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Evangelism: Studies in the book of Acts

Participant's Guide



"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:8

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Acts

Preparing the understanding for mission

Study 1 | Acts 1:1-8

1. Read Luke 1:1-4. How do these words help assure us of the historical accuracy of the events of the book of Acts (and the gospel of Luke)?
2. 1:1. What does v.1 tell us about Luke's theme or subject for the Book of Acts? How does this theme contrast Christianity from other faiths?
3. 1:3-8. Why do you think Jesus prepares the apostles' minds (v.3) before he sends them power (v.4)? What was it about (cf. Luke 24:44-49)? What does the apostles' question reveal about their understanding of the kingdom? How does Jesus correct and inform their understanding?
4. 1:2-8. What things are given to the apostles uniquely and what things are given to the us along with the apostles?
5. In what way is the apostolic ministry continuing in the church and in what way is it not? In what ways does this distinction influence the way we apply the book of Acts to ourselves today?

WEEK 1 PROJECT — DISCUSSION

[Leaders should lead the group through this overview of the whole course and allow them to ask questions. Then use the discussion questions at the end for sharing.]

The purpose of this course is to prepare your mind and heart to be effective witnesses for Christ's kingdom in the world — in a small group community. The basis for this course is a study of the book of Acts, which is a source for all the principles we need to be witnesses.

In Acts 1 and 2 we see that Jesus prepared both the understandings and the whole lives of his disciples before he sent them out. He gave them both truth and power. But notice that this preparation came in the context of community. They did not learn and grow into "sentness" as individuals. They received both the necessary truth and power in community. Your small group community will be the setting for you to prepare yourselves for the same great experience and service.

As we study Acts 1 and 2, we will learn how to prepare one's life for God to use. As we study Acts 3-7 we will learn how to grasp and share the gospel itself. As we study Acts 8-12 we will learn how people come to Christ and are changed through conversion. As we look at Acts 13-17 we will learn how to answer objections and how to make a case for the truth of Christianity. Finally, in Acts 18-19 we will learn about different strategies and means for sharing our faith with others. When you get to this point (in March), your group will choose a way of outreach to do together, and you will spend 2-3 months putting your learning into practice, and then supporting and supervising one another as you reach out.

The following is an outline and schedule.

October		Preparing your Life for evangelism
Week	Oct 7	Acts 1:1-8: <u>Preparing the Understanding for Mission</u> (Intro to Course)
	Oct 14	Acts 1:6-26: <u>Preparing the Life for Mission</u> (Building a "Altar" for a Life God Can Use)
	Oct 21	Acts 2:1-36: <u>The Power Arrives</u> (The Power of the Holy Spirit)
	Oct 28	Acts 2:37-47: <u>The New Community</u> (The Power of the Gospel)

November Presenting the Gospel

- Week Nov 4 Acts 3:1-26: Peter Presents the Gospel
(Sharing a Testimony)
- Nov 11 Acts 4:1-31: Peter Defends the Gospel
(A Gospel Outline)
- Nov 18 Acts 4:32-6:7: Counter-Attack
(Gaining Confidence)
- Nov 25 Acts 6:8-7:60: Stephen Presents the Gospel
("Oikos" Evangelism)

December Leading People to Faith

- Week Dec 2 Acts 8:1-40: The Ethiopian's Conversion
(Special Joint Meeting: Joyful Boldness)
- Dec 9 Acts 9:1-43: Paul's Conversion
(A Gospel Outline: II)
- Dec 16 Acts 10:1-11:18: Cornelius' Conversion
(Understanding Conversion)

Jan-Feb Persuading People to Believe

- Week Jan 6 Acts 11:19-12:24: New Mission Breakthrough
(What is Apologetics?)
- Jan 13 Acts 12:25-13:52: Paul Presents the Gospel
(Soundbyte Apologetics)
- Jan 20 Acts 14:1-28: The Gospel for Pagans
(A Case for Christianity: I)
- Jan 27 Acts 15:1-16:5: Clarifying the Gospel
(A Case for Christianity: II)
- Feb 3 Acts 16:5-40: Three Surprising Conversions
(Process Apologetics)
- Feb 10 Acts 17:1-34: The Gospel for Intellectuals
(Helps and Hints for Handling Objections)

Week Feb 17 Acts 18:1-28: Mission to Corinth
(Special Joint Meeting: Home Outreach Buffets)

Feb 24 Acts 19:1-22: Mission to Ephesus: I
(Strategy 2: Discovering Series)

Mar 3 Acts 19:23-41: Mission to Ephesus: II
(Strategy 3-4: Open Group. Oikos Intentional.)

Mar 10 Acts 17-19: Review: Paul's Strategies
(Strategy 5-6: Worship/Events. Service Projects.)

Remember, your group will choose a strategy together. Nothing will be forced upon you. Whether you are “outgoing” or shy — there is a method that fits you.

1. Share either one positive experience or one negative experience you've had in witnessing to your faith. What one or two important things can be learned about sharing faith from these incidents.

2. Share the two biggest obstacles for you with regards to witness.

Acts

Preparing the life for mission

Study 2 | Acts 1:8-2:12

1. 1:9. Why do the angels tell the disciples not to “stand... looking into the sky”? What should the ascension mean to them and us?
2. Jesus told them to not begin their mission until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5). What do they do to prepare for this gift in 1:13-14?
3. What do they do to prepare for this gift in 1:15-26?
4. Compare and contrast this incident in Acts 2:1-4 with Acts 4:31; 7:55; 13:9; Luke 1:41, 67; 3:21-22; 4:1. In what ways is Pentacost unique, and in what ways is it repeatable?
5. What is the significance of the multi-lingual proclamation of the gospel on the day of Pentacost? Why do you think God did it that way?

Acts

The power arrives

Study 3 | Acts 2:5-39

1. vv.5-13 What evidence is there that this was a worship service that the crowd came to? What is the significance of that fact for us today?
2. vv.5-11. What are the marks of the kind of corporate worship that makes a strong evangelistic impact? vv.12-13. What kind of impact did this first corporate celebration have on the audience?
3. vv.14-36. What does Peter say in response to this first question? This is a gospel presentation — outline its basic points. What kind of impact does this first gospel presentation have on the audience?
4. vv.37-40. What does Peter say in response to this second question? This is a description of how to receive Christ — outline its basic points. What kind of impact does this have on the audience?
5. What do we learn from this passage about the witness you should have as an individual Christian? The witness we should have as a church?

WEEK 3 PROJECT —

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Introduction: The Holy Spirit's Coming

Before His death, Jesus told all those who were *spiritually* thirsty to come to Him and drink. He promised that rivers of living waters would flow out of them, speaking symbolically of the Holy Spirit who hadn't been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39). Jesus later said it was for our good that He was going away and He promised to send *the Counselor, the Spirit of truth*, to guide us into all truth and to tell us what is yet to come (John 16:7,13). Then, Christ's last words before His ascension assured believers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came, that would result in their being bold witnesses of His death and resurrection (Acts 1:8). Pentecost was fifty days after Christ was resurrected and just 10 days after His ascension. It is here, in Acts 2:1-36, that we see Jesus' promises about the Holy Spirit fulfilled. On that day all the Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter was empowered to explain what was happening. He describes David's prediction of Christ's resurrection and exaltation as fulfillment of prophecy and God's foreordained plan. And he points to the gift of the Holy Spirit as proof of Christ's Lordship.

Today we have the gospels, the book of Acts and the epistles to teach us about the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives and in the life of Christ's church. We are inseparably linked to this *Person* as believers, yet many believers are confused about or ignorant of His ministry in our lives. Ask yourself — "Theoretically, if the Holy Spirit left my life today, would it make any difference in the way I respond to things?" (Leader: 10 min. #I; 10 min. #IIA; 10 min. #IIB; 15 min. for prayer.)

I. The Holy Spirit's Ministry

- A. The Holy Spirit came to *convict the world* of sin, righteousness and judgment, according to John 16:8-11. What has been *the world's response*, from Old Testament times until now, according to **Acts 7:51-53**?
- B. Assign these verses. Discuss how the Holy Spirit relate to *all believers*.
 1. **I Corin. 6:19, 20**
 2. **Eph. 1:13**
 3. **Rom. 8: 11, 16 & 26**

4. In I Corin. 12:7-13 we see that there is both diversity and unity in the body of Christ, for the common good. Everyone profits as the spiritual gifts are exercised that the Holy Spirit bestowed. He gives 'severally, as He wills, we receive.

- C. Once we better understand the theology of God's Spirit at work in the church and in us, what should be the implications in our walk with God and the life of the church?

II. How Christians relate to the Holy Spirit

- A. What potential *problems* are exposed in the following verses?

1. **Eph. 4:30** (What *solutions* are offered in v.31,32?)

2. **I Thes. 5:19** (What *solutions* are offered in verses 20-24?)

3. **Gal. 5:17** (What *solutions* are offered in verses 16,18 & 25?)

4. I John 1:5-10 once again shows us problems, or *hindrances*, that can keep us from the Spirit's fullness. How can these verses help us follow through on obeying the solutions offered in the verses above *and what's at stake if we don't?*

- B. Eph. 5:18 is a command for believers to be filled with the Holy Spirit. **It's not an option**, but He doesn't tell us to do something beyond our grasp. Eph. 5:19-21 and Col. 3:15,16 describe evidences of the Spirit's fullness in our hearts and in the church. We speak to one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in our hearts to the Lord, being thankful for everything and submitting ourselves one to another. Do you see the Spirit's fullness being manifested in our church?

III. Pray together about:

- A. Where you need deeper understanding, confessing obstacles to obedience in your walk and your desire to experience the Spirit's work in yourself and in our church.
- B. **ALTAR Accountability.** In the whole group, or in smaller groups of 2 or 3, share how you are doing in the 3-5 things that you resolved to do in order to 'build an altar' and have a life more useful to God'.

Acts

The new community

Study 4 | Acts 2:40-47

1. vv.40-41. Why do you think Peter tells them to save themselves from “this generation”? What does this statement imply about the church, and about becoming a Christian?
2. vv.42-47. Make a list of the characteristics and functions of the early church which are evident in this passage.
3. What do we learn here about the church’s a) ministry of learning and b) ministry of fellowship?
4. What do we learn here about the church’s a) ministry of worship and b) ministry of witness and service?

The five ministries of the early church are also five “vital signs” of a Spirit-filled community.

A. Ministry of learning in the truth. (1st sign: Theological depth)

B. Ministry of loving in the fellowship. (2nd sign: Intimate relationships)

C. Ministry of worship in the Spirit. (3rd sign: Joyous worship)

D. Ministry of witness through words. (4th sign: Relentless evangelism)

E. Ministry of service through deeds. (5th sign: Sacrificial service)

**5. Consider your own small group. How can it better manifest these ‘vital signs’?
Consider your local church. How can it better manifest these ‘vital signs’?**

WEEK 4 PROJECT —

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Introduction

In Acts 2:37, we see an example of the Spirit convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11) as Peter spoke to the crowd at Pentecost. He was preaching the gospel boldly. We can too. (Leader: Look up each verse under I - 10 minutes, II - 15 minutes, III - 10 minutes and discuss the questions. Pace yourself to leave 10 to 15 minutes to read number IV and pray.)

I. Understanding where the power lies

- A. **Romans 1:16** – What are we told about the gospel? How does this verse challenge our attitude about witnessing and to whom we witness?
- B. **I Corin. 1:17,18 & 22-24** – What was Paul's central message to the Greeks at Corinth, in spite of their intellects, morals and philosophies?
- C. **I Corin. 2:1-5** – How did Paul proclaim the gospel that he said he was not ashamed of and what comfort does this offer to us?

II. Accepting the ministry God gave us.

- A. **II Corin. 5:17-20** – What is God's messenger called? What specifically does he do? Where does he get his authority? What does God's messenger talk about? What's the message? How would you define 'reconcile'? In this passage, who is reaching out to whom?
- B. Who have you had an opportunity to share this message with lately and how did they respond?

III. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the gospel, the lives of many people were touched. We should be able to experience increasing confidence in communicating the gospel, as we continue to contemplate what it means to build an altar, make sacrifices to the Lord, and trust the Holy Spirit to let the fire fall into our hearts as we live for Him in word and deed.

- A. **PRAY FOR OPPORTUNITIES this week** to practice being a minister of reconciliation. It is the God empowered ministry that has been given to each believer! Accept it joyfully.
- B. **ALTAR Accountability.** During closing time of sharing and prayer — in the larger group, or in smaller groups of 2 or 3, ask each other and share: "How are you doing with the 3-5 things that you resolved to do in order to "build and altar" and have a life more useful to God?"

Acts

Peter presents the Gospel

Study 5 | Acts 3:1-26

- 1. What is striking about the healing of the crippled man? What does it tell us about how God works in our lives?**
- 2. What essential facts does Peter tell them about Jesus? What three kinds of evidence does he give for these facts (apart from his citation of Scripture)?**
- 3. How does Peter prove from the Bible that Jesus is the Messiah? Where did Peter learn all this? What is the importance of seeing the centrality of Christ in the Old Testament?**
- 4. a) How does Peter tell his listeners they must do to receive Christ? Compare it with what he told his listeners in Acts 2. b) What does he say will be the results of receiving Christ?**
- 5. Summarize what can we learn about evangelism and witness from Peter.**

WEEK 5 PROJECT — SHARING A TESTIMONY

I. The Story of **your spiritual journey**. Have you experienced salvation? If so, you have a message. **Read I Peter 3:15**. Let's consider what we need to know to be ready:

A. Write *one word* best describing **your life** during each of the three phases of your spiritual journey to knowing Christ. Then, share them, by category, without comment.

1)Before_____

2)How_____

3)After_____

B. Record *3 phrases or words* that describe different attitudes, circumstances or actions you had before you came to know Christ, then share them.

1)

2)

3)

C. How would you summarize your differences and what you had in common?

II. The story of **Jesus Christ's spiritual journey**. **Read Romans 10:14-17**

A. **How** did you hear the gospel (who, where, when)? Consider finding a way this week to thank that person for influencing you to give your life to Christ. It might encourage them!

B. **What** did you understand about the claims of Jesus Christ? *This is the part of your testimony that must be clear and about HIM, not you!*

III. Proclaiming His praises! **Read Isaiah 52:7**. "In biblical times, there was no CNN to take people into the battle zone via television. Instead, messengers ran from the war zones to inform anxious family members and friends of the outcome of the battles. In this passage the message is one of **victory**, **"Your God reigns!"** (*The Treasures of Encouragement* Sharon Betters)

A. Ps.66:16 says, **"Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what He has done for me."**

1. What is an area where you have seen **change in your life** because of Jesus? A true testimony relates to personal experience.

2. How has God **comforted** you through relational conflict, deep loss, illness, financial or job pressures? You have a message!

B. This is how we can preach without 'preaching'! We can cultivate the habit of seeing ALL of life as an opportunity to express gratitude to God! No child of God is exempt from this type of 'preaching' ministry'.

IV. **Read Jer. 20:9. Pray** for our testimonies to **burst forth from an inward fire!** We ARE to **preach the gospel, without 'preaching' and talk about Jesus!** An energizing power is given by the Holy Spirit to cleansed, trusting hearts. So confess your sins for continual cleansing and consider this quote by Michael Green: **'EVANGELISM IS OVERFLOW'!**

Acts

Peter defends the Gospel

Study 6 | Acts 4:1-31

1. What do we learn about unbelief from the reaction of the Sadducees, rulers, elders, and teachers of the law in contrast to the reaction of the people?
2. What is particularly troubling to the leaders about the apostles (v.7, 13-14), and what link is there between this distress and their rejection of the gospel message?
3. vv.8-12. What evidence and arguments are used by Peter in his defense? What is the leaders' response?
4. vv.23-31. What are the marks the prayer which brings down such power into the disciples?
5. Summarize. What do we learn about witness and ministry from this entire passage? Examine your hearts and our church in light of it.

WEEK 6 PROJECT —

THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL: PART 1

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you
 “?” -for something that raised a question

If a Christian is going to share the faith, it is necessary to have in your head both an outline of the gospel and a summary of the gospel.

In The Content of the Gospel: Part II (before Christmas) we will provide a single outline that can be memorized. Today, we discuss the need for a “gospel summary”.

WHAT — is an outline of the gospel and a summary of the gospel?

An outline of the gospel is a framework on which you can hang all the relevant information about Christ so that a listener can believe and receive him. A gospel outline is an “accordion” in that it can be shared fairly briefly, but could also be expanded very fully, depending on the circumstances.

1. The “two diagnostic” questions of Evangelism Explosion, (see D.James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*)
2. The “Four Spiritual Laws” of Campus Crusade, (see numerous Crusade publications)
3. The “Bridge Illustration” of Navigators, (see in Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*)
4. See a less well-known but fine presentation by John Guest called “A Faith That Can Be Yours”, (*in Risking Faith*)

A summary of the gospel really needs to be brief — it should 30 seconds to a minute in length at the most. It is much shorter than the full presentation that needs to be given to someone who is very ready to believe.

WHEN — use a gospel summary or outline?

An outline of the gospel should be used when a listener is genuinely interested in knowing what the Christian faith is about, and how to become a Christian. A

summary of the gospel is not sufficient for a person who wants to become a Christian. Rather, it is for the early stages of a conversation or a relationship with a non-Christian. Its purpose is to get the basic idea of the gospel out on the table. Mainly, it is to distinguish Christianity from mere “religion and morality”, and to give a gripping definition of sin and grace.

The goal of the brief summary is to get the non-Christian to reveal his or her particular problems with the gospel, the personal barriers against faith. Then, these barriers can be worked through. After they have been, you can provide a gospel outline that more fully explains the faith. The reason we provide a “brief” summary of the gospel is so that, eventually, your sharing of the faith will be very directed at the person’s particular and specific issues. If you provide first a longer outline of the gospel, you probably will be “scratching where the person is not itching” and thus (perhaps) you may bore them.

HOW — to use a gospel summary.

Here are several examples. You may prefer to write your own.

Do-Done summary (see example in Bill Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*).

“Do”. All forms of religion, (formal or informal), are spelled D-O, because they tell us we have to perform good works and obey moral and religious laws in order to find God, to achieve forgiveness, nirvana, or peace. But you can never be sure you have done enough. “Done”. But Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E because God sent his son to earth to live the life we should live, and die on the cross to pay the debt we should pay for wrongs we’ve done. Buddha said “Strive w/out ceasing”; Jesus said “It is finished”. (John 19:30)

To become a Christian is to turn from “do” to “done” by asking God to accept you for Jesus’ sake and commit to live for him.

Sin-Salvation summary (based on a paragraph in John Stott’s *The Cross of Christ*):

Sin is us substituting ourselves for God, putting ourselves where only God deserves to be — in charge of our lives.

