

Ready to Give an Answer

A Biblical Guide to Evangelism and Apologetics

Chapter 1 — What Is the Gospel and Who Actually Saves?

Primary Text: 1 Corinthians 15:1–11

¹ Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; ⁷ then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; ⁸ and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Supporting Texts: Romans 1:16–17; Romans 3:10–26; Romans 5:6–11; Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1–10; Mark 1:14–15; Acts 16:25–34

Main Truth: Evangelism begins with knowing the gospel clearly. We proclaim Christ faithfully, but God is the One who saves.

Begin With the Text

Before learning methods of evangelism or arguments for Christianity, we need to answer a much more basic question: **What is the gospel?**

The word is familiar enough that Christians can use it without stopping to define it. We speak about preaching the gospel, sharing the gospel, believing the gospel, living according

to the gospel, and defending the gospel. Yet familiarity with the word does not guarantee clarity about its meaning.

That is especially dangerous here. If we are unclear about the gospel, becoming better at evangelism will only make us more effective at communicating an unclear message. If we are unclear about the gospel, becoming better at apologetics may make us better at defending Christianity without being able to explain how a sinner is reconciled to God.

So we begin where Paul begins.

As you read Paul's words, several things immediately stand out. There is a message that Paul preached. The Corinthians received that message and stood in it. Paul himself had first received it before delivering it to others. At the center of that message are the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul then points to witnesses who saw the risen Christ, and when he finally turns to his own life, he credits the grace of God for everything that happened to him.

That movement gives us the foundation for everything else in this book.

Evangelism and Apologetics Need Each Other

Before learning how to answer an atheist, speak with a Mormon, challenge relativism, discuss morality with a skeptic, or respond to someone who says that all religions lead to God, we need to understand what we are ultimately trying to bring that person to.

Evangelism and apologetics belong together, but they are not the same task.

We can know how to defend the faith without knowing how to share the gospel, and we can know how to share the gospel while being poorly prepared to defend the faith.

A Christian may become exceptionally skilled at apologetics. He may recognize contradictions in another worldview, ask thoughtful questions, challenge hidden assumptions, discuss the foundation of morality, explain the laws of logic, defend the reliability of Scripture, and demonstrate that a non-Christian worldview has difficulty accounting for the very things it assumes. Yet after an hour of excellent discussion, he may still never explain how a sinner can be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

The opposite problem is just as real. A Christian may memorize a short gospel presentation and become comfortable explaining sin, the cross, and faith, yet become completely lost

when another person says, “I do not believe God exists,” “Why should I trust the Bible?” “Truth is relative,” “Science explains everything,” or “Christianity may be true for you, but it is not true for me.”

The gospel has not changed, but the person hearing it may possess an entire system of beliefs that affects how he interprets every sentence we say.

This is why we need both. **Evangelism announces the good news of Jesus Christ. Apologetics helps us confront the assumptions, objections, and false beliefs that stand in the way of understanding that message.**

Apologetics may expose a contradiction. It may reveal that a worldview cannot support its own claims. It may answer a historical objection or correct a misunderstanding about Christianity. It may even bring someone to the point of admitting that his own position is inconsistent. But apologetics is not the gospel. Winning an argument is not the same thing as making Christ known. A person can lose an argument and remain lost. He can admit that his worldview has serious problems and remain lost. He can even acknowledge that Christianity gives a stronger account of morality, truth, reason, or human dignity and remain lost. Eventually, the conversation must come to **Jesus Christ**.

That is why this book begins with the gospel rather than with atheism, logic, cults, competing religions, or philosophical arguments. Before learning how to defend Christianity, we must know exactly what Christianity calls us to proclaim.

The Gospel Is a Message We Receive and Deliver

Paul says that he “delivered” what he had first “received.” That language is important because it tells us that Paul was not the author of the gospel. He was its messenger.

The gospel did not originate in Paul’s creativity, personality, cultural insight, or ability to communicate. He received a message and was responsible to deliver it faithfully.

That means the evangelist does not possess the authority to redesign the message. We do not have permission to remove parts that modern people find uncomfortable. We do not replace sin with low self-esteem, judgment with inconvenience, repentance with personal improvement, or Christ’s lordship with the promise of a happier life.

