

IS THE BIBLE A GOOD THING?

Why I'm Here...

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Christian View of the Bible.

For centuries, the people of God have responded that way when parts of the Bible were read. The Christian faith assumes that the Bible is something to be thankful for. The Christian faith is built on the notion that the Bible is a gift that God has given to the world. Also, reading the Bible actually builds faith as you read it.

But...There Are Significant Challenges Involved in Believing This.

There are a great number of obstacles that stand between us and trusting the Bible. I hope to address some of those obstacles tonight. My desire is that through tonight and our subsequent get together, I can help clear the path for you to deal with God through Bible

If you are a Christian.

I hope this will strengthen your faith and help you explain it to others. I want you to have a greater confidence in and appreciation of the Bible. This will help you to read it more, which will build your faith.

If you are not a Christian.

I hope this will help take away some barriers between you and Bible. I also hope this will be an encouragement and a challenge to you to check out historic Christianity. Keep in mind that reading the Bible is actually the source of faith.

Note: This will not give you an air-tight case for Christianity

February 26: Intellectual Obstacles (we have audio and transcript)

Tonight: Personal Obstacles

A Little Bit About Myself.

I am forty two years old and have been a Christian for almost twenty years, and a Christian minister for nearly ten. Several years after I became a Christian, I began to wrestle with these kinds of questions for a period of about two years. My wrestling was very intense and I was willing to walk away from the faith if the issues about trusting the Bible seemed insurmountable. At every step along the way, I found many satisfactory answers. Over time, I got to the point where I thought the case for trusting the Bible was solid (though not airtight). Personally, I also got to the point where I gave God, the Bible, and the church the "benefit of the doubt".

I also pastor a church here in Capitol Hill and love helping skeptical people trust the Bible.

What Do I Mean By Personal Obstacles to Trusting the Bible?

These are not so much intellectual objections to the trustworthiness of Scripture, but they are more along the lines of moral/visceral objections (By the way, this doesn't mean they are any less important than intellectual objections). These obstacles are often linked to our own personal histories. Tonight, I will address two of these objections.

Obstacle 1: Sin/Hypocrisy in the Church

Obstacle 2: Dislike of Certain Biblical Teachings

OBSTACLE 1: SIN/HYPOCRISY IN THE CHURCH

My Dad's Story. When I was growing up, the PTL Club (Jim and Tammy Bakker) was quite popular. One night while watching television, we watched a little bit of their broadcast. Someone was on their show raising a bunch of money to build a satellite network that would broadcast their show all over the world. At one point, my dad looked up in utter disgust and said, "If they're right, I'd rather be wrong." History proved him right. There was all kinds of corruption at the heart of that organization.

The Church as an Institution. Throughout history, the church has supported slavery, backed the Spanish Inquisition, launched the Crusades, supported misogyny, been riddled with financial/political corruption, and more recently covered up sexual predators who were ministers.

But while we believe that "God made of one blood all nations of men to dwell under the whole heavens," we know that the African has become, according to a well-known law of natural history, by the manifold influences of the ages, a different, fixed species of the race, separated from the white man by traits bodily, mental and moral, almost as rigid and permanent as those of genus. Hence the offspring of an amalgamation must be a hybrid race. . .incapable of the career of civilization and glory as an independent race. And this apparently is the destiny which our conquerors have in view. If indeed they can mix the blood of the heroes of Manassas with this vile stream from the fens of Africa, then they will never again have occasion to tremble before the righteous resistance of Virginia freemen; but will have a race supple and vile enough to fill that position of political subjection, which they desire to fix on the South.

Robert Dabney, 19th Century Presbyterian Theologian

Pastoral Counseling Experience. I have pastored and counseled many people who have been sinned against dreadfully by their Christian parents. For example, there is one person I know whose "perfect pastoral couple" parents are some of the nastiest, unrepentant people I have ever run into. All of this is done in the name of following Christ. It is absolutely and utterly shameful.

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THIS?