Salvation is God substituting himself for us, putting himself where only we deserve to be — dying on the cross. Read II Cor.5:21.

*To become a Christian is first to admit the **problem**: that you have been substituting yourself for God either by religion (trying to be your own savior by obedience to moral standards) or by irreligion (trying to be your own lord by disobedience to moral standards). And second to accept the **solution**: asking God to accept you for Jesus' sake and know that you are loved and accepted because of his record, not yours.*

Slavery-Freedom summary (see What Does It Mean To Know God?)

Slavery. *We were built to live for God supremely, but instead we live for love, work, achievement or morality to give us meaning and worth. Thus every person, religious or un- is worshipping something to get your worth. But these things enslave us with guilt (if we fail to attain them) or anger (if someone blocks them from us) or fear (if they are threatened) or drivenness (since we must have them). Sin is worshipping anything but Jesus — and the wages of sin is slavery. **Freedom.** As a fish is only free in water, we are only free when serving Jesus supremely. For he is the only source of meaning that we cannot lose (freeing us from fear and anger) and that is a free gift (freeing us from guilt and drivenness). Read Matt.11:28-30. His “yoke” is the only one that does not enslave.*

Law-Love summary.

Law. *Some see God as simply Judge who demands we be moral and righteous. If God is not a Judge there is no hope for the world — how else will wrong be punished?*

Love. *Some see God as simply a Father who loves us and doesn't want to punish. If God is not a Father there is no hope for us — how else can we be forgiven?*

Problem. *God is both. If a father was also a judge, and a guilty child was brought before him, he could not just acquit. How can God's Law and Love must be reconciled?*

Solution. *When God sent his Son to die in our place, the judge was judged. On the cross God's justice and his love was satisfied at once, “that God might be both just and justifier [judge and father] of those who believe” (Rom.3:26).*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss those things in the reading that most helped you — things you marked with an '!'
2. Discuss those things in the reading that raised questions — things you marked with an '?'
3. Which gospel summary is the most helpful to you? Why?
4. Do you have a summary that you have heard or that you use that is not represented here? Share it.

Acts

Counter-attack

Study 7 | Acts 4:32-6:7

1. 4:32-37. How does v.31 lead to v.32? In what ways does the filling of the Holy Spirit and boldness (v.31) relate to the radical sharing of material possessions?
2. 4:32-33 and 6:6-7. How do we see word-witness relate to deed-witness in the life of the early church? What implications does this have for your own witness here and now?
3. 5:1-12. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? Why was it so serious and so seriously dealt with? How can we a) fall into a similar trap, and b) avoid it?
4. 5:12-42. Survey this long passage and make a list of the characteristics of a spiritually vital church.
5. 6:1-6. What does this passage teach us about the marks of a vital church?

WEEK 7 PROJECT — GAINING CONFIDENCE

Ice Breaker: What is the key ingredient in gaining confidence in lifestyle evangelism?

I. **Let's review** what we've learned through our study in Acts and our projects that should help us develop confidence in being our King's representatives:

A. The Power of the Holy Spirit – Read Romans 8:6 & 11

1. What are several examples we've seen in Acts that have demonstrated "the power of the Holy Spirit" being unleashed in ordinary men?
2. What would keep you from experiencing this confidence? How can we get the truths about the Holy Spirit in Scripture to help us gain confidence seeking to represent Christ to others in both word and deed?

B. The Power of the Gospel – Read I Corin. 1:17,18

1. What are several examples of the Gospel's power we've seen in Acts?
2. What would keep us from taking steps to witness if we believe A & B? How can we get these truths to motivate us into action?

C. Sharing a Testimony – We shared with one another words, phrases and sentences describing our spiritual journeys to faith in Jesus Christ, using the simple outline of **before, how & after**. Has anyone done this lately? (1 or 2 share)

D. The Content of the Gospel

1. What example of *an outline* of the Gospel have we seen in our Acts study? Have you shared an outline of the Gospel lately? (1 or 2 share)
2. A *summary* of the Gospel is for the early stages of conversion, giving the basic idea of the gospel, defining sin and grace, and exposing faith barriers. Have you tried using one of the examples? (1 or 2 share)

II. **Gaining confidence in lifestyle evangelism will come with practice.** As you are a "doer of the Word and not a hearer only," you will find yourself gaining confidence. Obedience to the light you've been given on a subject will always result in strengthened faith and confidence in God working *through you* with the Holy Spirit's power.

A. Pray for an opportunity to share your testimony (or part of it), an outline of the Gospel (using a booklet or the Scriptures), or a summary of the Gospel (like: Do-Done, Sin-Salvation, Slavery-Freedom, Law-Love, Problem-Solution).

B. Take the initiative to do this. The Spirit empowers obedience. *Expect* God to answer your prayer and honor your obedience and the desire to see others know Christ. The fire will fall on the altar of a pure, obedient, faith-filled, praying heart!

Acts

Stephen presents the Gospel

Study 8 | Acts 6:7 - 7:60

1. **6:8-15.** What does this passage tell us about why Stephen's ministry was so effective? Which of his characteristics do you lack? What can you do to grow in that area?
2. **6:13-14.** Summarize Stephen's message from his accusers. How does the gospel change the way we look at the temple and the law? Why is it significant that the future apostle Paul listened to this Stephanic gospel presentation (8:1)?
3. **7:1-50.** How does Stephen's very long speech answer the original question (v.1)? How does each section about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Solomon advance his basic argument? How does he adapt his argument to the premises and nature of his audience?
4. **7:37-43.** How do these verses address the place of the law in Israel? 7:51-53 How does this charge follow from his whole speech?
5. **7:54-8:1.** What happens to Stephen to prepare him for death so well? Why does it lead to courage and forgiveness (v.60)? How can we know more of this ourselves?

WEEK 8 PROJECT — “OIKOS” EVANGELISM: I

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you
 “?” -for something that raised a question

The Main Method of Evangelism

In the book of Acts, especially in the chapters 10 and following, the “main method” of evangelism of the early church emerges. It is not a program or a well-oiled scheme — it is what we will call “*oikos evangelism*”.

“Oikos” is the Greek word for “household”, but we must be careful not to read into this term our own concept of the nuclear family. A Graeco-Roman household contained not only several generations of the same family, but also included servants, the families of servants, friends, and even business associates. Essentially, new believers shared their faith with other members of their “oikos”, and thus people came to faith through web networks of relationships.

Not only church history, but modern research has shown that the vast majority of persons come to faith through the witness of a friend, relative, or associate — not through massive programs or campaigns.

Biblical examples

“The following day [Peter] arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him...”

Acts 10:24

“On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river... We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira... The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come stay at my house’.”

Acts 16:13-15

“He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and all your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.”

Acts 16:30-34

“The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We

have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ)... Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'

John 1:41,45

"As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me', Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him."

Mark 2:14,15

Principles

1. Definition. In Manhattan, there are not so many *oikos*'s which consist of large extended families. Nonetheless, everyone has an "oikos". Notice that Levi (Matthew) the tax collector had a household that consisted mainly of business associates rather than relatives.

An "oikos" is a web of common kinship affinity (relatives), geographical affinity (neighbors), vocational affinity (co-workers), associational affinities (special interest colleagues), and plain friends.

2. Advantages. "Oikos" evangelism is the most personally demanding of all the methods of evangelism, because it requires primarily that you be a changed person, transformed by the gospel. Your life is the main attractor and the main evidence for the truth of the faith. In "oikos" evangelism, your life is under observation by those who don't believe. You can't run and you can't hide! If your character is flawed (or even unexceptional), you won't be effective.

"Oikos" evangelism is therefore very non-manipulative. The person outside the faith is, in a sense, "in the driver's seat". He or she gets to raise questions and determines at what speed the process proceeds. There is no "canned" presentation. He or she also has a personal knowledge of the evangelist, and thus gets a very good and fair view of what Christianity is all about and how it works in someone's life.

In short, all the "advantages" of oikos evangelism are for the unbeliever, not the believer. No wonder it is so effective!

3. Pre-requisites. Essentially, the pre-requisite is that the gospel change us. Until that happens, we will be ineffective witnesses. First the joyful effects of the gospel in our own lives must give us an enormous energy for witness. How can we keep our mouths closed about such a wonder? If that energy is not there, we must repent and seek God until it flows. But second, the humbling nature of the gospel must lead us to approach non-believers without superiority and with lots of respect. Since we are saved only by God's grace and not our goodness, we expect to often find wisdom and compassion in non-Christians which at many points may exceed ours. Is that humility and respect there? If

not, we will be ineffective. Third, the love experience of the gospel must remove from us the fear of others' disapproval. Is this boldness increasing? If not, we must repent and reflect on the gospel and God's acceptance with us until this fear diminishes.

These three character qualities are absolutely necessary. Put another way, if you are not effective in reaching others for Christ, it is because of a lack of joy, a lack of humility and gentleness, or a lack of boldness. Which is it?

If the gospel fills us with joy, humility, and confidence, then we will not treat non-Christians as "evangelism cases" — people that we relate to, talk to, and care for only in order to win them over to our side. That is to objectify and dehumanize them, and, ironically, it is unwinsome. We should not love people in order to evangelize them. Rather, we should evangelize them in order to love them. The more these dynamics are present in our lives the more we will draw in new people like a magnet (Acts 2:47).

4. Planning. In this week's project, we will only talk about the first step in an "oikos" evangelism plan — choosing 4 people to begin to pray for. Make a list of 4 people that fit these qualifications: a) We hit it off well together. b) We share some common interests. c) This person would probably enjoy our church or small group. d) This person is open to me.

Make the list:

Now begin praying for them, and begin thinking of ways to strengthen your relationship with them.

- 1. What most helped you in the reading? What questions did it raise?**
- 2. Which of the three pre-requisites for witness do you most need? How did Stephen show all three in his life (Acts 6:8-15; 7:54ff)?**
- 3. Share your list of 4 people with someone in the group and pray for the other person's "oikos" by name as well as your own.**

Acts

The ministry of Philip

Study 9 | Acts 8:1-40

- 1. 8:1-4. What are the results of the execution of Stephen and the persecution that it brought? (Have you seen God work good things through a disaster?) How does this result fit in with Stephen's message?**
- 2. 8:1-4. Who is doing the preaching of the word in these verses and what is the significance of that?**
- 3. 8:5-25. What was so amazing about Philip's act of going to Samaria? What were the elements in his effective ministry? What would be the equivalent of his bold ministry action today?**
- 4. 8:9-25. Did Simon really believe (cf.v.13 with v.21-23)? What was Simon's main problem? How can we avoid his mistake? Do you think he repented?**

5. 8:14-17. This is a highly unusual and puzzling passage, and people have been debating it for years. Let's be guided by this note from John Stott.

6. 8:26-40. What do we learn about sharing our faith from the story of the Ethiopian' conversion?

CONVERSION PROJECT

Read and mark “!” - for something that helped you

“?” -for something that raised a question

Christianity without conversion is no longer Christianity, because conversion means turning to God. It involves forsaking sin, with its self-deifying attitudes and self-serving conduct, and turning to Christ, whose death on the cross is the basis for God’s offer of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus was judged in our place so God could extend his righteousness to us.

– David Wells, *Turning to God*, p.27

In most translations of the Bible, the word “conversion” appears very seldom. But that does not mean that conversion is not absolutely central to Christianity. Rather, the New Testament writers use many different words to describe the process.

The Book of Acts records the conversion of Paul three times (9:5ff., 22:6ff., 26:12ff.). In addition, it tells us of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:25ff.), of Cornelius, (10:44ff.), and of the Philippian jailer (16:29ff.). But moreover, it records Paul telling us that all the Gentiles who were entering the church were entering by “conversion” (Acts 15:3). Thus the book of Acts shows the indispensibility of conversion to being a Christian.

But what *is* conversion? It is common to use terms like “converted” “born again” “believed” “received Christ” all interchangeably. But the Bible makes some important distinctions.

To “become a Christian” is both “Conversion” and “Regeneration”. They are two sides of the same coin, and cannot be separated, yet they must be distinguished. One is something God does and one is something we do. The first is the theological, the other is behavioral. The theological element (what we are in Christ — regeneration) is the same for all, but the behavioral (what we do — turning) is the different for all. Regeneration is an act of God at a single and specific point in time (though we may not be conscious of exactly when that point has occurred). Turning is a process of ours, which may be dramatic or gradual, depending on many factors.

An “insider” to Christianity (i.e. a child raised in a Christian home) may find conversion so natural that he or she cannot pinpoint the time of the change at all. (Some churches create venues for children to “give their lives to Christ”, to help them pinpoint their conversions. But usually the process is extremely gradual. There may be several preparatory steps in which God “illuminates” the youth through the Holy Spirit, providing pieces of the gospel, until it “comes together” for them after a number of years. On the other hand, an “outsider” to Christianity (i.e. a person raised Jewish or Muslim or secular) may have much more of a “Damascus Road” (i.e. Pauline) conversion experience. So the theological side of conversion is always identical — regeneration. But the behavioral side of conversion is always different, depending on culture, personality, and prior world-view.

A. Regeneration

This is a work of God in which the power and holiness of God enters our hearts in the form of the Holy Spirit. This is so radical a reality that it is called “partaking of the divine nature” (II Peter 1:4), becoming a whole new creation (II Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15), being born again (John 3:3). In Titus, Paul says, *“he saved us... not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.”* (Titus 3:5-7). What the Holy Spirit does is called “regeneration” (*paliggenesias*), which is the same word as “rebirth” (*gennetha anothēn* — “born from above”). We have a new “genesis”, we are born again. See also I John 2:29, 3:9-10; I Peter 1:3,2, 2:2; James 1:18).

B. Conversion

The New Testament uses the word *epistrephō*, to “turn” as the word for conversion. Almost always, the word is used as an intransitive verb — it is what we do. (On the other hand, “regeneration” or “rebirth” is what is done to us.) Just as we cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born again (John 3:3), we also cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we convert (Matt.18:3). Everyone must convert, whether Jew (Acts 3:19; 9:35) or Gentile (Acts 11:21; 14:15).

Because the word for conversion is “turning”, there are therefore two parts to conversion — turning away from and turning toward. Thus the Thessalonians turned from idols and turned to the living God (I Thess.1:9). These two aspects are *metanoia*, repentance (turning away) and *pistis*, faith (turning toward). We are only converted as we turn away from sin and self-salvation, and to faith in Christ and his salvation.

Summary:

Now we can see that, though it is fair and right to use the word “conversion” to refer to both rebirth and converting, and it is fair to use the word “reborn” to refer to both rebirth and converting, that they are two aspects of the same thing. John brings them together when he says: *To all who received him, who believed in his name* (conversion), *he gave full rights as children of God, who are born not of nature or of the will of man, but of the will of God* (rebirth). John 1:12-13. Rebirth/conversion is also called a change of ownership (Rom.6:17-18), a change from darkness to light (Acts 25:18; II Cor.4:6; I Pet. 2:9), a change from death to life (John 5:24; Eph.2:1-6).

So — we can outline “becoming a Christian” like this:

Rebirth (what God does)

Conversion (what we do)

Repent (turn from self-salvation and serving self)

Faith (turn to Christ salvation and serving him)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What helped you most?
2. What questions were raised?
3. How does this shed light on your own conversion experience?

Acts

The conversion of Saul

Study 10 | Acts 9:1-31

1. v.1-2. How do these verses shed light on John 6:44 and John 15:16? How is this an encouragement to us doing evangelism?
2. v.3-4. Compare this account of Jesus first words to a fuller account in Acts 26:13-14. What indication is there that Saul's conversion was not as "sudden" as it seems? What could these "goads" have been? What were the "goads" Jesus used on you?
3. vv.3-9. Some have said that Saul's conversion is a very strong piece of evidence for the supernatural origins of Christianity. How would that be so? (Compare 9:1-9 with Acts 22:3-16 and 26:9-18).
4. v.4-5. What is the significance of Jesus' statement that Saul is persecuting Him? (How is a convicting statement? How is it an encouraging statement?)
5. v.10-31. What are the results of Saul's conversion evident in these verses? In other words, what changes do we see?

WEEK 10 PROJECT — JOYFUL BOLDNESS

Introduction: We tend to talk boldly about the things that bring us the greatest joy. Our job, a wedding, a child's birth, or something new. So it shouldn't surprise us that boldness in witnessing should follow a personal, intimate, joyful encounter with the living God.

I. Read John 1:35-42.

- A. Why was Andrew *joyful*?
- B. How did Andrew demonstrate his joy and *boldness*?
- C. What resources do we have that Andrew didn't have that should foster joyful boldness in our witness to others?
- D. How do we allow ourselves to be robbed of joyfulness or boldness?

II. The following verses describe the *spiritual boldness (confidence)* God wants us to experience in two other areas of our lives. What is the source of confidence in each situation... and what are the results?

- A. Heb. 4:16 and 10:19; Eph. 3:12
- B. I John 4:13-19

III. Ps. 35:9 says, "...my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation". But in Ps. 51:12 David pleaded, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation..." Which best describes where you are *experientially* right now with the Lord? Why?**IV. Suggested action points**

- A. **Remember your conversion.** Meditate on the things that brought joy to your heart when you first knew Jesus Christ personally. What were a few?
- B. Acts 4:29 assures us we should **pray for boldness**: "Lord... enable your servant to speak your word with great boldness." Are you willing to pray that? Continue to pray for the four people you recorded in a recent project. Have you seen God at work in any of their lives yet?
- C. **Believe** that God wants you to be joyful and bold in prayer, witnessing and on the day of judgment as you stand before Him, relying on the Father's Savior's and Spirit's love for you. **Conclude your discussion with prayer for one another... personal requests and also reflecting on what you've shared about joyful boldness in your lives. Don't miss it!**

Acts

The conversion of Cornelius

Study 11 | Acts 9:32 - 11:18

1. 9:32-42. Why do you think Luke includes these two miracles as an introduction to the longer account of Cornelius' conversion?
2. 10:1-8, 22, 34-35. Cornelius is an example of a "good man" without the gospel. What do these verses teach us about such a person?
3. 10:9-23. How does break down Peter's racial/cultural prejudices?
4. 10:34-48. How does v.34-35 (and his presentation of the gospel) show that Peter understands now the meaning of the vision? What is the meaning of the vision?
5. 10:44-11:18. What is the final (the fourth) sign given by God to Peter that the gospel is for the Gentiles? How do our converts teach us — ad Cornelius taught Peter?