We are messengers, not authors.

This protects the church from allowing evangelism to become marketing. Marketing normally begins by asking what a particular group wants and then developing a message

that will appeal to them. Evangelism begins somewhere else. It begins with what God has said and what God has done.

Certainly, we should communicate wisely. Paul spoke differently in a synagogue than he did in Athens. Jesus spoke differently to Nicodemus than He did to the woman at the well. The language, starting point, illustrations, and questions may change according to the person.

The message does not.

Paul says in Romans 1:16:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation...”

The power is not ultimately found in our technique. It is found in the gospel God has given.

A Testimony Is Not the Gospel

There is value in telling people what Christ has done in our lives. Scripture itself contains testimonies. Paul repeatedly described his conversion. A testimony can make the Christian faith personal and concrete, and it can help someone see what grace looks like in a human life.

But testimony and gospel are not the same thing.

There is a difference between saying, **“Here is what Jesus did for me,”** and saying, **“Here is what Jesus did.”**

Our testimony describes the effect of Christ’s work upon us. The gospel announces the work itself.

Someone may say that Christianity saved his marriage, gave him peace, helped him overcome addiction, restored purpose to his life, or carried him through suffering. Those may all be genuine effects of God’s grace. But none of them, by themselves, is the gospel.

A Muslim may say Islam gave him peace. A Mormon may say his religion strengthened his family. Someone involved in a secular recovery program may say that the program saved his life. A person practicing another religion may describe a powerful spiritual experience.

Personal transformation alone does not establish the truth of Christianity.

- The gospel is not merely, “Christianity worked for me.”
- The gospel is news about what God has actually done in history through Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul begins with Christ rather than with himself.

Christ Died for Our Sins

Paul summarizes the heart of his message with the words:

“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”

Those words immediately tell us both what happened and why it happened.

Christ died. But He did not merely die. He died **for our sins**.

The gospel therefore cannot be understood without understanding sin. If sin disappears from Christianity, the cross becomes difficult to explain. Jesus then becomes merely a tragic martyr, an example of sacrificial love, a victim of political and religious injustice, or a teacher whose message threatened powerful people.

Scripture gives us a deeper explanation. Christ died for sinners.

Romans 3:23 states:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The problem is universal. It does not say that some particularly immoral people have sinned. It says **all** have sinned.

Paul develops the point even more strongly earlier in the chapter. Romans 3:10 says:

“There is none righteous, not even one.”

Humanity’s problem is not merely that we occasionally make poor decisions. The biblical diagnosis is much deeper.

Romans 6:23 explains the consequence:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life...”

Sin earns something - **Death** - God’s gift gives something entirely different - **Life**.

Sin Is Against God

We often understand sin horizontally before we understand it vertically. We recognize that murder harms another person, theft violates another person's property, adultery betrays another person, lying deceives another person, and cruelty causes suffering.

All of that is true. But sin is first an offense against God because God is the Creator and Lawgiver. The person we harm belongs to God and bears His image. The moral standard we violate is not one we invented for ourselves.

Romans 1 describes the heart of humanity's rebellion by saying that although people know God, they do not honor Him as God or give thanks. Sin is therefore not merely the breaking of isolated rules. At its deepest level, sin is the creature refusing to honor the Creator as God.

This changes the way we think about human goodness. Most people judge themselves comparatively. A person thinks, "I am not perfect, but I am not a murderer." Another says, "I try to help people." Someone else thinks, "I have made mistakes, but I am basically a decent person."

The problem is the standard. If the standard is another sinful human being, almost everyone can find someone worse. If the standard is God, the comparison collapses.

The question is no longer, **"Am I better than most people?"** The question becomes, **"Have I lived according to the righteousness of the God who made me?"**

Romans 3:23 has already answered:

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The "Good Person" and the Question of Standards

Suppose someone says, "I think God will accept me because I am a good person." There are several ways we might respond, but immediately telling the person, "No, you are not," may not be the wisest starting point. Instead, we can begin with a question: **What do you mean by good?**

That simple question begins exposing assumptions. What standard of goodness is being used? Personal opinion? Culture? Comparison with other people? A general sense of fairness?