- 1) **Agree Where Appropriate.** There is no excuse for these sins. God judges this kind of living and so should we, whether you are a Christian or not.
- The **third commandment** is “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” This is a commandment against hypocrisy. The idea is that when you claim to be a Christian, you are taking up a banner that has God’s name on it. To “take the name of the Lord your God in vain” means to claim to be a Christian and live in a way that is utterly contradictory to that.
 - **False prophets** were put to death in the Old Testament. These were people who claimed to speak for God but did not. God so much wanted us to see the danger of this that in the Old Testament (Israel’s theocracy) they were to be put to death.
 - **Jesus’ strongest words** were directed against religious hypocrites. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the other.”* (Matthew 23:23)

- 1) **Abusus Non Tollit Usam.** This is a very helpful Latin phrase which means “abuse does not nullify proper use”. We can use it for all kinds of things. Take, for example, alcohol. When abused, alcohol can be devastating. It can ruin relationships, families, careers and wreak all kinds of devastation on people. However, this abuse of alcohol does not mean that alcohol cannot be properly used and enjoyed as a gift of God (Psalm 104).

The same is true for the Bible. No doubt the Bible has been abused by people who have tried to twist it to promote/sustain evil in the world. But that doesn’t mean the Bible cannot be read/understood/applied well. This means that even though the sins of Christians are very grievous, that does not mean we can simply jettison the Bible.

- 2) **Give Credit Where Credit Is Due.** If we are going to (rightly) assign blame to the people of God over the centuries for the sinful things the church has done (much of it in God’s name, no less), then we also have to be willing to talk about the gifts that God has brought into the world through the church.
- During the days of the **Roman Empire**, Christians were notorious for caring for the poor. *“The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well,”* Julian the Apostate, 4th Century Roman Emperor.
 - During the **plagues** that swept through Europe, Christians were notorious for caring for those who were dying of the disease.
 - Christians were responsible for the discontinuation of the practice of **widow burning** in India.

- Christians were the primary drivers behind the **abolition of the slave trade** in Great Britain (William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect).
- In the United States, Christians were responsible for building many **hospitals**, advocating public education, seeking worker rights, and pursuing numerous other initiatives that greatly benefited public life.
- Christians were the primary drivers behind the **American Civil Rights** movement during the 1960's (get MLK quote from Bearing the Cross about his Christian motives for doing his work).
- Christians were the primary drivers behind a relatively bloodless overthrow of **Apartheid in South Africa** in the late 1980's and 1990's.

Again, the point is that you cannot simply point to the sins and shortcomings of the church and thereby reject the Bible. You also have to ask yourself, "If the people who brought these gifts to the world are Christians, what do they believe?"

CONCLUSIONS ON SIN/HYPOCRISY IN THE CHURCH

- God shares your anger and dismay at the sin and hypocrisy that the church has demonstrated over the years. In other words, this is a point of connection for you and the teachings of the Bible.
- At the same time, the sins and failings of Christians should not be taken as a reason for exploring the Bible. Find out for yourself what the Bible actually teaches. Don't reject it before you have checked it out.

OBSTACLE 2: DISLIKE OF BIBLICAL TEACHINGS

How This Obstacle Is Articulated. Many people approach Christianity with questions such as “*What is the Christian position on x, y or z?*” If that person is given an answer with which they disagree, then that person will reject moving any further in exploring Christianity. Disagreement in these vital areas can result in a shutting down of the conversation.

What Are Some of these Areas of Dislike? These vary from culture to culture and also show variations over time. In our current day and age, here are some of the more prevalent issues.

- *What does the Bible say about homosexuality?*
- *What does the Bible say about other religions? I don't want to be part of a religion that believes all other religions are wrong. That seems incredibly arrogant and narrow-minded.*
- *I really don't like the idea of hell. If I have to believe in hell to be a Christian, I'm not interested.*
- *Christians have oppressed women. What does the Bible teach about men and women?*
- *The God of the Old Testament seems very barbaric and crude. I really don't think that a God worthy of following should be like that.*

What Should You Do If You Have These Questions?

1) Ask a Christian. These are very important questions to ask. I would urge you to take these questions to a Christian you respect. Here, an example is helpful. Let's say you were interested in entering into the culinary world of **mushrooms**. You wanted to know more about mushrooms, but you also know there are some dangers with eating them. You could either ask: a) someone who loved mushrooms; or b) someone who hated mushrooms. If you wanted to get the best information, you should ask the person who loved mushrooms.

The same is true for questions related to the Christian faith. Don't simply rely on information given to you by people who are opposed to Christianity (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Bill Maher). Ask someone who loves Jesus about what it means to follow Jesus and deal with answers to questions like that.