CONVERSION: PART II PROJECT

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
 "?" - for something that raised a question

THE GOSPEL AND THE "SEEKER"

In I Corinthians 14:24 Paul describes a person who comes to a worship service *"who does not understand"* — literally a "seeker". We have seen Cornelius is a "seeker" who God acknowledges and sincere (Acts 10:1-4). Though they may be very good persons, they still need to be brought to *"repentance unto life"* (Acts 11:14). How can we help a person who is "on the verge" — who seems to want to come to Christ. Here are some helps on helping such persons:

Principles for applying the gospel to seekers

The following is a paraphrase of a lecture in an out of print book by a Presbyterian minister of the early 19th century. William Sprague, *Lectures on Revival*, Lecture 6

1. Determine the amount of knowledge and the amount of feeling.

- if he is long on feeling and short on knowledge, your course of action is fairly simple. He may be ripe for conversion. Present the truths of the gospel in a balanced, full way. You may be bold to press for a commitment. If he will not, discover at what point he has trouble. Review the outline briefly, asking, "Do you understand and agree that first, _____, and second, _____..."
- if he is long on knowledge and short on feeling, you may need to elaborate the gospel presentation with vivid illustrations and pointed applications.. Show him that Christianity is not an academic matter, not a matter of weaving a web of intricate thought-forms. Say, as Whitefield, *"It is one thing to assent with your mouth, and another thing to believe from the heart. If you have really done that, a truth affects you mind, will, and emotions. Have you ever been saddened by your sins? Have you cried out to God that you need a saviour? Has the mercy of God in Christ seemed precious to you?"* [Caution: Keep in mind the words of Thomas Watson — *"But wouldest thou know when thou hast been humbled enough for sin? When thou are willing to let go thy sins. The gold has lain long enough in the furnace when the dross is purged out; so, when the love of sin is purged out, a soul is humbled enough, what needs more? If a needle has let out the abscess, what needs a lance? Be no more cruel to thyself than God would have thee."* — from A Body of Divinity, p. 451

2. Impress on the awakened sinner the need to come to God on gospel terms immediately.

- God owns you. Every day you rule your own life you become more and more guilty.
- The concern you have now is the gracious influence of the spirit of God. If you decide to come to God at your own convenience, you are mocking God. He is too great for you to snap your fingers when you are ready. Who is King around here? You are in great danger of losing the openness of heart you have now. Do you think you can repent any time you wish? No! Repentance is a gift from God, which he is offering you now. You must take it or risk becoming too hard to care. Then you will be lost forever. Don't delay. Even a passing conversation with a friend can drive away your convictions. Act now.

3. Beware of a spirit of self-righteousness.

- When a man is first awakened to his need, he usually sets out on a furious effort to please God through his efforts (church attendance, prayer, obeying the law). Warn him of this.
- Say, "Don't stop striving to please God, but do it in the spirit of the new covenant, not the covenant of works. There is no actual saving value in your strivings, only gratitude value (saying "thank you" for a full salvation). Until you accept this and fall down helpless at the feet of Christ's mercy and are willing to accept the free gift of eternal life, you cannot be saved."
- Warn him that he can assent to justification by faith in the abstract and still try to catch God's eye with his efforts, so he must examine his heart.

4. Beware of making comfort your ultimate end instead of giving God his due.

- If you see yourself as a sufferer looking for relief primarily, you will never find peace. God is no sugar daddy to be used by you to secure your own happiness. Say to him: "Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after — what? Blessedness? No! Righteousness! Happy are they which don't seek happiness, but rather to give God his due. Happiness never comes to those who seek it directly. You are a sinner, in need of pardon. Give God what you owe: repentance, faith, obedience. Your troubles will take care of themselves. Until you have grasped this in your heart, you'll not have peace."

5. If, after sharing the gospel, the person is not ready to repent and believe, yet is still awakened, advise this:

- Spend a lot of time reading good books, the Bible, and in prayer. Coming to church meetings and so on is good, but no substitute. It is too easy to derive your spirituality from the environment. Also, many well-meaning counselors may be confusing. Talk often with one or two spiritual advisors and with the Lord
- Read the intriguing sermon by Lloyd-Jones on Mark 8:22,26 — “Men as Trees, Walking” in *Spiritual Depression: Causes and Cures*. He tells about people who are in a similar condition to the blind man. They seemed to have been touched by Jesus — they see things they couldn’t see before, yet things are still not in focus. What did the blind man do? He was honest. He did not say, “I see fine!” He admitted his condition and Jesus touched him again. So tell Jesus what you see and what you don’t see. Ask him to touch you some more until you see clearly.
- But above all, stress that these means of study and prayer are only means to the end. They cannot merit anything from God. They are only ways to enable God to work in you.

Common objections or problems posed by seekers

1. “I just can’t believe” What you are describing is simply the settled distaste every natural heart has to God. Don’t make an excuse for it. In yourself, you are unable to believe, but the Holy Spirit has already come to your aid. If you see what you have to do and wish that you could do it, then that is evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work. (You give yourself too much credit! You couldn’t see all these things unless the Spirit was already at work! Don’t despair.) Now, as long as this divine aid is offered to you, you must act. Don’t wait for some kind of psychological sense of certainty; faith is acting on what you know to be true.

Paul says: “We walk by faith, not by sight”. See? He doesn’t pit faith against reason, he pits faith against feelings and appearances. Do you see what you must do? Then repent, trust, obey Christ. How can you stand on this plea of inability? That is an abstract question, and it is a sinful refusal.

2. “I’ve tried all you’ve said to do, but it hasn’t worked.” [Evaluate: Either he hasn’t ‘tried’ properly, or he has a false understanding of what ‘worked’ means.] What do you mean by ‘worked’? Did you expect a certain feeling? Did you expect your problems to go away. Faith is acting on what you know to be true, despite how things feel or appear (“We walk by faith, not by sight”). Imagine that a doctor tells you, “You are dying because of all the fat and starch you are eating; if you stop eating steak and potatoes, your body will begin to strengthen”. The first time someone beside you eats a big steak dinner, won’t it smell great? It doesn’t smell dangerous and deadly. Now if you exercise faith, you follow what you know to be true (this food is poison to me), or you can

follow your appetites, senses, and feelings. What if you exercise faith? Will it immediately feel wonderful? NO! Your stomach will growl and you will feel unsatisfied. It is only as you practice faith over time that the healing and health (that is, the good feeling and visible effects) will come. So it is with saving faith. You may not at first experience anything remarkable. Nor will all your problems be solved. But your standing with God is changed, and eventually, the effects will flow out into your whole life. Phil. 2:12-14 tells us that the strength and life of God comes as you obey him. He works as we work.

How have you been trying? Perhaps you have been striving in a spirit of self-righteousness (see above). Perhaps you have been striving in a spirit of bargaining with God, instead of approaching him as a sovereign king (see above). ("I'll do this and that if God will do this and that". Instead say, "I owe God everything, and he owes me nothing; I'll gladly do whatever he bids me WITHOUT CONDITIONS". If you have put conditions on your seeking him, he will not meet you.) [Bottom line.] I'm sorry you have been frustrated in your seeking God, and I cannot know your heart or God's heart enough to tell you why you haven't felt that you've connected with him. But I do know this. You haven't got the option of giving up. His disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You [alone] have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). What is your alternative? You have none. If you keep seeking, Jesus says that no one who comes to him will he cast out (John 6:37). On the other hand, if you stop seeking him, you will certainly perish.

3. "I just don't have any sorrow for sin or desire for God." [He may be the victim of having heard long, lurid testimonies which convinced him that he too must have an extended period of self-loathing and weeping over his sin.] It is not Biblical to require everyone to have equally long, vivid, and horrible sorrow over sin. Look at Matthew, Zaccheus, the Phillipian jailer, and Lydia (Luke 19:9; Acts 16:14, etc.) There is no indication that they spent time in terror and horror. They were called abruptly and they came. Look at Jesus invitation to the Laodiceans (Rev. 3:15-20). He invites the lukewarm, self-deluded people to open to him so he can fellowship with him. They were not put through some long time of conviction.

Listen! If your house had caught on fire, how alarmed would you have to feel about it in order to be saved? Just enough to get out! It doesn't matter whether you leave crying 'Oh! My house, my house' or not. It doesn't matter if you are in a panic or just a bit upset. THE ONLY GOOD YOUR EMOTIONS AND FEAR ARE IS TO GET YOU TO LEAVE. The only good conviction of sin is to get you to repent and humble yourself under the mighty hand of your king. So submit! Don't wait to feel a certain way. [Ultimately, anyone who is concerned about lack of sorrow and feeling is caught in a self-righteous spirit. He hopes to please God with his pious feelings. Don't allow this. Confront him.]

4. “I’m too bad/depressed.” Look how far Jesus came to save sinners! Are you worse than Paul? (I Tim. 1:15) Jesus loves to save sinners; he delights to do it. (Luke 15:7; Is. 53:11; Zeph.3:16-17). The Bible says God is “mighty to save”; are you saying that He is not strong enough to deal with your sins? Are you mightier than God? [Again, remember that this complaint is often a subtle form of self-righteousness. The man thinks he is unworthy. Then he is assuming his worthiness is the necessary basis for coming to Christ.]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What did you find most interesting/helpful?**
- 2. What questions did this raise?**
- 3. Is there anything here you wish you knew when you were a young Christian?**

Acts

New mission breakthrough

Study 12 | Acts 11:19 - 12:24

INTRODUCTION

The city of Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria) and the capital of Syria. It was unusually multi-cultural and cosmopolitan, even for a large city. The city officials encouraged immigration, and offered Jews full citizenship. Thus there were very large, vital communities of Jews, Greeks, Romans, Asians, and Africans. This city becomes the site of the next new breakthrough in the Christian mission.

- 1. 11:19-24. What was the distinctive feature of gospel communication at Antioch? How do you think their preaching would have been different from the preaching of Peter that we have seen? What were the results of this ministry?**
- 2. 11:22-26. What were the reasons that Barnabus was sent? What were the elements of his ministry — and the results of it?**
- 3. 11:19-30. Look at the whole history of the young church in Antioch. Mark the number of stages in its development and name each one.**

4. Why do you think that Christians weren't called "Christians" until Antioch (v.26)? Why do you think the Antioch church was so successful in showing the power of the gospel?

5. 12:1-24. What does the incident about Peter teach us about prayer?

ENCOURAGEMENT PROJECT

Read and mark "!" - for something that helped you
 "?" -for something that raised a question

Introduction

Acts 11:19ff shows the importance of the ministry of encouragement. vv.22-24 virtually glows as we read it. Clearly, Barnabus' ministry of encouragement was enormously powerful in the history of the church. We tend to underestimate the importance of this work. Barnabus' ministry is "sandwiched" between the ministry of evangelism and of training/discipleship. It is a crying need of new Christians in particular, and it is like the "oil" in the church's "engine" — it is a vital spiritual lubricant. Without it, we burn up and burn out.

Definition

The very name "Barnabus" means "son of consolation". Encouragement is not the same as discipling and teaching. It is not the same as evangelism. It is affirming, confirming, supporting, coaching, consoling, cheering. It doesn't seem to take as much knowledge or skill as evangelism or discipling *per se*, but here we see the power. Without encouragement, we will never do the work of evangelism and discipling that we need to do.

The very Greek word translated "encouragement" is "*para-kaleo*" which literally means "to call alongside". It means to come near, to identify closely, to motivate and build confidence and create endurance in another person. To encourage is not to say, "get going" or "do what I have done" but "let's get going". An encourager is good at putting him or herself in another's shoes. It is often used as a synonym for "counseling" in the New Testament.

In some of these passages *parakaleo* is translated "exhort", but it is always exhorting with a strong proportion of comfort and affirmation.) Encouragers are patient (I Thess.5:4) gentle, affectionate (I Thess.2:7-11), positive and non-argumentative (II Tim.2:24-26), and is more effective when using the Bible skillfully (Rom.15:4; II Tim.4:1-4).

Place

Encouragement is especially important for newer believers, which we see both here and in Acts 14:21-22, where again we see that encouragement is something done for young converts after they have heard the good news.

Encouragement is also something necessary for those going through difficult times (II Cor.1:-9; Acts 14:22-23).

Sometimes even people who are being disobedient respond better to encouragement (II Thess.3:11-13; Heb.3:13) than to warning.

Responsibility

So often our problems are aggravated because we do not have encouragers in our lives. Sometimes we don't get encouragement because we are too proud to seek it or let people know we need it. Other times we are afraid that if we share our weakness we will get warning instead of encouragement. We have to be willing, however to meet and make ourselves vulnerable to others (James 5:16; Heb.10:24-25), in order to receive encouragement from God through other brothers and sisters.

It is also our duty to look around us and notice who needs encouragement. On the one hand, all Christians are to encourage each other (Heb.3:13; 10:24-25), and therefore we must always be on the look out. But some people have a gift of this — it is listed as a spiritual gift in Romans 12:8. One sign that you are good at this is that people tend to want to open up to you about their problems. Consider ways that you could make better use of this gift. The church needs more Barnabuses!

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Think of other marks and characteristics of an encourager.

Is the ministry of encouragement something you particularly need right now?

Is it something that you could give to someone in need right now?

Acts

Paul presents the Gospel

Study 13 | Acts 12:25 - 13:52

1. vv.1-3. This body became the first missionary-sending body in history. What led them to this? Notice the role of a) their leadership make-up, b) their routines, c) the Holy Spirit.
2. vv.1-3. What can we learn from this incident for our own churches today?
3. vv.6-12. Why was Paul so forceful with Elymas? Why was the miraculous judgement on Elymas appropriate?
4. vv.13-41. Read Paul's gospel presentation. What can you tell from the address about its intended audience? How does he make the case that Christianity is true in vv.16-25 and 31? What does he say the heart of Christianity is in vv.26-37? How does he call upon them to respond in vv.38-41?
5. vv.42-52. a) Why do the ones that reject the gospel do so? b) Why do the ones who accept the gospel do so?

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you
"?" -for something that raised a question

How can we communicate the gospel to someone so that they can receive Christ and become children of God (John 1:12-13)?

The character of the gospel in the book of Acts

The gospel is the essential Christian message. In the book of Acts we see the apostles delivering it in every place and setting. It is called "*the gospel*" (Acts 14:7,21;16:10), "*the gospel of God's grace*" (Acts 20:24), "*the word of his grace*" (Acts 20:32), "*the good news about the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 11:20), "*the message of the gospel*" (Acts 15:7), "*the message of his grace*" (Acts 14:3), "*the message of his salvation*" (Acts 13:26), or even just "*the message*" (Acts 11:19. cf. Acts 2:41;4:4;10:44;17:11). What do we learn from these descriptions in Acts?

First, we learn that the gospel is not so simple and rigidly fixed that it is presented identically in every setting. A survey of gospel speeches in the book of Acts shows what great variety in presentations there were. The gospel is adapted differently to different audiences.

Yet, second, we see, that this is a very definite and limited body of knowledge with a set content. Thus the writer refers to *the word*, *the message*. We see from the accounts in Acts that it can be expounded in a single talk. It can be "received" (Acts 8:14;17:11). We are told that when Cornelius' household "*received*" the message (11:1), the Holy Spirit fell on them (10:44). This shows that the gospel is not "everything in the Bible", but a set of core truths which, when understood and received, saves us.

Third, we see that when the gospel is summed up in one or two words, it is usually said to be about "*salvation*", "*grace*" or "*the Lord Jesus Christ*". Thus we see the essential message is that through Jesus we are saved by grace.

Does is the gospel "elementary" truths as opposed to "advanced" truths? No. The gospel does not relate so much to the rest of Christian truth as the first step relates to a staircase, but rather as the heart relates to the rest of the circulatory system (or as the brain relates to the nervous system). The rest of Christian truth is just an unfolding of the gospel — it is the working out of its implications and ramifications, intellectually, spiritually, behaviorally.

An overview of the gospel in the book of Acts

Despite the significant adaptations, depending upon the audience, each gospel presentation has several core components. John Stott breaks them down into four basics, and calls them the gospel "events, witnesses, promises, conditions" (See J.Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.79-81). Over and over again,

the apostles talk about “gospel events” (Jesus’ death and resurrection for our sins), “gospel promises” (objective pardon for sins and subjective freedom and joy), “gospel witnesses” (the testimony of the Bible and the eyewitnesses to the resurrection), and “gospel conditions” (the requirements of repentance and faith).

These do not come in the same order or in the same terms, and it is very important to notice that. This means that we are free to juxtapose these in the best way to reach people in our particular time and place. But these components are always there. We will reorganize the outline and give new names.

THEORETICAL OUTLINE

“Why should I believe?”

The Case

Relevance (“gospel promises”) We show the listeners that the gospel answers their deepest problems and issues. They should receive it because they need it.

Credibility (“gospel witnesses”) We show the listeners that the gospel is supported by strong evidence. They should receive it because it is true.

“What must I believe?”

The Content (“gospel events”) The heart of the gospel.

Sin and self-salvation. We show the listeners that they are under the guilt and power of sin, which leads them to seek to be their own savior and lord.

Grace and Christ’s salvation. We show the listeners how Jesus life, death, and resurrection in our place saves us and opens the way to God.

“How can I believe?”

The Commitment (“gospel conditions”)

Turning. We show the listeners that they must turn away from their former life and honor Christ as Lord.

Trusting. We show the listeners that they must trust cease self-salvation activity and trust Christ as Savior.

PRACTICAL OUTLINE

We see in the book of Acts that changes in the audience most effect how the “case” part of the gospel is presented. The Case part of the gospel addresses the basic question, “why should I believe this?” As we outlined it, there are two very important and fairly different lines of argument for Christianity. First, people should believe because they need it, it is relevant to them. It meets the deepest aspirations of the human heart, and solves the most basic problems of the human condition. But second, people should believe because it is true, regardless of what they believe. It is the most rational way to account for the world and life we see. To sum up — “why should we believe?” Because it is both subjectively true (the relevance case) and objectively true (the credibility case).

As important as these two “cases” are, they are rather different. Some people and groups have an acute consciousness of subjective needs, and they will be extremely sensitive to hearing more of the relevance-case. Others may have low awareness of any subjective needs, and they must be pressed to see the objective truth of Christianity, whether they like it or not! Which of these should come first? We see Paul talking to religious educated people in Pisidian Antioch, and there the credibility case (Acts 13:16-31) came before relevance case (Acts 13:38-39). But in Lystra, when Paul was speaking to uneducated pagans, the appeal and relevance case (Acts 14:15a) comes before the credibility case (Acts 14:15b-17). How do we do it today? Obviously, we need to be flexible, but here is a good procedure for our time and place.

Step #1 – Case for relevance *Answers: “Why do I need this?”*

First, we discern the person’s own “themes of relevance” — basic aspirations/hopes and fears/struggles. Then we ask how their basic beliefs about God and the world are helping them face these things.

Step #2 – Brief content *Answers: “What is the Christian message?”*

Second, we supply a brief gospel summary but geared to show how it meets the needs of the listeners, their “themes of relevance”. This is a “brief summary of the gospel” (see previous document) which is not designed to explain the whole.