Then another question naturally follows: **Do you think God uses the same standard?**

The statement “I am a good person” usually contains several unstated assumptions. The person may assume that salvation is based upon goodness, that enough goodness can outweigh wrongdoing, that he personally qualifies as good, and that his own definition of goodness agrees with God’s.

Each assumption deserves examination. This is the beginning of the relationship between apologetics and evangelism. We are not yet giving a complicated philosophical argument. We are simply learning to listen closely enough to recognize what a person is assuming.

Eventually, however, the conversation must return to Scripture. God defines the standard, and His standard exposes every one of us.

The Cross Is Substitution, Not Self-Improvement

Paul tells us that Christ died **for our sins**. There is substitution in those words. Our guilt - His death. The guilty receive life because the innocent One stands in their place.

Romans 5:8 says:

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Notice the timing.

Christ did not wait until sinners became righteous enough to deserve Him. He did not wait until we corrected our lives. He died **while we were sinners**.

Romans 5 also explains that Christ died for the ungodly and that reconciliation comes through His death. The movement is from helplessness and hostility toward reconciliation with God.

This separates the gospel from moralism.

- The gospel does not say, “Try harder.”
- It does not say, “Become religious enough.”
- It does not say, “Repair yourself and then approach God.”
- It does not say, “Live like Jesus and perhaps God will reward you.”

The gospel announces what God has done for sinners who could not rescue themselves.

Good works have a necessary place in the Christian life, but they are not the foundation of our justification. We do not become acceptable to God by successfully imitating Christ.

We need Christ because we have failed.

Christ Was Buried

Paul next says:

“and that He was buried...”

That statement may seem like a small detail, but it is not. The burial emphasizes the reality of His death.

Christianity is grounded in events that occurred in history. It is not merely a collection of timeless spiritual principles. It does not simply tell us to find hope within ourselves or to interpret suffering positively.

1. Jesus lived.
2. Jesus died.
3. Jesus was buried.

The gospel makes claims about reality whether a person accepts those claims or not. Christianity therefore cannot be reduced to the sentence, “This is true for me.”

If Christ truly died and was buried, then something happened in the world we all share.

And if what Paul says next is true, the consequences are enormous.

Christ Rose From the Dead

Paul says:

“He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

The resurrection is not an optional doctrine placed at the edge of Christianity. Paul makes clear throughout 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ was not raised, Christian faith collapses.

Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection. This is also why Paul identifies witnesses. He refers to Cephas, the Twelve, more than five hundred brethren, James, the apostles, and finally himself.

Paul is not embarrassed by historical evidence. Neither should we be.

Presuppositional apologetics does not teach us to ignore evidence. It teaches us to understand evidence within the world God has created rather than pretending that facts exist independently of God.

The resurrection occurred in God's world. The Creator who gave life in the first place is not incapable of raising the dead. That does not mean we dismiss historical investigation. Quite the opposite. Christianity makes historical claims, so we care whether those claims are true. But we do not begin with the assumption that a universe closed to God is the neutral starting point and then ask whether God can somehow be inserted into it. The universe already belongs to Him.

According to the Scriptures

Paul twice anchors these events in Scripture:

"Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures"

and:

"He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

Christ's death and resurrection were not random events detached from God's prior revelation. They occurred according to the redemptive purpose God had already made known. This has important implications for apologetics.

- Our authority is not our religious feeling.
- Our authority is not private spiritual experience.
- Our authority is not simply what seems persuasive to us.

God has spoken.

That matters when someone says, "I prayed about this religion, and I received a feeling that it was true." Another person may pray about a contradictory religion and report an equally powerful feeling.

Both experiences cannot establish contradictory truths.

The question must become: **What has God revealed?**

Our experience is evaluated in light of revelation. Revelation is not evaluated by the intensity of our experience. That is why Scripture must remain central to evangelism and

apologetics. We cannot defend Christianity faithfully while remaining unfamiliar with the Bible that defines Christianity.