2) Try to Understand the Bible's Teaching. As a part of your question-asking, you also need to figure out if you really do understand the Bible's teaching that you're questioning.

Our misunderstandings can be linked to our coming to a conclusion based on **insufficient information**. Keller gives the example of **NT slavery** in his book. The Bible doesn't say anything about Christians refraining from practicing slavery in the NT. To our ears, this seems outrageous. But, if we dig deeper, we discover that NT slavery was vastly different

than North American chattel slavery. It was more akin to our current employer/employee relationships. So by digging deeper, we find that the disagreement wasn't there.

Also, our misunderstandings can be there because we've let a **knee-jerk reaction** influence us before we have thought the matter through. Consider **hell**. Many people reject Christianity because of the Christian belief in hell. The idea of hell is repulsive to our current sensitivities. However, hell is an outworking of God's justice. And, we **NEED** there to be justice in the universe. If there is no justice, then there is no moral difference between Mother Teresa and a serial pedophile. That is an unlivable universe.

Also, and this is too important to leave unsaid, remember this. The Bible speaks of hell and God's judgment, but it also offers **EVERYONE** an escape from that judgment. There is a way to escape that judgment, and that is by believing in Jesus.

One final note on this is that to understand the Bible, you've got to **study it with Christians**. Don't just read it by yourself. Read it and study it with people who love God's word and are having their lives shaped by it. In short, I am saying **get involved with a church** that centers what they do on what the Bible teaches. By this I mean a church that sees **the Gospel (good news about the life/death/resurrection of Jesus)** as the central message of the Bible.

3) Be Willing to Be Trumped. This may be the most difficult thing of all, but it is absolutely vital to understanding Scripture. The Bible is ultimately God's word to us calling for each and every one of us to place ourselves **under** it. The temptation is for us to **sit over the Bible** and critique it (I like this and this, but this I don't like). The reality is that the situation is supposed to be the opposite. The Bible is supposed to sit **over us** and critique us (This is good; This is not so good).

Another way of putting it is this...If your **methodological starting point** is "*I am right about the things I care most deeply about*", then you will constantly butt heads with Scripture. To come to Scripture properly means, in the end, that we submit to what it says, even when we don't like what it says.

This is a strong statement, but it is true. There is also grace in it as well. If we refuse to be trumped by the Bible, we are basically either: a) rejecting God; or b) trying to make God fit into our projection of what God should be like. If we are rejecting God, then we need to be honest about it. If we are trying to make God fit into our preconceived notion of what God is like, *A God like this will never transform us because our most cherished beliefs and values are undisturbed.* We can never be changed on a core level with such an approach. Keller refers to this as a Stepford God in his book.

This can be restated in this way: *If you are interested in transformation, you must be willing for God's word to trump you. A God that never offends us will never change us.*

CONCLUSIONS ON DISLIKE OF BIBLICAL TEACHINGS

- If you dislike the Bible's teachings about certain things, find out for yourself what the Bible actually teaches about these things. Don't be content to just go on your existing preconceived notions or by what you have heard others say.
- Wrestling with the teachings of the Bible is hard work. But, it is far too important a task to leave undone.
- How you read the Bible is as important as whether you read the Bible. You should read/study the Bible with Christians who understand the Bible in a Christ-centered, gospel-oriented way.

Resources

The Reason for God, by Tim Keller (especially his chapter on “You Can’t Take the Bible Literally”). A good book that considers many objections to historic Christian faith. Tim is the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City (www.redeemer.com).

Subverting Global Myths, by Vinoth Ramachandra. Ramachandra is a Sri Lankan Christian with a very wide-ranging intellect. In his chapter on “Myths of Human Rights” he demonstrates how the world has Christianity to thank for our growing understanding of human rights.

The Inerrancy of Scripture, by Kevin Vanhoozer. A good article on what inerrancy means (and doesn’t mean). He also tackles some common misunderstandings of what it means to read the Bible “literally”.

http://uga.ruf.org/site_content/attachments/0000/0640/Inerrancy_of_Scripture_Vanhoozer.pdf

The Last Word, N.T. Wright. A helpful book on understanding how Scripture should function in the church. N.T. Wright is the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and is the foremost New Testament scholar in the world.