Step #3 – Case for credibility *Answers: “How can you know it’s true?”*

Third, we begin to answer more intellectual objections. The brief summary lets them set the agenda, so you do not answer questions they aren’t asking. Sometimes there is a return to “relevance”, with questions about “how does it work for you?”

Step #4 – Full content *Answers: “What must I believe?”*

Fourth, we return and unpack the gospel, this time explaining the two basic points more fully — who we are (the character of sin), and who he is and what he has done (the character of God, Christ, and grace). Sometimes this leads back to step 3 again!

Step #5 – Commitment *Answers: “How can I believe — make it mine?”*

Fifth, we explain how to appropriate the work of Christ, so that the gospel promises (named under “the case for relevance”) become ours. This always has two parts — both turning and trusting, repenting and resting, making him Lord and Savior.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?
2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?
3. What does your own experience of witnessing in New York City lead you to think about the “Practical Outline”? Is this a good order?
4. Have you used the “Brief Summary of the Gospel” from a former week? What are the questions you are getting in response to it?

Acts

The Gospel for pagans

Study 14 | Acts 14:1-28

- 1 vv.1-7. What were the three main stages of the work at Iconium? What lessons do we learn for our own ministry?
- 2 vv.8-15a. What does the crowd's reaction to the healing of the crippled man tell us about them?
- 3 vv.15-17. Though this is a brief summary of Paul's talk, compare it to the talk in Acts 13:16ff. How is it different from that talk and why? To what kind of person would Paul bring such a message today?
- 4 vv.15-17. How is the talk in Acts 13:16ff the same as the speech to the Lycoanians? What can we learn from the comparison and contrast of the two speeches?
- 5 vv.21-28. Make a list of all the principles of "follow-up" and ministry that Paul and Barnabus followed after the many were converted. Were you properly "followed up"? Do you properly "follow up"?

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part II – CASE FOR RELEVANCE

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you
“?” -for something that raised a question

How can we communicate the gospel to someone so that they can receive Christ and become children of God (John 1:12-13)? First, we make a “case for relevance” — we discern the person’s own “themes of relevance” — basic aspirations/hopes and fears/struggles. Then we ask how their basic beliefs about God and the world are helping them face these things.

BRIDGE BUILDING

1. *Building trust.*

According to Aristotle, persuasive people combine three different factors in themselves. “*Logos*” means they are able to demonstrate clear and persuasive reasons for what they believe. They show how their minds were changed. But on its own, “Logos” will not persuade, since rationality is only one aspect of human nature. “*Pathos*” means they show are able to demonstrate both a passion and a compassion as they communicate what they believe. Thus they demonstrate how their hearts were changed. Finally, “*Ethos*” means that they are able to demonstrate attitudes and a lifestyle consistent with what they believe. They show how their life was changed. Persuasion involves appeals to reason, emotion, and experience. Persuasive people earn trust by their thoughtfulness, warmth, and integrity.

Thus the Christian develops redemptive relationships of active listening, service, authenticity and consistency. This takes time but it creates openness to the message when it comes from you. Through discussions and interaction, the Christian discerns “themes of relevance” (see below) — things that are burning issues for the non-Christian.

2. *Identifying themes of relevance.*

A theme of relevance is some true concern or conviction which arises from the person’s creation in the image of God. The Christian makes contact with the knowledge of God which every non-Christian has (Rom.1:18-21). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians do know the truth about God, but it is

intellectually and emotionally repressed. The Christian makes contact with the image of God which every non-Christian has (Gen.1:27). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians' deepest longings demonstrate the absence of God in a heart that was designed for him. We were created to be rational, relational, creative, eternal. And a person fears death, treats love as a reality, and longs for justice and freedom even when his/her world view can neither explain or satisfy those impulses.

What are examples of "themes of relevance"? These are the person's greatest hopes, fears, aspirations. There are two basic categories of them. There are Life Priorities, and Life Problems. Life Priorities include *Major job and vocational issues* ("My job isn't fulfilling, I don't know if I want to spend my life on this"); *Overall life goals* ("In my life I want to accomplish..."); *Heroes and ideas* ("The person/idea that influences me most..."); *Analysis of world problems* ("I think the problem with our society is..."); *Love and marriage* ("Marriage isn't for me..."). Life Problems include *Guilt or anger about the past* ("I regret... I have trouble with"); *Anxiety and fears about the future* ("I am very worried about..."); *Boredom or frustration with the present* ("Nothing tastes...") *Ethical dilemmas* ("I don't know what the right thing to do is...")

3. Identifying belief position

A "belief position" is what the person consciously believes about theological and religious issues. This includes what they believe about God, about Jesus, about life after death, about human nature, and so on. But a person's essential belief position can be ascertained by looking at these basic questions. *God's nature*. ("I think God is...") *Human nature*. ("What I think is basically wrong with people... (or) what I think is the reason most people are unhappy...") *Moral order*. ("I think that the way to determine right and wrong is...") *Spiritual meaning*. ("I think what would ultimately fulfill me...")

You will discover two basic kinds of non-believers — those who subscribe to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, but have not understood or "grasped" the gospel. They are trying to save themselves by being good. These people are not very secular, and generally you can simply demonstrate the case for relevance with a personal testimony, and go immediately to the full content of the gospel (there is seldom a need to make a case for credibility). But in NYC, most people will be more secular, and will reject most or all basic Christian doctrines. Therefore you need to identify their belief position, and make the case for relevance as in #4 below.

4. Arousing interest.**a. Show tension between their theme and their belief.**

The fundamental way to arouse interest in the gospel is to show a person a tension between their themes of relevance (which reveals their primal understanding that there is a God) and their belief position (which expresses their conscious denial of the Biblical God.)

b. Relate a brief presentation of the gospel to their theme.

Once you have pointed out some tension between the person's concern or conviction and his or her belief position, make a brief presentation of the gospel in such a way that shows how it addresses the person's "theme".

The following example shows how this works. It is adapted from account of a conversation between Becky Pippert (BP) with a black female law student (LS) on a bus in Salem, Oregon. (in *Out of the Salt Shaker*, IVP, 1979, p.160ff.)

Becky meets LS on the bus and introduces the subject of heroes.

LS: "I guess Karl Marx is my hero." [Editor's note: Remember, this was 1979!]

BP: "What makes him your hero?"

LS: "I think his ideas were great — they haven't always been carried out rightly of course."

BP: "But what exactly is so great about his ideas?"

LS: "He's my hero because of his passionate regard for the oppressed"

BP: "I agree with that concern, but... I know Marx holds no belief in God."

LS: "Yes... he sees the universe as godless, and we have meaning only in a corporate sense of class. We are not significant as individuals."

BP: "Yet you admire his regard for the oppressed even though they are ultimately insignificant. It seems strange to value people so highly when they are random products of a universe. Why not manipulate them as you please?"

LS: "I couldn't do that... I guess if my natural response is to feel [individuals] are significant then I need a philosophic system that says the same things... But I believe we are basically good. If we could just live in a classless society, we would be free of the things that weigh us down..."

BP: "Listen, I know a guy who is one of the worst racists...if he lived with you for fifty years in your classless society, he would still think 'nigger'. How can Marx wipe out the ugliness and hatred of a bigot?"

LS: [Eyes glaring] "We've been trying to change that for centuries... And all the rules and laws in the world can't... make you love me."

BP: “Look, you tell me you know individuals are significant, and you need a system that says so. Now you’re saying that the real evil comes from within us. For external rules or laws can curb but cannot transform behavior. So you need a system that regards evil as internal and a solution that transforms radically not curbs superficially. Right?... Well, that’s the very kind of system I’ve found.”

LS: “Hey, what kind of revolution are you into?”

(Pippert) “When I told her I followed Jesus, I think I had better not quote her exact words of response! But after she recovered from her shock she asked me how I knew it was true. For the rest of our trip she asked me to defend Christianity. She listened intently, and when we arrived she said, ‘I’d like to get together again... When I went home this weekend my younger sister came to see me, too. Then she told me she’d become a Christian. I told her it was anti-intellectual and unsubstantiated. In a furor I packed my bags, walked out saying I never wanted to discuss it again. And here I got on a bus and sat down next to you.’ We do indeed worship the Hound of Heaven.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**
2. **What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**
3. **Think of one key relationship you have with a non-Christian. Which of the three factors in “building trust” do you most need to work on, if you are to be a more effective witness?**
4. **How does Becky Pippert uncover a “theme of relevance” for the law student? How does she uncover her “belief position”? How does she show the contradiction between the two? How does she adapt her gospel presentation to the theme of relevance?**

Acts

Clarifying the Gospel

Study 15 | Acts 15:1 - 16:5

1. a) Did the “some men” in vv.1-5 represent the apostles’ position in Jerusalem?
b) Why were they contending that the Gentile converts of Paul were not obeying the law of Moses? (Were they breaking the 10 commandment?)
2. Read 13:42-48. How is this the background for the crisis of chapter 15? What was different about the Gentiles Paul preached to in the synagogue (v.43) and the Gentiles who Paul turned to in v.46b? Why and how did Paul’s ministry arouse such opposition from some Jewish Christians (15:1-2)?
3. vv.7-11. Of what three facts does Peter remind the Council, and what conclusions does he draw from them?

Application question: How is this problem of culture a continual one for the Christian church, even when the particular issue is not Jewish-Gentile tensions?

4. vv.12-21. a) How does James solve the problem theologically? How does he solve it practically? b) Read vv.22-35. What does this entire debate and event teach us about what to do when Christians differ?

5. 16:1-5. Is Paul's behavior with Timothy seem in tension with his uncompromising stand in 15:1-5? What does this teach us about where to contend and where to compromise?

Acts

Three surprising conversions

Study 16 | Acts 16:5-40

- 1. vv.1, 6-10. Trace these moves on a map to see how unusual a route this is. a) On the basis of other passages in Acts, what are the possible ways that the Holy Spirit may have been guiding them away from these provinces? b) What does this incident tell us about how God will guide us?**
- 2. vv.11-15. What are we told about Lydia? How did she come to faith? What signs are we given that Lydia was truly converted?**
- 3. vv.16-19. Contrast the pre-Christian spiritual state of the slave-girl with that of Lydia. Contrast the ministry of Paul to Lydia with that of Paul to the slave-girl. What is Luke trying to show us?**
- 4. vv.19-40. a) What led the jailer to believe? b) Compare his pre-Christian spiritual condition with that of Lydia and the Pythoness. c) How does Paul lead him to Christ? d) Why does Paul insist on a public apology v.37?**
- 5. Surely there were many conversions at Philippi. Why do you think Luke chose three such disparate people to profile for readers?**

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part III – B – CONTENT: PRESENTATION #1

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you
 “?” -for something that raised a question

As we said last week in the introduction, there are two basic kinds of person to share the faith with in our western society today — persons with a more traditional world view, and persons with a more deeply secular world view. Therefore we provide two ways to present the gospel, one for each kind of person. They differ mainly in how they demonstrate the hearer's need for Christ, in how they present the guilt and danger of sin. Presentation #1 (this week's project), called “*Sin as Separation*”, is for people of a more traditional mindset. These are people with a) a belief in God and b) a definite sense of obligation to absolute moral standards. Presentation #2 (next week's project), called “*Sin as Slavery*”, is for people of a more deeply secular mindset. They are people with a) no belief in a personal God and/or b) little concept of any absolute moral standards.

The “Brief Summaries” and the Extended Gospel Presentations

How do these two extended gospel presentations provided in weeks 16 and 17 relate to the “Brief Gospel Summaries” of week 6? The “Separation” presentation is an extension of the “Law-Love” summary of the gospel provided in the Week 6 project. The “Slavery” presentation is an extension of the “Slavery-Freedom” summary of the gospel provided in Week 6. These two summaries take different perspectives on the subject of sin, and therefore are slanted toward one kind of listener or the other. The other two summaries, “Do-Done” and “Sin-Salvation”, would fit with presentations either way, since they both focus not so much on our need, but on how salvation is accomplished by Christ.

The following is very extensive. I will provide an “easy outline” and summary later.

PRESENTATION #1 (Sin as Separation)

Pre-Presentation

Refer to previous material on building trust, finding themes of relevance, and sharing a gospel summary. The following assumes that this presentation is not an abrupt or an inappropriate changing of the subject.

Opening question: “WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND TO BE THE GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR BEING ACCEPTED BY GOD OR FOR ADMISSION TO HEAVEN?”

This question serves two purposes. First, it is a “qualifier”, since it confirms or denies your assumption that this person has definite concept of God and moral absolutes (and is thus best helped with the “Separation” approach). The person’s answer may reveal that they are not sure there is a God, or do not believe in an afterlife of rewards based on moral behavior. They may say things like: “well, I think when we die, that’s it.” or “I think if there is a God, God is just the power of love and life” or “I think God accepts everyone” or “I think after death we all just get absorbed into God, the light” or “if there is a God and heaven, it will just depend if you followed your own beliefs very fervently”. In some cases, they may be very turned off or so confused by the question that they simply do not answer it. All these responses indicate that the person would be more helped by the “Slavery” presentation.

Second, this question identifies the person’s “salvation system”. It reveals if they believe in a “good works” system or a “grace” system for approaching God. These are the only two possible answers, though there are a great variety of forms. National surveys show that 35% of Americans, when asked this questions and given 7 possible answers, choose “because I have confessed my sins and accepted Christ as my Savior” (G.Barna, *Evangelism That Works*, p.45n). The large majority of responses to this question then are “works” answers. Examples are: “you have to — be a decent person” “follow the golden rule” “obey the 10 commandments” “go to church” “follow the example of Jesus” “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are a loving person”. Often they may give a vague answer such as “you have to ask God for forgiveness”. But always probe for the real foundation for their hope. Ask “but why would he forgive someone for sin?” Often they will say, “because we are very sorry for them and really want to do better” or “because God is very loving”. All these show a lack understanding that we are separated from God by our sin and no amount of good works or good intentions can bridge the gap. A “grace” answer does not have to be perfectly precise, but must show that the perso knows they are too weak to live up to God’s standards, that they separated from God and are accepted only by mercy through Jesus.

Note 1: Sometimes people say they believe in God and heaven, but when you get into your discussion, you will find they insist that everyone and anyone is saved or loved by God, no matter what. Essentially, they have no sense of obligation to be good. (You may ask: “do you really mean *everyone* is accepted? Even genocidal dictators?” They may back off then, and you find that they do believe in moral standards, just very low ones!) People who insist on this kind of universalism or relativism (despite seeming to have a definite belief in God) are candidates for Presentation #2—Sin as slavery.

Note 2: People with a Catholic backgrounds need to realize that some Protestants seem at first sight to believe in a “grace system” but really do not. People from conservative Protestant churches may give a general answer like: “you have to believe that Jesus died for you” or “make a decision for Jesus”. But if you ask, “why does that get you in?” you may find that they really believe they have to love and follow Jesus as a way to be good enough for God. Many people with Protestant backgrounds have what’s been called a “sincerity covenant” — they try to live the best they sincerely can and Jesus makes up the rest with this forgiveness. That is salvation by a “works-and-a-little-grace” system. On the other hand, people with a Protestant background need to realize that some Catholics seem at first sight to believe in a “works system” but really do not. Catholics who believe they are saved from first to last by grace will take hold and receive that grace by taking the Sacraments (of baptism and the Lord’s Supper). That does not mean that they are relying on their works for salvation. In the final analysis, however, most people with Protestant and Catholic backgrounds are trying to go to God on a “works system”. They all need the gospel.

This question and approach is not new. D.James Kennedy made it popular in his book *Evangelism Explosion*, but evangelists have been using it for literally centuries. Here is an example of how the British pastor Charles Spurgeon shared the gospel in the mid-19th century with a “waterman”, a ferry operator. This does not provide a good example of the language we should use, but it illustrates how the principles of the gospel have been used across time and culture.

Spurgeon: “Have you, my friend, a good hope of heaven if you should die?”

Waterman: “Well, sire, I think as how I have.”

S: Pray tell me, then, what your hope is, for no man need ever be ashamed of a good hope.

W: Well sir, ...I don’t know that anybody ever saw me drunk...I do think as how I am as good as most folk that I know.

S: Oh dear! Oh dear! Is that all you have to trust to? [“The waterman then told me that he was charitable as well, and I told him that I was glad to hear it, but I did not see how his good conduct could carry him to heaven. He asked why.”]

S: You have sometimes sinned in your life, have you not?

W: Yes, sir, that I have, many a time.

S: On what ground, then, do you think that your sins will be forgiven?

W: Well, sir, I have been very sorry for them, and I think they are all gone—they don’t trouble me now.

S: Now, my friend, suppose you were to go and get into debt with the grocer where you deal, and you should say to her, 'Look here, missus, you have a long score against me, I am sorry to say that I cannot pay you for all those goods that I have had; but I'll tell you what I will do, I'll doe. I'll never get into your debt any more.' She would very soon tell you that was not her style of doing business; and do you suppose that is the way in which you can treat the great God? He is going to strike out you past sins because you say you will not go on sinning against Him?

W: Well, sir, I should like to know how my sins are to be forgiven...

S: ["Then I told him, as plainly as I could, how the Lord Jesus had taken the place of sinners, and how those who trusted in Him, and rested on His blood and righteousness, would find pardon and peace."] Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography: The Early Years*, pp.373-375

Follow-up questions: (If a "works" answer) "COULD I SHARE WITH YOU A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, HOW YOU CAN KNOW GOD'S LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE AS A FREE GIFT, NOT ON THE BASIS OF (WHAT THEY JUST SAID)?" This gets permission to do the presentation. It has the integrity to say upfront that you are disagreeing with them, but the extremely positive expression "as a free gift" is usually winsome and elicits an affirmative answer. Go to the Presentation below.

(If a "grace" answer) "ARE YOU CONFIDENT THAT, IF YOU WERE TO DIE TONIGHT, YOU WOULD DEFINITELY GO TO HEAVEN?" This is called the "assurance" question". Though they may have given the "right" answer, and have an intellectual grasp of the gospel, this question helps reveal whether or not they have appropriated it for themselves. If they gave a grace answer and a "yes" answer to assurance, then as far as you can tell (without knowing them better), they are professing Christians. But if the person gives a "no" answer to assurance, it could be that they realize that they have never made the commitment themselves. Or it could mean that they have done this, but their lives and lifestyle has contradicted Christianity. In that case, they have a bad conscience which blocks their assurance. In all cases, you need to go to the part of the presentation that has to do with "Commitment" which we cover in a subsequent week.