Christianity Is More Than “Jesus Changed My Life”

The gospel certainly changes lives. Christ gives peace, hope, forgiveness, new desires, and transformed priorities. He may restore relationships, free someone from destructive habits, strengthen someone through suffering, and completely redirect the course of a life.

Those things matter. But they are effects of the gospel, not the gospel itself.

If our entire message becomes, “Jesus can improve your life,” Christianity begins sounding like another self-improvement system. The gospel is larger.

It announces that we have sinned against God, that Christ died for sinners, that He was buried, that He rose from the dead, and that He is Lord. It announces that forgiveness and eternal life are found in Him.

That message remains true even when following Christ does not make life immediately easier. The truth of the gospel does not depend upon whether our circumstances improve.

Paul Himself Is an Example of Grace

When Paul finally turns to himself in 1 Corinthians 15, he says:

“For I am the least of the apostles...”

He explains why:

“because I persecuted the church of God.”

Paul was not a neutral seeker calmly evaluating religious possibilities. He was actively opposing the church.

Yet verse 10 says:

“But by the grace of God I am what I am...”

Those words are central to the theology of evangelism.

- Who changed Paul? God did.
- Who took the persecutor and made him an apostle? God did.

- Who receives the glory? God does.

Ephesians 2 gives us the same pattern. Fallen humanity is described as dead in trespasses and sins, following the course of this world and living under the power of sinful desires. Then comes one of the great turns in Scripture:

“But God, being rich in mercy...”

The movement toward salvation begins with God’s mercy, not human spiritual achievement.

This protects evangelism from manipulation. We cannot argue someone into regeneration. We cannot emotionally pressure someone into spiritual life. We cannot discover an illustration powerful enough to create a new heart. We proclaim the truth, reason with people, answer objections, challenge assumptions, persuade, and plead. But **God saves**.

Convincing Is Not the Same as Converting

This distinction becomes especially important once apologetics enters the conversation.

Convincing someone that an argument is sound is not the same thing as God converting that person to Christ.

Someone can lose an argument with a Christian and remain an unbeliever. He can admit that the Christian argument for objective morality is stronger than his own position and remain an unbeliever. He can recognize that atheism has philosophical difficulties and remain an unbeliever. He may even understand the basic facts of the gospel intellectually and remain an unbeliever.

Paul says in Romans 1:16:

“the gospel... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Our confidence therefore rests neither in intellectual weakness nor in intellectual brilliance. We should reason carefully and defend Christianity faithfully, but the power to save belongs to God.

Apologetic success cannot simply mean, “I won the argument.” Evangelistic success cannot simply mean, “The person repeated a prayer.”

Our responsibility is faithfulness.

- We speak truthfully.
- We defend Christianity honestly.
- We proclaim Christ clearly.
- We entrust the person to God.

Salvation Is a Gift

Romans 6:23 places two realities beside one another:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life...”

The contrast is intentional.

- A wage is earned.
 - A gift is given.
- Sin earns death.
 - Eternal life is given by God in Christ.

Ephesians 2:8–9 makes the same point:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith...”

Paul then excludes boasting by explaining that salvation is not the result of works. This means salvation cannot be purchased with church attendance, moral improvement, baptism, charity, religious sincerity, or any other work we offer God. If a gift must be purchased, it is no longer a gift. Grace excludes boasting. No Christian will stand before God and say, “I earned this.”

What Is Saving Faith?

Saving faith is more than knowing true facts about Jesus. A person may affirm that Jesus existed, that He was crucified, that Christians proclaim His resurrection, and that salvation is found in Him, yet still remain unconverted. Scripture never presents saving faith as mere intellectual agreement.

The problem is deeper because fallen man is not spiritually neutral. He does not simply lack one final piece of information. Apart from the work of God, he is dead in sin, hostile toward God, and unable to produce spiritual life from within himself. This is why salvation must be understood from beginning to end as an act of divine grace.

Ephesians 2 describes sinners as dead in trespasses and sins before declaring that God made them alive with Christ. The movement is not from spiritually neutral man to a better decision. It is from death to life, and God is the One who gives that life.