Presentation

A. Sin

Read or quote Luke 10:25-27. **"ALL THE MORAL LAWS OF CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS AND EVEN COMMON SENSE BOIL DOWN TO TWO MORAL PRINCIPLES: 1) LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR BEING, AND 2) LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOU WANT TO BE LOVED."**

This really is common sense. First, if God really made us and keeps us alive every second, then we belong completely to him and we owe him everything. (Anything you create yourself is yours to do with what you will.) Second, the “golden rule” for loving others is something absolutely imprinted on us. You don’t have to teach it to children, they know it instinctively before they can barely talk (e.g. “I gave you my toy, you give me yours.”)

Read or quote I Corinthians 13:4-8a (to “*Love never fails*”). **“LOOK AT THE SECOND PRINCIPLE FIRST. PAUL SAYS THAT REAL LOVE ALWAYS FORGIVES, SERVES, AND ENDURES BECAUSE IT SHOULD BE UNCONDITIONAL. THAT IS HOW WE ALL WANT TO BE LOVED. YET WE DO NOT COME EVEN CLOSE TO GIVING OTHERS WHAT WE DEMAND OURSELVES.”** What is ‘unconditional love’? It is loving people not for what they give you, but for simply for they themselves. If that was the case, then your love would never give up on them — there would be no conditions that it required. That is how we all want to be loved. We want to know that others love us, and not the things we are providing them. Yet we fail to do to others what we want from them. We do give up on people when they stop being kind and useful to us. **“THE GOLDEN RULE MEANS WE SHOULD MEET THE NEEDS OF OTHERS WITH THE SAME SPEED, JOY, AND RELENTLESSNESS WHICH WE USE TO MEET OUR OWN”**. It does not take much reflection to see that the golden rule is absolutely right, we owe it, yet it is impossible to keep.

Read or quote Exodus 20:3. **“LOOK AT THE FIRST PRINCIPLE. GOD SIMPLY ASKS THAT THERE BE NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT TO YOUR THINKING, FEELING, AND BEHAVIOR THAN HE IS.”** When Jesus said, “*Love him with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind*” he was only being reasonable. If we owe God absolutely everything, then we should not love anything more than him, nor depend on anything more than him. But do we come close? Use the test of your thoughts. When you have nothing else that you have to think of, what do you enjoy dwelling on? Is it God, or are there other things more absorbing and enjoyable. Of course, everyone on the earth does not find that God is the most important thing to their hearts. To put God first is absolutely right, we owe it, yet it is impossible to do.

Read or quote Romans 3:10. **“THE BIBLE IS CATEGORICAL THAT ‘NO ONE IS RIGHTEOUS — NO, NOT ONE’. NO ONE COMES CLOSE TO OBEYING THE MOST REASONABLE AND COMMON SENSE MORAL PRINCIPLES.”** Of course, some people are far more moral and decent than others, but Christianity says that is to only compare less unrighteous people to more unrighteous. Compared to what we all owe God and our neighbor, we all fail. For example, imagine if you asked three swimmers to swim from Hawaii to California. One cannot swim and drowns in a few yards; one is a good swimmer and drowns in four miles; one is a great swimmer and drowns in a hundred miles. Though one is many times better than the rest, they are all incapable of swimming to California, and they are all equally dead.

B. God. "CHRISTIANITY TELLS US 2 BASIC THINGS ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD" — 1) Read or quote Psalm 11:7 **GOD LOVES JUSTICE AND THEREFORE CANNOT ACCEPT EVIL OR SIN AT ALL.** We all long for justice. If a man in a car was to back into your car and damage it, you would not be satisfied if he only said, "I'm sorry". You would want nothing short of justice. But God loves justice far more than we do; he is absolutely just and holy and cannot accept wrongdoing at all. **2)** Read or quote I John 4:8. **"GOD IS LOVE, AND HE SEEKS THE GOOD EVEN OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE DISOBEYED AND OPPOSED HIM."** It is perhaps too easy and popular today to believe that God is love. He is a God who wants to forgive and restore.

Transition: **BUT FORGIVING US IS, IN A SENSE, THE BIGGEST PROBLEM GOD HAS EVER FACED.** These two "sides" of his nature create a dilemma, a great problem.

3) Read or quote Exodus 34:5-7. **GOD LOVES US AND DOES NOT WANT TO PUNISH US, BUT IS JUST AND MUST PUNISH SIN.** When God revealed himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai he made a startling statement. He said that he was abounding in love and forgiveness, "yet" he will always punish wrongdoing. It seems impossible that God could be both. **"IT SEEMS HE CAN EITHER HE CAN LOVE US, AND NOT LOVE JUSTICE, OR HE CAN LOVE JUSTICE AND THEN NOT LOVE US — BUT HE CANNOT LOVE BOTH."** What a problem. If he does not love justice perfectly, what hope is there for the world? But if he *does* love us perfectly, what hope is there for us? Imagine an illustration. If a father was also a judge, and his guilty child was brought before him, he could not just acquit his child. He could either do what he wanted to do as a judge, or what he wanted to do as a father, but not both.

C. Christ.

1) Read or quote Acts 20:28. **GOD HIMSELF CAME TO EARTH IN HUMAN FORM AS JESUS CHRIST.** This text tells us that it was God's own blood shed for us. God became human and vulnerable and subject to death. **2)** Read or quote I Peter 2:22. **JESUS WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO EVER HAD A PERFECT RECORD — LOVING GOD AND HIS NEIGHBOR.** He lived the life we should have lived. **3)** Read or quote II Corinthians 5:21. **BUT ON THE CROSS THERE WAS A GREAT TRANSFER — HE IS TREATED AS OUR BAD RECORD DESERVES, SO THAT WE CAN BE TREATED AS HIS PERFECT RECORD DESERVES.** Look at the verse. It says that Jesus was "made... to be sin". Since Jesus did not actually become selfish, cruel, etc. on the cross, that means that he was treated as if he were sinful — he became "legally" sinful and liable for our sins. But it says that now it is possible for us to "become the righteousness of God". Since Jesus "became sin" by being treated as sinful, so we can "become righteous", be treated as perfectly righteous. He is treated as if our record is his, so we can be treated as if his record is ours. **THE GOSPEL IS: GOD TREATS BELIEVING SINNERS AS THOUGH THEY HAD LIVED THE LIFE JESUS LIVED AND DIED THE DEATH JESUS DIED.**

4) Read or quote Romans 3:26. This is the solution to the dilemma. The love of God fulfilled the law of God — in Christ on the cross. When Christ was punished, both his love for us and his love for justice were satisfied in one stroke *“that God might be both just and justifier [judge and father] of those who believe”* (Rom.3:26). **BECOMING A CHRISTIAN IS NOT ME DEVELOPING A RIGHTEOUS RECORD THROUGH MORAL EFFORT AND GIVING IT TO GOD; IT IS GOD DEVELOPING A RIGHTEOUS RECORD THROUGH CHRIST AND GIVING IT TO US.** A visual illustration to use at this point. Take a book: “this is our record, full of sins”. Take a blank white card or piece of paper: “this is Christ’s record, perfect, a ticket into the presence of God”. Put one in this hand and one in the other. Then switch them. “He gets our record, and sinks under it; we get his record and rise with it.”

D. Faith.

1) Read or quote John 1:12-13. **BECOMING A CHRISTIAN NOT TRYING HARDER, BUT RECEIVING A STATUS — “RIGHTS AS CHILDREN OF GOD”.** Notice that becoming a Christian is like being adopted. Adopting children is a legal act. In one moment, the children automatically become your heirs. So becoming a Christian is receiving this new status, being heirs of God’s love and life. **IT IS RECEIVED BY “BELIEVING” — BY FAITH.** **2) WHAT SAVING FAITH IS NOT.** Read or quote James 2:19. **MORE THAN INTELLECTUAL BELIEF.** The demons believed Jesus lived and died for sin, but they are not his children! Saving faith is not less than intellectual belief — you must have that — but it is more. Read or quote Phil.3:8-9. **MORE THAN TRUST FOR HELP AND STRENGTH.** It is possible to pray to God and trust in him for strength and protection, but still be trusting in your-*self* for salvation. Remember your answer to my first question: you said you thought it was possible to find God through (what they said). So you see, you may trust God for many things, but you are trusting yourself for your salvation.

3) WHAT SAVING FAITH IS. Read or quote Romans 4:5 (also refer back to Phil.3:8,9) **REAL FAITH IS REMOVING YOUR SAVING FAITH FROM WHERE IT IS NOW, AND PUTTING IT ON JESUS CHRIST.** **a) REPENT — NOT JUST FOR SINS, BUT FOR TRYING TO BE YOUR OWN LORD AND SAVIOR.** Paul says that first you must “not work”: that means that you must see that you cannot earn God’s favor with any moral effort, not even with efforts to develop a penitent, surrendered, sincere heart. You must admit that it can only be received. **b) BELIEVE — NOT JUST IN JESUS IN GENERAL, BUT IN JESUS AS YOUR NEW RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD.** Then Paul says you must “trust God who justifies the wicked”. That means you ask God to accept (justify) you solely for the sake of what Christ did for you. You say: “Lord, I know that right now I am ‘wicked’, but I can be just and acceptable through Christ. Receive me because of him.” Refer back to John 1:12-13. The moment you do this, you not only receive “rights” as children, but you are “born of God” — God’s spirit comes in and begins to renew you.

IS NOT TRYING HARD TO QUALIFY FOR GOD, BUT ADMITTING THAT YOU CANNOT

First, of all — I have good news — better you have — but first, a much higher view of the law. Golden rule. I Cor.13 — go and do that! Do you?

Acts

The Gospel for intellectuals

Study 17 | Acts 17:1-34

1. vv.1-9. If Paul's great burden is to win the Gentiles (cf. Eph.3:8) why does he always first go to the synagogue in any town? What are the implications for our own efforts to spread the gospel?
2. vv.1-9. What was Paul's basic strategy in Thessalonica and Berea? What was the reaction to it and why?
3. v.16-21. From what motives did Paul operate (what did he see and feel when he first saw Athens)? What can we learn from his example?
4. a) What can we tell about how Paul reasoned in the marketplace? (vv.17-18) b) How does he gain the interest of his hearers in vv.22-23?
5. a) What six principles (at least) does Paul lay out to show them who the true God is? (vv.24-31) b) Some people have criticized this sermon as not being Christ-centered enough. How would you answer that? c) How does Paul's message fit this audience (refer to the introduction to the Athenian mission)?

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Part III – A – CONTENT: PRESENTATION #2

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you
 “?” -for something that raised a question

The following is very extensive. I will provide an “easy outline” and summary later.

PRESENTATION #1 (Sin as Separation)**Pre-Presentation**

Refer to presentation #1 on “Pre-Presentation” and to the “Content: Introduction” on discerning whether a person would be helped by the following approach or not.

Opening question: **“WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING A PERSON NEEDS (OR YOU NEED) IN ORDER TO BE HAPPY AND FULFILLED?”** This question is an extremely direct way to find a “theme of relevance” as described in Part II. “Relevance”. A more indirect approach might be preferable. The purpose of this question or its like is to find what the person thinks is real meaning in life. They are likely to give a fairly general, impersonal answer, like “find what they really want to accomplish in life and do it” or “find people who love and accept you for who you are”. You should follow that up with genuinely interested queries to explain, like: **“HOW MANY PEOPLE REACH THAT, DO YOU THINK?” “WHY OR WHY NOT?” “HOW EASY OR HARD ARE YOU FINDING IT?”** Just as, in Presentation #1, it is important to understand their answer, in order to refer back to it later, so it is here.

Follow-up question: **“COULD I SHARE WITH YOU A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, THAT THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED IS NOT JUST (WHAT THEY JUST SAID) BUT TO KNOW AND EXPERIENCE GOD PERSONALLY, AND HOW THAT IS POSSIBLE?”** This gets permission to do the presentation. It has the integrity to say upfront that you are disagreeing with them, but the extremely positive expression “know and experience God” is usually winsome and elicits an affirmative answer. Go to the Presentation below.

Presentation**A. The problem — Slavery.**

1) NOBODY IS BORN WITH A SENSE OF WORTH OR VALUE IN THEMSELVES. All persons need to establish a sense of worth or value — nobody is born just having it. And we cannot just give it to ourselves — we must have the love and approval of others. Now there are innumerable ways we seek this sense of worth — career, possessions, appearance, love, peer groups, achievement, good causes, moral character, family, personal “bests”, certain kinds of relationships — or a combination of a several. A very liberal person will have a different path by which to prove him or herself than a very conservative person. But we all have a path. This means two things —

2) THAT EVEN THE MOST IRRELIGIOUS ARE REALLY WORSHIPPING SOMETHING. Whatever thing or things from which we choose to derive our value become the ultimate meaning in our lives. Whatever is ultimate serves as a ‘god’ and a ‘righteousness’ even if we don’t think in those terms. These things control and disappoint us if we find them, and devastate us if we lose them. For example, they enslave us with guilt and self-hatred (if we fail to attain them) or with anger and resentment (if someone blocks them from us) or with fear and anxiety (if they are threatened) or at least with drivenness (since we must have them). In other words, we are not free. Whatever is the most important thing in life for us controls us. We do not control ourselves.

3) THAT EVEN THE MOST RELIGIOUS, ARE NOT REALLY WORSHIPPING GOD. There are plenty of religious and moral people in the world. But they are not fundamentally different from the irreligious people, because they too are trying to prove themselves through their performance in order to establish their value and worth. They may use religion and morality to do it. They may look to God as Helper, Teacher, and Example, but their moral performance is serving as their Savior. They are just as guilty and self-hating if they fail it, just as angry and resentful if someone blocks it, just as fearful and anxious if something threatens it, just as driven “to be good”. So there is no really fundamental difference between religious and irreligious people.

B. The Solution — Redemption.

The word “redemption” literally means — “bought out of slavery”. Jesus came not primarily to be our Helper, Teacher, or Example, but as our Savior. We must see:

1) WE ARE LIBERATED NOT SO MUCH THROUGH THE TEACHING, AS THROUGH THE WORK OF CHRIST. Our deep sense that we need to be good and loving to others is not mistaken, but we will never earn our sense of worth by trying to love others. No one has ever “done unto others as we would have them do unto us”. We will always fail. Jesus, came not primarily as example, but as a substitute. He came to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died (as penalty for our failures).

2) WE ARE LIBERATED NOT BY GIVING A WORTHY RECORD TO GOD, BUT BY RECEIVING A WORTHY RECORD FROM GOD. When we believe, we get Christ's spotless record, and therefore the rights that go with it. It is transferred — and then we are worth what Christ is worth. The Bible calls this worthiness our "righteousness". We all make something our righteousness. But Jesus' free righteousness is the only true righteousness. It is the only one that is perfect, can stand up to any circumstance or human failure.

3) WE ARE LIBERATED BECAUSE JESUS IS THE ONLY GOD WHO DOES NOT ENSLAVE. As a fish is only free in water, we are only free when serving Jesus supremely. For he is the only source of meaning that we cannot lose (freeing us from fear and anger) and that is a free gift (freeing us from guilt and drivenness). He is the only God who can forgive — none of the other ones can or will. Read or quote Matt.11:28-30. His "yoke" is the only one that does not enslave.

C. The Reception — Adoption.

How do we "receive" this record?

1) CHANGE NOT THE AMOUNT BUT THE DEPTH OF YOUR REPENTANCE. You have to "repent", but the repentance that receives Christ is not so much being sorry for specific sins (though it is that), but it is admitting that your main sin is your efforts of self-salvation, at trying to be your own Savior. Don't just repent of sins, but of the self-righteousness under all you do, bad and good. Repent not just for doing wrong, but for the reason you did right!

2) CHANGE NOT THE AMOUNT, BUT THE OBJECT OF YOUR FAITH. You have to "believe", but the belief that receives Christ is not so much subscribing to a set of doctrines about Christ (though it is that), but transferring your trust from your own works and record to Christ's work and record.

Read or recite John 1:12-13.

3) ASK DIRECTLY FOR A NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, FOR JESUS' SAKE. Imagine you worked for a very rich man. Your relationship depended on your performance week by week. But then imagine that this man adopted you. Suddenly the relationship would become loving and intimate, and his wealth would all be yours automatically, and it would not come to you on the basis of your performance, but on the basis of the legal relationship. That's what it means to become a Christian. Pray: "Lord, if I have never done so before, I thank you for the magnificent, sufficient sacrifice of your Son for me, and I ask you to receive and adopt me as your child, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Christ has done for me."

D. The New Life of Growth.

This new life of freedom grows over time. How?

1) THROUGH CONTINUAL REPENTANCE FOR RESIDUAL SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS.

A new quality of life results as you learn to joyfully repent for remaining “idols”, left-over systems of self-salvation. Under every problem there is something more important than Jesus that is operating as our functional righteousness and worth.

2) THROUGH A GROWING EXPERIENCE OF GRATEFUL LOVE. A new quality of life results as you lose the old motivation of selfish fear (“slave” mentality) and become empowered by the new dynamic of grateful love (“child of God” mentality). Without an experience of grace, all our good deeds are essentially self-interested, impersonal, and conditional. But the gospel moves us to love and serve God for who he is in himself.

Acts

Mission to Corinth

Study 18 | Acts 18:1-28

1. Compare Paul's choice of ministry sites with 16:12, and what you recall from the rest of the book of Acts. What kinds of places does he give priority? Why? What impact should that have on Christians today?
2. vv.1-18. Notice the distinct stages in the Corinthian mission. What were they? What led to each move to a new stage? What obstacles did he meet at each stage, how did he respond each time, and how did God respond each time?
3. vv.8-11. What is surprising about the emotional condition of Paul in v.9 in light of v.8? Should it be surprising? Why would Paul find ministry in Corinth so difficult (cf. I Cor.2:2-3)? How does God respond to him?
4. Collect and list all the ways that God's help and encouragement comes to us. What can we learn from a) Paul's actions and b) God's directions (in v.9-10) about how we can receive God's help ourselves?
5. vv.24-28. What can we learn for our own effectiveness in ministry from Apollos? From Priscilla and Aquila?

Acts

Mission to Ephesus

Study 19 | Acts 19:1-41

1. vv.1-7. Recall what we know about Apollos (18:24-28). How does that account for the “problem” of these men? Do you think these men were Christians? Look at Paul’s questions and try to discern what elements were missing and what elements must be present before a person can truly said to be a Christian?
2. vv.8-22. What was Paul’s main method in his mission in Ephesus, and how does it compare and contrast with those in Corinth and Athens? Make a list of all the methods of evangelism you’ve seen Paul use.
3. Take some time to reflect on how Paul’s mission methods (especially in Acts 17-19) instruct the modern church? What does he do that we neglect or omit?
4. vv.11-20. What can we learn: a) about the place of miracles in ministry from vv.11-12, b) about the power of Jesus’ name from vv.13-16, c) about the marks of real conversion from vv.17-20?
5. vv.23-41. What caused the riot? What lessons can we draw from it? What do you think was Luke’s purpose in relating this account of the riot?

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Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you
 “?” -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. This particular set of sheets is the most difficult. With many people, it would be good to skip some or all of them. But they will be absolutely necessary with a number of people, especially those who have thought through their objections to Christianity in a coherent way.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?
2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?
3. How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?
4. Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?

B. HOW TO BELIEVE IN ANYTHING (B-1)

How can we come to know if a religion like Christianity is true? Before we outline an approach (in B-3), we need to deal with two common assertions in B-1 and B-2. These are by far the most difficult sheets of the series.

1. “I don’t have to believe in God unless you can prove his existence.”

Many people have taken this for granted for years, but there are grounds why this isn’t a rational assertion (on its own terms), nor a fair one. First, it is in the end a self-contradictory statement. To say “belief in God is only rational if there is proof” puts a burden on belief in God that you don’t put on yourself for many of your most basic beliefs. 1) You cannot prove that you were eating lunch today — because memory is something we must take on faith. 2) You cannot prove that because paper is flammable in the past it will be in the future, because cannot prove the uniformity of nature, but rather must assume it. 3) You cannot prove the existence of other persons, that your senses are showing you the real world “out there”. Why not? You can’t prove logic without using logic, which is to assume the very thing you are trying to prove. You can’t prove that our sense experience is valid without using our sense experience, which is to assume the very thing you are trying to prove. You can’t prove that the future will be like the past without saying, “well it always has been so in the past”, which is to base your argument on the principle you are trying to prove. So we cannot prove our most basic beliefs about the existence of persons, the uniformity of nature, the reliability of our senses, and yet we consider someone who denies them as irrational!

I know that this kind of thinking makes one’s head hurt. But we have to address this very common assertion. The assertion “a belief is only rational if it is proved by logic or scientific investigation” is then irrational on its own terms, since it cannot be verified in the way it makes demands on other assertions. “Proof”, then, is not the only way to know things for certain.

Second, the statement is not fair. Belief in God is not like belief in the Yeti, the “abominable snowman”. There would be no warrant to believe in such a thing without empirical proof. But two people who disagree about the Yeti can still agree about the rest of the reality, whereas two people who disagree about the reality of God have a different view of everything else. One person believes everything exists only because of God, and the other believes all things are able to exist “on their own”. Now since the origin and the limits of the universe are hidden to us, both views of reality are assumptions of faith. So to disbelieve in God is at that moment to believe “I live in a universe in which nature is uniform and in which reason and sense perception work, all without God.” How can you prove that? We’ve seen that you cannot. So the non-believer in God is not in a neutral, uncommitted position. You cannot act as if the Christian’s world-view is on trial and yours is not. You cannot demand a proof for the Christian’s basic beliefs about the universe that you yourself cannot produce.

(B-2)

2. "But you have demonstrated too much! Since no one can prove anything at all, no one can be sure of anything at all."

We have seen that a person who insists that basic belief in God must be proven gives reason "too much credit", how it cannot prove any foundational beliefs about the nature of the universe. But there is an opposite mistake that can be made — to give reason too little credit. Many people today are going beyond even the "no religion is superior" view of A-2 to a radical skepticism, saying that we cannot know any reality at all. Maybe, these folk say, our faculties don't tell us anything about the world as it is, but only impose a "structure" on reality. So we actually "create our own reality".

But this view is untenable because it is dishonest; it will not use its own critical tools on itself. Radical skeptics cannot disagree with using laws of logic without using laws of logic. They cannot communicate their points without expecting their words to be understood (thus showing their belief in the reliability of sense perception). They insist that our perception of reality is not reliable, but they are assuming then that there is an objective reality that exists or else they could not say we are failing to see it. In short, you cannot contradict the idea of truth without using it.

Where does this leave us? We said that the "basic beliefs" we mentioned in B-2 — memory, sense perception, the uniformity of nature, the reality of the external world, the laws of logic — that could not be proven without using them. But now we also see now that we cannot deny them without using them either. That shows that though we cannot prove them, we also cannot avoid knowing them, no matter how much we protest that we don't believe in them. We just "find ourselves" knowing these things inescapably. If you cannot even doubt something without affirming it, there is no use doubting it.

Where does this leave us? Pascal summarized it perfectly in *Pensee* 406. "*We have an incapacity for proving anything which no amount of dogmatism can overcome. We have an idea of truth which no amount of skepticism can overcome.*" On the one hand, we must not make the "over-rational" objection that Christianity has to be proven before it can be believed. On the other hand, we must not make the "under-rational" objection that there is no objective truth, or that we cannot use our reason and senses to sift the evidence for it.

Summary: We really do know many things by evidence and probability, but almost nothing at all by "proof". Now that we have rid ourselves of 1) the demand for absolute proof, yet 2) radical skepticism about reason, and also 3) the mistaken notion that non-belief in God is neutral and objective, we can get to work to outline a way to sift and evaluate the evidence for Christianity.

(B-3)

3. “How can we test different sets of religious beliefs to come to know which ones are true?”

First we must recognize that everyone has a “world-view”. This is a master theory of life which is a set of interlocking beliefs based on some ultimate criterion for determining truth and falsity. For example, your ultimate criterion might be logical consistency (rationalism — the mind), or empirical observation (empiricism — the senses), or one’s own experience (existentialism — the feelings), or some religious authority (the Bible, Koran), or some other authority (family tradition, ethnic culture) etc. Now we cannot “prove” an ultimate criterion without using it, or without assuming some other one. For example, if an empiricist says, “I will only believe that which is proven scientifically”, you could be asked, “but how can you prove that scientific proof is the only valid criterion for truth?” In that case he or she might say, “well, I know it in my heart — I just feel it is right.” Now you are talking like an existentialist, and you aren’t an empiricist! But the next question will be, “how can you know that your heart and experience is in touch with reality?” And so on.

So are we all stuck within our world-view frameworks? No. Thomas Kuhn, in his landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, demonstrates how we interpret “facts” and “evidence” in terms of our own world view (what he calls a paradigm). But a stream of phenomena may become evident which the paradigm cannot explain. The lack of the paradigm’s *explanatory power* leads the holders of the paradigm to question whether it is really in accord with reality. The holders may posit a new paradigm and see if the phenomena can better be explained and made to “fit” coherently in this new framework. If they can, there is a “revolution”! The old world-view or theoretical framework is shaken and falls to the ground and the new one is moved into.

Second, we need to test our world views using “givens” that we cannot avoid knowing. We have seen that all of us, regardless of our “ultimate criterion” cannot doubt without affirming certain “givens” — that there is a material universe, that nature is uniform, that our rational intuition works, and so on. If we agree on that these things are there, we now can ask: “whose world-view can best explain what we see, and whose world-view leads us to expect the opposite of what we see? We look at the premises of each world view and ask: if the premise of this world view leads to conclusions that do not fit with what we see, the “givens”, then we need to reject the premises.

Third, no person can examine Christianity without at the very same time testing his or her own world-view. Our approach then will be to show that there is more evidence for Christianity than for any alternative world-view (and everyone has one). Though there are difficulties with the Christian faith, the alternatives have far more trouble accounting for and “making sense” of what we know. Our argument will be that Christianity explains and accounts for everything we observe, not just a narrow range of data. As Pascal put it: “*Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God, or of ourselves.*” *Pensees* 417

(B-4)

4. “But how can I be certain that Christianity is true before I believe in it?”

Actually you can’t. But we must not be too dissappointed or even surprised at this. Why? First, because virtually everything else in life works on principles of rational probability, not certainty, and they suffice for us. Second, because God is personal, and persons cannot be known for certain without commitment.

First, consider how reason only takes us to a state of probability, and then we must commit if we are going to reach a state of certainty. The demand for “proof” was a quest for religious certainty apart from making a commitment. But the rest of life does not work that way. If you are going to hire someone to work for you in your office, rational inquiry can only indicate who is probably the right person for the job, but you will have to commit to the candidate (hire him or her) to be certain. Also, consider how evidence is sifted and evaluated in a court of law. The judge tells the jury to convict if the accused is guilty beyond a “reasonable” doubt, not beyond a possible doubt. In other words, it is virtually impossible to demonstrably prove that a person did a crime, but that is not necessary for the law to work.

Second, consider what we said, before, that belief in God is more like belief in other persons and minds than like belief in the Abominable Snowman. Imagine that both Susie and Sally want to marry Michael. Sally is a serial killer in prison, and she insists she will probably do it again; Susie is compassionate, disciplined, smart, and kind. How can Michael be sure which one will be the better wife? All the rational evidence points to Susie, not Sally. But he cannot be certain, he cannot prove that Susie will be a good wife until he marries her. There no certainty with persons before commitment. He also cannot prove that Sally will not change beyond a possible doubt — but he can be confident that she will be a bad wife beyond a reasonable doubt.

Now, in real life, this level of probability suffices us. Suppose Michael would say, “since you can’t prove your case, and since it is possible that Sally will be a good wife, then that should be my position.” We would retort, “why?” We would all think him irrational. Yet skeptics, in just this way, will often insist that, “since you can’t prove your case, and since it is possible to disbelieve in God, then that should be my position.”

So the purpose of our process of rational expression is to show that it is very rational to be a Christian, in fact, more rational than to hold to any other set of beliefs. When we have done that we have done our job. We can go no further, because no process of reasoning can rob us of the risk of commitment. If we cannot know any other significant person without it — what makes us think we could know God without it?

Acts

Farewell to Ephesus

Study 20 | Acts 20:1-38

1. vv.1-16. Where was Paul heading when he set out from Ephesus? Why did he take such a roundabout route? How were these difficulties actually an advantage for Paul and the church? What do you learn from this for yourself (cf.Gen.50:20)?
2. vv.7-12. Why is Luke's story so detailed? How do the details tell us about what happened to Eutychus? What evidence is there that Luke is describing a resurrection, not a resuscitation? What do we learn here about early Christian worship?
3. Compare vv.17 and 28. What do we learn about how the early church was governed from these verses?
4. vv.18-36. Make a list of the specific duties that Paul urges Christian leaders to do either by a) example, and/or b) direction.
5. vv.18-36. Make a list of the specific character traits that Paul urges Christian leaders to have, either by a) example and/or b) direction.

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?
2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?
3. How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?
4. Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?

C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (C-1)

An Overview

Let's recap. It is typical for people to say, "I'll believe in God if you can prove that he exists using reason and science". But God is a foundational concept, an "ultimate criterion" — for believers he is the way we explain and understand everything. Therefore, he cannot be proven any more than skeptics can "prove" their foundation, their "ultimate criterion" — namely that through reason and science we must explain and understand everything. No one can "prove" an ultimate criterion for truth without using it (or using another one). For example, if you say, "we can only be sure of what scientific observation proves" we can ask, "how do you know that, how can you 'prove' that?" You can't. Foundational concepts are assumed, and used to understand the world we see. Therefore, the way we test one foundation over another is by asking: "which view of the universe explains rationally what we see?" That is how we test scientific theories about entities that are not observable (such as quarks) — that is also how we also test faith-based worldviews, which we all have. When we put the theistic (believing in God) world view up against the non-theistic world view, we see that it makes much more sense of four things we see: **matter, morals, mind, music.**

Matter

What do we see? That the universe came into existence with a "Big Bang". That life would have been impossible on earth unless the fundamental constants of physics (the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces) were all calibrated to exactly as they are. If there is a God, the Big Bang and the beginning of organic life are perfectly rational and expected. If there is not a God, we would not expect them at all. These occurrences are (in such non-theistic world-view) highly unlikely — the chances are infinitesimally small. When the secularist says, "well, though there's no God, the universe and life just happened!" that means that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we see (a big bang out of nothing, organic life out of inorganic) — why not change the premise?

Morality

What do we see? That we recognize some behavior as wrong absolutely, not just as a matter of opinion or taste or culture. If there is a God, the universal experience of a moral obligation, of moral outrage would be perfectly rational and expected. If there is not a God, we would not expect them at all. These things are (in a non-theistic world view) difficult to account for yet impossible to live without. When the secularist says, "well, though there's no God, some

things are definitely wrong!" that means that though the Christian world view DOES lead to expect this experience and conviction, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory — that there is no God — does not lead you to expect what we know (that some things are wrong, that some laws are unjust despite what the populace says) — why not change the premise?

Mind

What do we see? That we reason by a) trusting our senses, b) expecting the uniformity of nature, and c) trusting laws of logic. If there is a God, who is rational and created and sustained a rationally ordered universe, then these things are expected, and even obligatory. If there is not a God, if the universe is random, just matter in motion, then we would not expect them at all. These things are (in a non-theistic world view) difficult to account for, yet impossible to avoid, for we can only deny these things by using them. When the secularist says, "well, though there is no God, we just know reason works", that means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that nature is uniform, not random, that our senses can be trusted) — why not change the premise?

Music

What do we see? That all natural, innate desires correspond to real objects that can satisfy them, such as sexual desire (corresponding to sex), physical appetite (corresponding to food), tiredness (corresponding to sleep), aesthetic desire (corresponding to beauty), relational desires (corresponding to friendship). That there exists in us a desire that nothing in time and space can satisfy, a desire for an unknown "something" that no amount of food, sex, friendship, success can satisfy. That human beings everywhere and at all times have been overwhelmingly religious, believing in something beyond the here and now that will fill the desire for that "something". Therefore, *"if I find in myself a desire which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."* (C.S. Lewis) The secularist says, the secularist says, "well, though there is no God, we just know that this is the one innate, deep, normal desire that has no object." That means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that the vast majority of people sense that there is another world) — why not change the premise?

Summary

Someone certainly has the right to say: "I don't want to be consistent — I'm just going to hold my views arbitrarily." Of course there is nothing that we said here that can compel or coerce anyone to believe. We should not even try to do that. But the point of our discussion is only to show that Christianity is more rational, that it makes more sense than non-theism. So to speak in this way is to concede that point.

Acts

Arrival at Jerusalem

Study 21 | Acts 21:1-26

1. vv.1-9. What do we learn about a) the strength of Christian fellowship and b) the ways it is expressed and carried out? Can you share examples of how Christians you didn't know personally provided support and help for you?
2. Look at Romans 12:13; Titus 1:8; I Peter 4:9,10; Heb.13:2; Lev.19:33-34; Acts 16:15. What do they tell you about a) the importance and b) the expression of hospitality among Christians. How can you practice it if you don't have a family or a spacious home?
3. Is Paul disobeying the Spirit (v.4 and 10-11) by continuing on toward Jerusalem (v.14)? Cf. with 20:22-23.
4. vv.17-26. What signs were there that James' "Jewish" Christianity and Paul's "Gentile" Christianity were compatible? If so, what is the problem here, the point of difficulty?
5. vv.22-26. What does James recommend as a solution? How does Paul's action here reflect principles he himself has laid down elsewhere? (cf. Acts 20:24; I Cor.9:20-23; 10:32,33) How might these same principles affect our own attitudes toward others? Provide some specific example.

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- 1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**
- 2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**
- 3. How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**
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C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (C-1)

The “Matter” Argument for God

One of the things we see when we look at the universe is order and design. There’s a road out of Tennessee that passes a hillside with a set of rocks that spell out “Welcome to Georgia”. Though these hundreds of rocks could have fallen into this pattern by chance, without an intelligent designer, it would be irrational to conclude that they did. Yet the structure and order of the human brain, or of the solar system itself, is billions of times more intricate.

“But doesn’t evolution explain the design and structure of organisms?”

Evolution can only deal with *organic* design and it assumes the orderly forces of nature that even allow ‘natural selection’ to allow fit species to survive. Today, physicists tell us of the astonishing “fine tuning” of the universe that some call ‘the Anthropic principle’. Life would have been impossible on earth unless all the fundamental constants of physics (the speed of light, the gravitational constant, the strength of weak and strong nuclear forces) were calibrated exactly as they are. For example, if the universe had expanded even a miniscule measure faster or slower (after the Big Bang), life would never have occurred. The chances are extremely small that all this happened by accident.

“But what if there have been a countless series of universes over time and we just happen to find ourselves in the one conducive to life?”

Of course, our argument is “probabilistic” and it is possible that we just happened to find ourselves here. But Alvin Plantinga shows how irrational it is to live upon such a possibility. He asks us to imagine “Tex” dealing himself 10 straight hands of four aces in a game of poker. What if he said, “I know it looks suspicious! But what if there is an infinite succession of universes, so that for any possible distribution of possible poker hands, there is a universe in which that possibility is realized: we just happen to find ourselves in one where I always deal myself 4 aces without cheating?” It would be irrational to assume that Tex is not cheating, though you cannot prove the remote possibility wrong. But the “fine tuning” of the universe is far less probable than 10 straight winning hands of 4 aces! While all the elements of design could have happened by chance, without an intelligent Creator, is it rational to live as if that remote chance must be true, just because no one can prove that it is not?

“But maybe the order we see is merely a product of our minds?”

This question puts you in a very awkward position. You are proposing that our minds are playing tricks on us, yet you want us both to use our minds to see it. You say, “maybe there is no order and intelligibility” but then why should our thinking be orderly about it?

Conclusion

The non-theists, then, are essentially saying: “well, though there’s no God, the universe and life just happened!” that means that though Christian world view does lead us to expect what we see, and the non-theistic world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we see (a big bang out of nothing, organic life out of inorganic) — why not change the premise?

C-2

The “Morality” Argument for God

One of the things we see when we look at life is an inescapable sense of moral obligation. This is more than saying that there are moral “values” or moral feelings. All people know it is right to be generous, kind, honest, courageous, and fair — and wrong to be selfish, cruel, deceptive, cowardly and unjust. But what we mean by “right” is not merely that we feel good about such actions, but that people are obligated to them no matter what they feel about them. An obligation is objective, not subjective — it is “there” no matter what anyone thinks or feels about it. But if there is no God, it is very hard to see where these objective obligations come from.

“But I don’t believe in objective moral obligation. Every moral statement is only an expression of the subjective feelings of the speaker”.

Consider what you do when you affirm that there are no objective moral obligations. You are saying, “you ought not to evaluate me by your moral principles”. But to say this you are pressing an obligation upon me that you are appealing to, that is outside of me, to which you say I ought to be accountable. Why? Now if there is a God who created a moral order, so that we are accountable to him and it, then surely it is fair to say, “we ought to be reasonable and tolerant”. But if there is no objective moral obligation, how can you even make an argument? If you cannot deny objective moral obligation without using it, then you should admit that you do see it and believe in it.

“But isn’t morality just a product of cultures and relative to them?”

The problem for those who espouse relativism is that they cannot avoid comparing cultures. Do you think that it was a good thing for America to abolish slavery? Are you critical of any ethical practices in your own culture? Do you think that child sacrifice was a bad thing? The only way you can do so is by appealing to objective moral obligations to which others are as bound as yourself.