Faith therefore must never be treated as the one contribution man supplies so that God can complete salvation. Faith is not a meritorious act that makes the sinner worthy of grace. It is itself part of the gracious saving work of God.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith...”

— **Ephesians 2:8,**

The sinner believes because God has acted graciously toward him. The same grace that saves also brings the sinner to rest in Christ rather than in himself.

Acts 16 gives us the proper object of that faith. When the Philippian jailer asks what he must do to be saved, Paul and Silas answer:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...”

— **Acts 16:31,**

The command is real. The sinner is commanded to believe. He is responsible to believe. But the command does not imply that fallen man possesses some independent spiritual ability by which he can generate saving faith apart from grace.

Scripture holds both truths together.

The gospel genuinely calls sinners to repent and believe, and when a sinner actually believes, all glory belongs to God.

Saving faith therefore has an object: **Jesus Christ Himself.**

- It does not rest in the strength of faith.
- It does not rest in the sincerity of the person believing.
- It does not rest in a prayer, an aisle walked, a baptism, a church membership, or a moment of emotional intensity.

Faith looks away from all of those things and rests upon Christ.

The crucial question is not, “How strong is my faith?” but, **“In whom is my faith resting?”**

Weak faith in a sufficient Christ does not become useless because it is weak. Strong confidence in the wrong object does not become saving because it is sincere. The saving

power is not located in the psychological intensity of faith. It is found in Christ, His righteousness, His atoning death, His resurrection, and His finished work.

This is why saving faith is sometimes described as **receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation**. It is not merely believing things *about* Christ. It is abandoning every competing ground of confidence and depending upon Him.

- The self-righteous person trusts his morality.
- The religious person may trust his church, baptism, sacraments, or religious history.
- The sincere person may trust the fact that he “means well.”
- The emotional person may trust an experience.
- The person raised in church may trust a prayer he repeated years earlier.

Saving faith looks away from all of these and says, in substance:

I have no righteousness of my own that can justify me before God. My only hope is Jesus Christ.

Even that confession gives the sinner no ground for boasting, because faith does not originate as an independent human contribution to salvation. God does not look down upon spiritually dead sinners, discover the one who was wiser or more willing than the others, and reward him for making the correct choice. Salvation would then leave room for man to distinguish himself.

Paul removes that possibility when he asks:

“What do you have that you did not receive?”
— **1 Corinthians 4:7,**

The Christian cannot ultimately say, “I made the difference.”

- Grace made the difference.
- God opened the heart.
- God gave life.
- God brought the sinner to Christ.
- And the sinner truly believed.

That is why biblical evangelism can call people directly and urgently to faith without treating faith as an autonomous human achievement. We tell the sinner exactly what Scripture says:

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- We plead with him to come to Christ.
- We reason with him.
- We answer objections.
- We warn him of judgment.
- We call him to repentance.

But beneath all of that is the confidence that only God can do what no argument, technique, emotional appeal, or evangelist can accomplish: **give life to the dead and bring a sinner willingly to Christ.**

Saving faith is therefore not man supplying the missing piece of salvation.

It is the sinner, made alive by grace, looking away from himself and resting entirely upon the Savior God has provided.

A Transfer of Trust

One helpful way of explaining saving faith is to describe it as a transfer of trust.

Every person is tempted to place confidence somewhere. Some trust their morality. Others trust their church attendance, baptism, religious background, sincerity, knowledge, charitable works, or simply their belief that they are trying their best.

The gospel calls us away from self-trust.

Saving faith recognizes, “My goodness cannot save me. My religion cannot save me. My works cannot save me. Christ is my only hope.”

This does not mean faith is an impressive spiritual achievement. It means the opposite.

Faith abandons the attempt to save ourselves and rests in what Christ has accomplished.

Repentance and Faith

Faith should not be separated from repentance.

Mark 1 records Jesus proclaiming:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe...”

Repentance and faith belong together.

Repentance does not mean cleaning ourselves up before coming to Christ. It is not a process of becoming respectable enough for God to accept us.

Repentance is a turning—a change of mind and allegiance in which the sinner turns from rebellion toward God.