“But isn’t our sense of morality a product of evolution? It helped us survive.”

One problem with this view is that it is difficult to prove that unselfishness, kindness, fairness are genetic traits that help one survive! But the problem is that the evolutionary theory can only account for moral feelings, not moral obligations. If a person says, “but there are not moral obligations, only evolved, genetically based moral feelings” that means that they espouse that murder and rape are not truly wrong, only impractical. But the one espousing this shows the very next moment that he or she does not believe it. They should never be morally outraged or hold anyone responsible for rape and murder. They should not ever hold people morally responsible for swindling and cheating. If our actions show that we believe certain acts to be objectively wrong despite our internal psychology, we show that we don’t believe the evolutionary model to be true.

“But maybe there just are moral obligations. How does that prove God?”

This is a weak argument. What it is saying is: “while the view that there is a Creator God would lead us to expect moral obligations, and the view that there is no God would not lead us to expect it, I am going to hold to an atheistic viewpoint anyway”. Moral obligations in a world without God mean that the atheistic world would be absurd. Here you have unavoidable obligations to do things that will give you no benefits in this life at all. Honesty and courage and love are often extremely impractical, leading to diminishment of money, health, even the end of life. Why would such obligations have ever arisen in a world where death is the end of everything?

Conclusion

We know that napalming babies, starving the poor, raping the vulnerable, and buying and selling people is wrong — does not just feel wrong. But if your premise [that there is no God] leads you to a conclusion that you know isn’t true [namely that these things only feel wrong, but are not wrong] why not change the premise?

Acts

Paul's arrest and defense

Study 22 | Acts 21:27 - 22:29

- 1. 21:27-36. Trace the parallels between Paul's suffering and Christ's? In what way is this instructive for us personally?**
- 2. 21:30-39. What does it tell us about Paul that he would turn and speak to the mob when he did?**
- 3. 22:1-22. How is Paul's speech well-designed for its audience and the situation?**
- 4. How is Paul's speech specifically instructive for us? Have you had experiences in which someone became very offended by what you said about your faith? In light of this passage, was the reason for that mainly in you or mainly in them (or both)?**
- 5. 22:22-29. Compare these verses with 16:22,23,37-39. Why does Paul mention his citizenship to avoid the flogging here, when he did not do so in Phillipi? How is this instructive for us?**

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C. WHY TO BELIEVE IN GOD (CONT.) C-3

The “Mind” Argument for God

One of the things that we see is that our minds *work*, that our sense perception and rational intuition help us perceive the real world. But if there is no God, and everything has a physical, natural cause, then we are led to some very disturbing conclusions about our own minds. Thoughts of the brain are only the results of non-rational, non-intelligent chemical processes in the brain. Neuroscientists today tell us that all thinking is the product of chemicals which are the product of our genetic code, brought to us by the long process of evolution. Therefore all our thinking and choices are pre-determined — there is no real freedom of thought. This is an inescapable conclusion of the belief that there is no God or eternal reality. But if our thoughts are not free and rational, but determined, then so are the thoughts that espouse this view, in which case we cannot trust them — they are only conditioned responses. And so we are in the position of listening to a man who says, “don’t trust a word I am saying”. You have to dismiss that sentence as self-refuting nonsense — failing to satisfy its own criteria of acceptability. Any view of the universe which would make it impossible to trust our thinking or minds to tell us about reality has to be dismissed.

“But surely the process of evolution has given us minds that we can trust, for we could not have survived unless they told us about reality.”

Evolutionary biology is no help here at all. Darwinian theory is that absolutely every capacity we have is due to a process called “natural selection”, in which those traits that help us adapt to our environment are passed along genetically (since only those with those traits survive). Our minds therefore were not designed by a Creator to perceive the real world, they are produced by a blind process that helps us survive in the world. Now we cannot possibly know that perceiving reality leads to surviving, only that what we perceive leads to surviving. For example, we know that “psychological” survival needs regularly lead us to repress or deny realities. If it is too painful to acknowledge how angry someone is or how hurt someone is through our behavior, we may completely deceive ourselves about it — just refuse to “see” it. What proof have we that the same thing has not happened to our capacities for perceiving the physical world. The simple fact is that evolutionary theory says the purpose of our minds is physical survival, not the production of true beliefs, and therefore it gives us no reason to trust our minds — quite the contrary. In fact, Darwin himself admits this, when he wrote: *“The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of a man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there were any convictions in such a mind?”* At best evolution makes us agnostic about our minds, which means we should then be agnostic about evolution itself, and everything else.

"But maybe our minds just emerged and do 'work' — why do we have to have a God for that?"

This raises an additional problem for the non-theistic world-view. The main reason our minds help us understand the world is what has been called "the uniformity of nature". The method of generalizing from observed cases to all cases of the same kind is called "induction". Without it, we would not be able to learn from experience, we would not be able to use language, we would not be able to rely on memory or advance science, all of which involve observing similarities and projecting them into the future. Now if we set the theistic view next to the non-theistic (which sees the universe as the production of random matter-in-motion) and ask: "which view best comports with the inductive principle?" we have to conclude that it isn't the non-theistic view.

Conclusion

So we see the severe problems with non-theistic thinking — it cannot account for itself! It is belief in God that provides us the necessary pre-conditions for trusting our minds at all, or accounting for why induction and deduction and sense perception works at all. Rational mind appears to be a reality (and to deny it is self-defeating), yet how do we account for it unless there is a rational mind behind the universe? Some say, "though there is no God, I just know that reason works". What that means is: "though your world-view does lead us to expect what we see and mine does not, I am going to hold it anyway." But if our premise (that there is no God) leads to a conclusion that is completely impossible to hold (that we cannot trust our minds, including the thought that we cannot trust our minds), why not question the premise?

C-4

The “Music” Argument for God

One of the things that we see in the world is that great art makes us feel that there is meaning in life, that love is real, that somethings are valuable. For example, Leonard Bernstein said, “Listening to Beethoven’s Fifth, you get the feeling there’s something right with the world, something that checks throughout, something that follows its own laws consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down.” This is a simple fact of experience. We all disagree on which art is “great” and which art affects us like this, but we all experience it. But if there is no God, love is an illusion — it is just a function of my brain chemistry, and beautiful music is also an illusion — it is just the way my nervous system is designed. Either there is a God, or love and beauty is an absolute illusion. C.S.Lewis put it quite well:

“Let us suppose that Nature is all that exists... you can’t, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behavior of your genes. You can’t go on getting very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it. You may still, in the lowest sense, have a “good time”; but just in so far as it becomes very good, just in so far as it ever threatens to push you on from cold sensuality into real warmth and enthusiasm and joy, so far you will be forced to feel the hopeless disharmony between the universe in which you really live [and the universe in which you think you live].

So either there is a God, or love and beauty and meaning are a complete illusion (and why would these deep convictions have ever arisen, anyway?)

“But just because we feel these things are real is no argument that they exist.”

But are we only talking about “feelings” here? There is a difference between innate and artificial desires. For example, just because you want a Coke doesn’t mean there is a Coke at hand, nor does it mean that one exists anywhere in the world. But thirst is fundamental and innate, and it does mean that there is such a thing as liquid. The desire for Coke came from factors outside of us (advertising, personal experience), but the thirst desire is completely natural and innate. Artificial desires can exist without a corresponding object. But innate desires correspond always to real objects that can satisfy them, such as with sexual desire (corresponding to sex), physical appetite (corresponding to food), tiredness (corresponding to sleep), relational desires (corresponding to friendship).

Now there exists in us a desire that nothing in time and space can satisfy, a desire for an unknown "something" that no amount of food, sex, friendship, success can satisfy. Human beings everywhere and at all times have been overwhelmingly religious, believing in something beyond the here and now that will fill the desire for that "something". This is an innate desire. Again, Lewis puts it best. *"So, a ducking wants to swim — such a thing as water; a baby wants to suck — such a thing as milk. And if I find in myself a longing which this world cannot meet, then it probably means that I was made for another world as well."*

Conclusion

The non-theist says: "well, though there is no God, we just know that this is the one innate, deep, normal desire that has no object." That means — that though Christian world view DOES lead us to expect what we see, and your world view leads you to expect the opposite, you are simply going to hold to your theory anyway. But if your premise/theory (that there is no God) does not lead you to expect what we know (that the vast majority of people sense that there is another world) — why not change the premise?

Acts

Before the Sanhedrin

Study 23 | Acts 22:30 - 21:11

1. **22:30-23:1** – Paul is facing death at any minute. What do we see here is one of the secrets of his boldness? How does I Cor.4:1-4 help us understand what a “good conscience” is?
2. **23:1**. How can we have a good conscience when we know we are sinners? How can Paul (in Acts 23 and I Cor 4:3-5) give us guidance for having the same kind of confidence that he had?
3. **23:1-5**. Commentators are divided over: a) why Ananias had Paul struck and b) how Paul could have failed to recognize the High Priest. What do you think? Was Paul’s anger wrong? How does Paul’s own statement in Eph.4:26-27 shed light on this issue? How does Paul get self-control? Where do you need to practice these insights?
4. **23:6-10**. What was Paul’s tactic in this hearing? Did it work? Was Paul more concerned with his own welfare or more concerned for the truth?
5. **23:11**. How does the Lord encourage Paul? How does he encourage you during hard times?

WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 1 – Trusting the Bible

Why should we trust the Bible in general? Because Jesus taught and believed in the Bible's trustworthiness (John 5:37-39, 46-47; 10:34; Matthew 5:17,19; 19:4-5). But how can we know what Jesus did and taught? Because the four gospels in the New Testament can be trusted as reliable history.

“But we don’t even have the original manuscripts — we only have copies of copies. Who knows how reliable they are?”

No scholars doubt that what we have today is essentially the same Gospels as originally written. The earliest copies we have of other documents of antiquity are usually 500-1000 years newer than the originals. (For example, the oldest copy of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* [c.50 B.C.] is from 850 A.D. Yet no historian doubts that we can trust it.) Yet we have thousands of copies of the Bible, some within a few decades of its composition.

“But weren’t the gospels really legends written long after the events, so that we cannot be sure that they reflect accurate first person memory?”

In the 19th century, many scholars insisted that the Bible was written over 100 years after the event, but archaeology and scholarship has forced the consensus that all the Gospels were written 65-95 A.D., or 30-60 years after the life of Jesus. (And St. Paul's letters, which contain much information about Jesus, were written just two decades after his death.) Thus all the essential historical claims of the New Testament (that Jesus did miracles such as the raising of Lazarus, that he claimed to be God, that dozens of people saw him risen from the dead) were circulating within the lifetime of thousands of people who had lived in Judea and had witnessed Jesus' ministry. How could Christianity have flourished when thousands of people (many of them hostile) could have contradicted the message?

Imagine a book coming out that claims that on a day 45 years ago, in a remote town of 5,000 in Canada, a flying saucer landed in full view of all the town. Certainly someone would go to that town and ask for corroboration. But what if none of the 1,000 residents still alive, who were there on that day, denied any such memory. What if the thousands of residents who were related or who knew the thousands of now deceased residents report that they never had heard anything about it in all those years? Surely, the author of the book could insist that people were lying, or that some miraculous “memory loss” had happened. But the number of believers in the book would be exceedingly small. In the same way, it would have been impossible for Christianity to have gained such widespread support if its critical historical claims were bluntly contradicted by the numerous witnesses who were still alive.

“But still — 30 to 60 years is a long time. How can we be sure memories of Jesus’ words and deeds were accurate?”

Some have taught that, after the death of Christ, the early Christians spun out stories of Jesus’ words and deeds which quickly changed and evolved in the telling, in a sort of “whisper down the alley” way. But we know that the rules of Jewish oral tradition (which would have governed the teaching of the earliest church) insisted on accurately memorizing massive amounts of material. Jewish disciples of a rabbi would have memorized his teachings word for word and then would have passed on the tradition faithfully and unaltered. The New Testament itself claims that this is what happened (Luke 1:1-4; I Corinthians 15:3-8; Col.2:7), so that when the Gospels were written, the writers could draw not only on eyewitness memories, but on large amounts of Jesus’ words and deeds carefully preserved in the churches. One of the evidences of this is how often the Gospels, written in Greek, preserve Aramaic words and word order. (Aramaic was the language of Jesus.)

“But ancient writers were not interested in the difference between fact and legend.”

This is simply not the case. While ancient historians were not as critical and precise as modern ones, there was a real effort to ask “did it really happen”? Luke (1:1-4) makes a very specific claim to be preserving historical facts through eyewitness accounts and the painstaking checking of sources. Also, ancient legends and forms of fiction did not contain the kind of detailed descriptions of events that the Gospels do. There are numerous examples of “irrelevant details” (like the 153 fish in John 21:11) which have no reason to be included in the narrative and would not have occurred to the author unless they simply happened. The *“I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage... pretty close to the facts, nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown [ancient] writer... without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative...The reader who doesn’t see this has simply not learned how to read.”* (C.S.Lewis) Therefore, these are either history or very intentional and deliberate fabricated lies, but they are not legends.

“But — no offense — isn’t that what religious activists do? Didn’t the authors embellish and shape the story of Jesus to bolster their authority and meet the needs of the early church?”

Certainly we must agree that the Gospel writers were not just reporters, but were teachers. They had their perspectives and they selected and organized their material to get their points across. But all the same reasons (stated above) make it impossible for them to have done outright fabrications: the rules of Jewish oral tradition, the non-fictional literary form, the blunt claims of accuracy, and the continued presence of corroborative eyewitnesses. A.N.Sherwin-White, an Oxford historian, studied the rate at which legend accumulated in the ancient world and wiped out the core of historical fact. It took at least three full generations. The essential claims of Christianity were publically circulating within too short a time for that to happen.

“But aren’t the Gospels full of contradictions?”

This is a great misconception. Most of the contradictions between the Gospels are the result of the authors’ selective use of data. For example, Luke 24 seems to say that Jesus ascended on the same day that he rose from the dead (thus contradicting the other Gospels). But in Acts 1 (also written by Luke) we see that Luke did know about the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension. Many other apparent discrepancies are explained similarly. There are a few difficulties that are harder to explain, but we should remember that we are only arguing here that the Gospels are reliable history.

Summary Why are we only arguing for the historical reliability of the Gospels? Because if they are reliable, then we can view the evidence for the claim that Jesus is the Son of God. If we decide that he is that, we will be able to embrace the entire trustworthiness of the Bible, because he taught it. If we do not accept his claims, we are not going to accept the whole Bible (nor will we need to).

Acts

Escape to Felix

Study 24 | Acts 23:11 - 24:21

1. What is the relationship of v.11 to the rest of the chapter? How does it shed light on a) God's actions, and b) Paul's heart and attitude? What does v.11 guarantee, and what does it not guarantee? Do we have anything like the same guarantee or promise that Paul was given?
2. 23:12-35. John Stott writes: "the most... cunning of human plans cannot succeed if God opposes them." a) How does this passage show this? (Trace the "coincidences".) b) How has your experience shown this? How does Claudius Lysias twist the truth to look good? Do you ever do this?
3. 24:1-9. Make a list of the charges brought against Paul before Felix? What evidence is mustered for each charge?
4. 24:10-21. How does Paul defend himself against the accusations?
5. Are any of these charges against Paul also thrown at Christians in New York City? How can we answer them?

THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Part IV – B – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: HOW TO BELIEVE ANYTHING

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 2 – The possibility of miracles

Before we can assess the evidence for Jesus' claims and identity we must first be in the position of admitting at least the possibility of miracles. But this is something that a great number of contemporary people cannot do. Broadly speaking, there are three basic reasons for rejecting the possibility of miracles.

"We cannot believe in miracles in a modern, technological age."

This view was put forth in a famous statement by Rudolph Bultmann in the 1950's, when he wrote, "it is impossible to use electrical lights and the radio and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles". But this is not an argument, it is really only just an emotional assertion — "/ feel when I use technology that miracles don't exist". But why should a new invention lead us to disbelieve in God? Why didn't we stop believing in God when the wheel was invented (a much more revolutionary technological advance than electricity or even the microprocessor). Some people feel skeptical of miracles and many others feel the opposite. Such psychological and sociological facts do not provide evidence either way.

"Modern science makes it impossible to believe in miracles."

"We now know", this view goes, "that there are Laws of Nature which cannot be violated". But first, fewer and fewer scientists are willing to talk about "laws" of nature. Physical science has had a revolution lately in which the assumed inviolability of Newtonian mechanics has given way to quantum theory, in which physical 'laws' are now only seen as regularities of nature. "Laws" are really only descriptions of how entities usually behave. Experience can only tell us that a "law" or custom of nature has not been violated, but empirical observation could never prove that it never can be.

Secondly, while nature has regularities, they can be altered by the actions of personal agents. For example, a baseball ought to fall to the ground when I let it go (because of the "law of gravity"), but it will not if another person catches it and holds it up. Now if personal agents can regularly bring about new events that would not have occurred by natural forces alone, how much more, if God exists, could he do so? If God exists, the laws of nature are not rules to which he must submit, but are just customary ways in which he upholds the world. If he wills something unusual on a particular occasion, then a "miracle" occurs, but there is nothing analogous to a human being breaking through a barrier or violating a law.

“But I don’t know that there is a God, and therefore I cannot assume that miracles are possible.”

But this statement is not really reasonable. Not knowing that there is a God is not the same as *knowing there is no God*. And you would have to absolutely know that there is no God in order to say “miracles are impossible”. Unless you could prove that there is no personal God who can alter nature’s regularities, then you cannot assume that miracles are impossible. Since (as we tried to show in previous places) no one can prove that God cannot exist, therefore no one can insist on the impossibility of miracles. Therefore, we must be at least open to historical accounts, like the Gospels, which attest to miracles like the resurrection of Christ.

Sum: Miracles are impossible only if you assume (take on faith) that there is no personal supernatural God. To say, “miracles are impossible” is thus a statement of faith, not something that anyone can prove. It is to say, “miracles cannot happen because miracles just cannot happen.” Therefore, many efforts to explain away Biblical miracles require greater “leaps of faith” than to accept them.

“When the Old Testament says that Sennacherib’s invasion was stopped by angels (II Kings 19:35), and Herodotus says it was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of the whole army (Herodotus, Bk.II, Sect.141), an open-minded person will be on the side of the angels. Unless you start by beggin the question [assuming miracles cannot happen] there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the existence of angels or in the action described to them. But mice just don’t do these things.”

– C.S. Lewis

Acts

Before Felix and Festus

Study 25 | Acts 24:22 - 25:22

- 1. 24:22-27. What hints are there that Felix and Drusilla were interested in Paul's message? Why do you think they might have been? (Consider what we know about them from the introduction.) What does that tell us about how and why people show interest in the gospel?**
- 2. 24:24-27. What can we tell from this brief description that Paul said to Felix and Drusilla?**
- 3. 24:22-27. What were the four factors that contributed to prevent Felix from embracing the gospel? Do the same factors prevent you from doing what is right?**
- 4. 25:1-12. How do the charges differ this time? Why did Festus offer Paul a trial in Jerusalem? Why did Paul refuse Festus' offer of a trial in Jerusalem and claim his right to appeal to Caesar?**
- 5. 25:13-22. What do Paul's actions teach us about our relationship to civil authority?**

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY

Part 3 – The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

The case for the resurrection of Christ is very strong, as long as we grant the possibility of miracles. If we do that, then three basic lines of evidence converge to convince us that Jesus rose from the dead: 1) the fact of the empty tomb, 2) the testimony of numerous eyewitnesses, 3) the long-term impact on the lives of Jesus' followers. If we try to explain these effects away, we find ourselves making even greater leaps of faith than if we believed in the resurrection itself.

How do we know the tomb was empty at all? (Isn't this just legend)?

We know that the early church was proclaiming the resurrection of Christ very early. We also know that there was great hostility from the leaders of Jerusalem toward the spread of Christianity. Therefore, since the earliest church preached the empty tomb — it must have been empty, or no one would have believed the preaching for a minute.

Here is one more piece of historical evidence. The gospel writers mention that the earliest hostile explanation of the empty tomb was that the disciples had stolen it (Matt.28:13). It is extremely unlikely that, if the gospel writers were fabricating these resurrection stories, they would have made up and provided such a plausible alternative explanation for the empty tomb. The fact that they include the body-snatching claim is very strong evidence that it existed. And if it existed, then there must have been an empty tomb that had to be explained.

But even if the tomb is empty, that does not prove a resurrection.

No, but other considerations make it hard to believe in the three possible non-supernatural explanations for the empty tomb. First is the theory that Jesus did not die on the cross, but revived in the tomb. But this is contradicted by the second line of evidence — the eyewitness sightings. Second is the theory that the disciples stole the body. But this is contradicted by both the second and also the third line of evidence — the changed lives of the believers. Third is the theory that the enemies stole it. This is the weakest of all the theories, since enemies would have had strong reasons to produce the body, if they had it.

Here is one more piece of historical evidence. The account of the folded graveclothes in John 20:5-7 contradicts all the theories. It indicates that the graveclothes of Jesus left behind in the tomb were still wrapped around, as if the body had passed through it. If anyone had stolen the body, why would they leave the grave clothes behind, neatly wrapped and folded? Or if Jesus had revived, how could he have gotten out of the graveclothes without tearing them to pieces? (cf. John 11:44)

How do we know anyone claimed to see Jesus? Aren't these just legends?

We can tell that the eyewitness accounts were not legendary. Why? First, Paul in I Corinthians 15 makes a long list of people who claimed to have seen the risen Christ personally, and notes that *"most of them are still living"* (I Cor.15:6). How could Paul write that "Mary and Peter said they saw the risen Jesus" when Peter and Mary were saying, "no we didn't"? It is extremely difficult to see how Christianity could have spread so rapidly if Paul's amazing assertions were so easily refuted. Scholars have noted that legendary accounts of historical events take at least two generations to accrue, long after the eyewitnesses are gone to act as controls on the narratives.

Second, every gospel states that the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection were women. In those times, women's low social status meant that their testimony was usually not admissible evidence in court. There was no reason for Christian writers to fabricate accounts of women seeing Christ first. The only explanation for the existence of these reports is that they really happened. So we can conclude that there really were many, many people who claimed to have seen the risen Christ personally.

Couldn't the eyewitness accounts been a hallucination, or a conspiracy?

Once we grant that the eyewitness claims really occurred, there are two factors that make it highly unlikely that they would be hallucination or a conspiracy. First, the eyewitnesses accounts are too numerous and the groups of eyewitnesses are too large. Paul alone mentions five appearances, and there are three or four others mentioned by the gospels. Acts 1:3-4 tells us that for forty days he appeared constantly to numerous groups of people. And I Cor.15:6 tells us that at one "sighting", five hundred persons saw him at once. The size of the groups and the number of the sightings make it virtually impossible to conclude that all these people had hallucinations. Either they must have actually seen Christ, or hundreds of people must have been part of an elaborate conspiracy which lasted for decades. Paul suggests to his readers that any of them can go and talk to the five hundred witnesses. This would have been a hoax that lasted for years, and one in which no conspirators ever broke down and told the truth.

But the final difficulty with the conspiracy theory is how hard it is to square it with the subsequent lives of the apostles and earliest disciples. Scholars recognize now that first century Jewish people did not believe in an individual resurrection, but only in a general resurrection at the end of time. But despite the fact that their belief system provided no basis for it — they began to proclaim the resurrection of Christ. And despite the fact that they were poor and small and marginal, they developed a confidence and joy that enabled them to spread the gospel so powerfully that it transformed the whole Roman world. Most impressive of all is the historical fact that nearly all the early apostles died as martyrs. As Pascal put it, *"I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut"*. It is hard to believe that this kind of powerful self-sacrifice could be done for a hoax.

Summary

It is impossible for Christianity to have begun unless the tomb was empty. We know that there were hundreds and hundreds of eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Jesus dozens of times. There were too many sightings for them to be hallucinations. Yet the transformed, sacrificial lives of the early disciples surely indicates that the beliefs were sincere. Therefore, it is most reasonable to conclude that the disciples saw what they said they saw.

Acts

Before Agrippa (Part I)

Study 26 | Acts 25:13 - 26:23

1. 25:13-27. How is Festus' summary of the case (v18-20; 24-27) a mixture of truth and untruth?
2. 25:13-27. How does his "spin" reveal how Paul is a problem for Festus? Why is Agrippa a help for him?
3. 25:23-27. Why is this such a tremendous opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Consider how many things God had to work together for this to occur. Refer to the last few chapters.
4. 25:23-27. How many of these factors were "bad" things? How can this illustration of Romans 8:28 help you right now?
5. 26:1-23. Trace each stage of Paul's defense by giving a one sentence argument that summarizes his point in: vv.2-3, vv.4-8, vv.9-11, vv.12-16, vv.17-21, vv.22-23. Most of us do not have such dramatic "testimonies" such as this one, but what can we learn from Paul for our own sharing of our experience?

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY.

Part 4a – The Challenge of Jesus Christ — His claims.

At the heart of the evidence for Christianity is a great conundrum. There is an unsurpassed moral and spiritual beauty about the character and the teaching of Jesus. Huston Smith, in *The World's Great Religions* says that only Buddha and Jesus so impressed their contemporaries that they were not just asked “who are you?” but “what are you?” But the difficulty for observers comes in just at this point, for Buddha asserted that he was not a god, but Jesus repeatedly and continually claimed to be *the* God, the Creator of the universe. So on the one hand, there is a person of supreme love and moral wisdom, but on the other, a man whose claims “*if not true, are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men.*” (C.S. Lewis)

But couldn't his followers have just make these divine claims up?

No. A number of reasons were given in sheet #1, above. But the main reason is that the original followers of Christ were Jews, and the divinity of a human being is the very last thing that first century Jewish minds would be able to make up. Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius *et al* were able, through strenuous, emphatic protestations, to convince their subsequent followers that they were not to be worshipped, that they were only teachers. Yet their first followers had views of God which allowed the possibility of a God-man. But first century Jews had a theology and a culture that in every regard was completely and totally resistant to the idea of God becoming human. The concept would not have even occurred to them. Many believe that Jesus, like all the other founders of great religions, was a humble sage who refused divine claims. But if Jesus had also denied that he was God, why would he have failed where the other founders succeeded, and with the least likely people on earth to divinize their teacher? The letters of Paul (written only 15-25 years after Jesus' death) and the even earlier hymns and creeds he quotes (like Phillipians 2:5-11) show that the Christians worshipped Jesus immediately after his death. The only fair explanation is that Jesus was the source of the claims — that his continual and powerful assertions of deity eventually broke through their walls of resistance.

But why couldn't he just have been a very good teacher?

The strength of the Christ's claims make that option impossible. First there were all this astounding indirect claims. (1) Jesus assumed authority to forgive all sins (Mark 2:7-10) — not just sins against him. Since we can only forgive sins that are against us, Jesus' premise is that all sins are against him, and therefore that he is God whose laws are broken and whose love offended in every violation. (2) Jesus claimed that he alone could give eternal life (John 6:39,40), though God alone has the right to give or take life. More than that, Jesus claimed to have a power that could actually eliminate death, and he

claims not just to have or bring a power to raise the dead, but to be the Power that can destroy death (John 11: 25-26). (3) Jesus claimed to have the truth as no one else ever has. All prophets said, "thus saith the Lord" but Jesus teaches with "but I say unto you" out of his own authority (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32) And more than that, he claims not just to have or bring truth, but to be the Truth itself, the source and locus of all truth (John 14:6). (4) Jesus assumed the authority to judge the world (Mark 14:62). Since God alone has both the infinite knowledge and the right (as Creator and owner) to evaluate every person, Jesus premise is that he has both divine attributes. More than that, Jesus claimed that we will be judged in the end primarily on our attitude toward him (Matt.10:32,33; John 3:18). (5) Jesus assumed the right to receive worship (John 5:23, 9:38; Luke 5:8; John 20:28-29) which neither great persons nor even angels would accept (Rev.22:8,9; Acts 14:11-15). (6) His even off-hand statements and actions continually assume that he has divine status. He claims to have sent all the prophets and wise teachers in the world through all the centuries (Matt.23:34). (So he is claiming to be eternal.) He comes to the temple and says all the rules about observing the Sabbath are off now because the inventor of the Sabbath is now here (Mark 2:23-28). (So he is claiming to be Creator.) He puts his own knowledge on a par with God the Father's (Matt.11:27) (So he is claiming to be all-knowing). He claimed to be perfectly sinless (John 8:46). (So he is claiming to be completely holy.) He says that the greatest person in the history of the world was John the Baptist, but that the weakest follower of Christ is greater than he (Matt.11:11). This list could be stretched out indefinitely.

Then there are his direct claims, which are staggering. John Stott has organized his assertions this way. (1) To know him is to know God (John 8:19), (2) to see him was to see God (John 12:45), (3) to receive him is to receive the God (Mark 9:37). Only through him can anyone know or come to God (Matt.11:27; John 14:6). Even when Jesus called himself "*the* Son of God", he was claiming equality with the Father, since in ancient times an only son inherited all the father's wealth and position and was thus equal with him. The listeners knew that everytime Jesus called him self "*the* Son", he was naming himself as fully God (John 5:18). Finally, Jesus actually takes upon himself the divine name "I AM" (John 8:58, cf. Exodus 3:14; 6:33), claiming to be the "Yahweh" who appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

We must remember one more point. Eastern religions were "pantheistic" and understand God to be the spiritual force in everything, so to say "I am part of God" or "I am one with God" is not terribly unusual. Western religions were "polytheistic" and believed in various gods who could take on human guises. But Jesus was Jew, and when he described God he meant the God who was beginningless Creator who was infinitely exalted above everything else. This means that what he was saying was the most stupendous claim that anyone has ever made. And he did not make it once or twice. Rather, his was a consciousness which suffused everything he said and did. We cannot minimize

these. If you heard a man saying “I have always existed, I created the world, I am ultimate reality. I will return at the end of time and your fate will depend on your obedience to me.” — you could not laugh. You would reject him, or fear him, or attack him, but you could not consider him a fine moral teacher. He did not leave that open.

Please immediately read part 4b. These two parts go together.

Acts

Before Agrippa (Part II)

Study 27 | Acts 26:1-32

1. 22:12-18. How is this account of Paul's conversion different from the others — in 9:1-19; 22:5-16? How do those differences show Paul tailoring his presentation to his audience?
2. 26:17-23. What does Paul tell Agrippa here about a) the need for salvation (our lost condition), b) the method of salvation (how to become a Christian), and finally, c) the ground of salvation (the reason God can save us)?
3. 26:24-27. How does Paul summarize his two lines of argument in a final stunning, direct appeal to the king?
4. Should we be as direct in our argumentation as Paul was?
5. 26:30-32. Once again, Luke shows that Paul is not guilty — and that Christianity is not disruptive to public order and society? Why do you think Luke is pressing this point so much? How can we make the same case today?

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WHY TO BELIEVE IN CHRISTIANITY.

Part 4b – The Challenge of Jesus Christ — His character

The first part of the challenge of Jesus Christ is the extraordinarily self-centered teaching. We must try to grasp how absolutely astounding these claims were to the listeners. We can do that partially by imagining how you yourself would react if a neighbor of yours began to claim that he or she was the Creator of the universe who would judge the world. You would almost certainly regard your neighbor as either insane or fraudulent. That, of course, explains the actual historical record of human reactions to him. He spawned either passionate worshippers or furious people who wanted to kill him. If he was a “good, moral teacher”, we cannot explain either the worshippers *or* his execution. Anyone who knew anything about him knew that there were only three possible explanations for him: he was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord he claimed to be.

Well, why could he not have been a fraud, then? There have been lots of cult leaders who claimed to be divine.

This brings us to the second part of the challenge of Jesus Christ. What is startling is not just that his claims that were so self-centered, but that his character and his actions were so completely unself-centered. The accounts of him in the New Testament speak for themselves. He combines qualities that no one ever has. Despite his incredible claims, we never see him pompous or offended or standing on his own dignity. (As one said, “*in thought he put himself first; in deed, last*”.) Despite being absolutely approachable to the weakest and most broken people, he is completely fearless before the proud and corrupt. Despite being profoundly human, and becoming weary and lonely and moved to joy and love and anger, yet we never see him moody, we never see him inconsistent, we never see him being strong where he should be tender or tender where he should be strong. Most interesting of all, in the accounts of his dealings with people, he is continually surprising us, shocking us, yet never disappointing us. One writer summed it up with a remarkable challenge:

“No one has ever yet discovered the word Jesus ought to have said or the deed he ought to have done. Nothing he does falls short, in fact, he is always surprising you and taking your breath away, because he is incomparably better than you could imagine for yourself. Why? They are the surprises of perfection. He is tenderness without weakness, strength without harshness, humility without the slightest lack of confidence, holiness and unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability, power without insensitivity, passion without prejudice. There is never a false step, never a jarring note. This is life at the highest.”

But can we really be sure those Biblical stories aren't embellished and idealized?

We should reflect on why it is that no major religion has a founder which claimed to be God, (though many tiny, unsuccessful cults have). There have been many people in history who have made divine claims, but they have never been able to make their assertions broadly believable except to that tiny percentage of the population which is unusually credulous or emotionally needy. Why not? First, there are always people who have grown up with and lived with the claimant, and they know his or her character flaws. Second, there is a huge resistance in the human mind to such an assertion. In Jesus' case, we must also remember that, though there were Jews who claimed to be the Messiah, there has never been a member of that culture in its 4,000 year history who has even made such an allegation, let alone got anyone to believe it.

Yet this is what Jesus did. Does a liar produce the kind of humble, utterly selfless, sacrificial, forgiving lifestyle that Jesus had? What kind of life must Jesus have had to have led to overcome the profound resistance of Jews to such unique claims? What kind of life must Jesus have had to have led to convince even the people who lived with him? What kind of life would Jesus have had to have led to do what no other person in history has ever done — convince more than a tiny percentage of unbalanced people that he is the Creator and Judge of the universe? It would have to have been like the incomparable life depicted in the New Testament.

Maybe, then, he really was insane?

But this possibility is greatly undermined by the almost universally acclaimed wisdom and beauty of Jesus' teaching. The great consensus of history is that the teaching of Jesus is at least as remarkable and brilliant as that of any other great sage. G.K. Chesterton wrote:

"If I found a key on the road and discovered it fit and opened a particular lock, I'd assume most likely the key was made by the lockmaker. If I find a set of teaching set out in pre-modern Oriental society that has proven itself of such universal validity that it has fascinated or satisfied millions of people in every century, including the best minds and yet the simplest hearts, that it has made itself at home in virtually every culture, inspired masterpieces in every field of art, and continues to grow and spread rapidly... [even today], are they likely to be the work of a deceiver or a fool? In fact, it is more likely they were designed by the heart-maker."

In summary, then. The claims of Jesus make it impossible that he would be just a good man. The character and teaching of Jesus make it nearly impossible to believe that he was a deceiver or insane. The resurrection of Jesus clinches the case.

But it is crazy and ridiculous to believe that a human being could be God?

Amazing — yes. But why is it ridiculous? Once we remove a dogmatic bias against miracles (see sheet #2), then it is even more crazy and ridiculous to believe the alternatives to the Christian explanation for the phenomenon of Jesus. How could a man who produced a kind of life and teaching that has never been produced before be a liar or a lunatic? How could a man make the claims he did and make good on them? How could hundreds of people be deceived into thinking they saw him alive after his resurrection? Yet if they were not deceived, but deceivers, why would have they lived and died sacrificially for a hoax? As hard as it is to believe that he is God come to earth, it is more difficult not to. Is it really impossible for God to become human? Why, if God is really all powerful, could he not have done it? And why, if God is really all-loving, would he not have done it?

Acts

Shipwreck

Study 28 | Acts 27:1-44

1. 27:1-12. The account of Paul's voyage to Rome is vivid with details. Why does Luke know so much about the voyage? Make a list of the statements in these early verses that indicate first hand experience (that the narrator could not know from simply looking at a map).
2. 27:1-26. How does God give Paul encouragement during the voyage? How has God sustained you during tough "voyages"?
3. Compare Paul's predictions in v.10 and vv.21-25. Does he contradict himself here? Have you ever experienced a disaster a) which was do to your refusal to take advice, yet b) was graciously eased and lightened by God?
4. Compare the response to Paul's advice v.10 and v.30-32? Why do they follow his leadership at the end but not at the beginning? What does this tell us about leadership in general? How did Paul's leadership save everyone's life twice (v.31-32; 42-22)?
5. a) What tension is there between Paul's prediction of v.22 and his command in v.31? b) How do these two statements show the unique view of Christianity with regards to the old "fate vs. free will" debate? c) Why is this view so intensely practical for our daily living?

Acts

To Rome (finally!)

Study 29 | Acts 28:1-31

1. 28:1-16. This is the end of the story of Paul's journey to Rome. Many people think this account was too long in proportion to its value. Do you? Why?
2. 28:17-28. What does Paul's movements in these verses tell you about his ministry strategy?
3. 28:30-31. Why does Luke leave us hanging like this? Does this seem like an appropriate ending to the book? Why or why not?
4. Try to put the theme or message of the book of Acts into one sentence.
5. Looking back over the book, what major lessons stick out to you? What verses or incidents were the most personally significant for you? Why?