Faith says, **“I cannot save myself. Christ is my only hope.”**

Repentance says, **“I will no longer defend my rebellion against the God who made me.”**

Neither repentance nor faith functions as a payment offered to God. They describe the response of the sinner who comes to Christ.

What About the Sinner’s Prayer?

A prayer may be a genuine expression of repentance and faith. There is nothing wrong with helping someone put into words what he believes or with praying alongside someone who desires to call upon Christ.

The danger comes when the prayer itself is treated as the saving mechanism. We should never give someone assurance merely because he repeated particular words. Our confidence is not in a prayer. Our confidence is in Christ.

When the Philippian jailer asks:

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

Paul and Silas do not answer, “Repeat this exact prayer.”

They answer:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...”

If someone genuinely wants to pray, we can pray with him. The prayer may express his faith, but the prayer does not cause salvation.

A Simple Gospel Framework

As the gospel becomes clearer, it can be helpful to remember its movement through four broad categories: **God, Man, Christ, and Response**. This is not an inspired formula or a required order for every conversation. It is simply a tool that helps us remember the major truths Scripture teaches.

We begin with **God**. He is the Creator, holy and good, the rightful Judge to whom we belong.

We then consider **Man**. Human beings were created by God but have sinned against Him. Romans 3:23 says:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

None of us can justify ourselves through our own goodness.

Then we come to **Christ**. First Corinthians 15 tells us that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day. He is not merely an example for us to follow. He is the Savior sinners need.

Finally comes the **Response**. Jesus says in Mark 1:15:

“repent and believe in the gospel.”

The sinner is called to turn from rebellion, stop trusting himself, and rest in Christ. The framework helps us remember the message, but the framework itself is not the gospel. The gospel is what God has done in Christ.

How Apologetics Serves the Gospel

Imagine someone saying, “I do not believe Christianity because everyone should determine truth for himself.”

Instead of immediately responding with a long argument, it may be helpful to ask what the person means by *truth*. We might ask whether something can be true for one person and false for another at the same time and in the same sense. We might then ask whether the claim that everyone determines truth for himself is itself merely personal, leaving us free to reject it.

Those questions begin exposing the worldview beneath the statement. But the conversation cannot end with, “Relativism contradicts itself.” The deeper destination is the Christian worldview and ultimately the gospel.

Romans 1 tells us that humanity lives in God’s world and already possesses knowledge of God. Paul writes that what is known about God is evident because God has made it evident. The problem is not that humanity inhabits a neutral universe in which God has left no witness of Himself.

The problem is suppression.

- God created us.
- We live in His world.
- Truth does not originate in us.
- God has spoken.

And the God against whom we have sinned has provided salvation through His Son.
Apologetics serves evangelism. It does not replace it.

Learning to Read the Person

The gospel does not change, but not every person needs the same next sentence. One person may say, “I am a good person.” Another may deny that God exists. Another may say that he believes in God and prays regularly. Someone else may be trying to obey the commandments in the hope that God will notice his effort.

Each statement reveals something different.

This is why good evangelism requires listening. Before answering, we may need to ask, **“What do you mean by that?”** or **“How did you come to that conclusion?”**

These questions help us discover not only what a person says but what he is trusting in and what assumptions are shaping his view of God, salvation, and reality.

Later chapters will develop this method much more fully. For now, the important point is that evangelism is not simply delivering a memorized speech to every person in exactly the same way. The message remains fixed.

Wisdom helps us understand how to bring the person to that message.

The Good Person

Consider again the person who says, “I think I will go to heaven. I have never killed anybody, and I try to treat people right.”

A helpful conversation might begin by asking what the person means by *good*. That leads naturally to the question of what standard he is using and whether God uses the same standard. We may then ask whether he has always lived consistently even according to his own moral expectations. Eventually the conversation reaches Scripture.

Romans 3:23 says:

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 6:23 says:

"For the wages of sin is death..."

And 1 Corinthians 15 tells us:

"Christ died for our sins..."

The questions did not replace the gospel. They helped expose why the gospel is necessary.

The Church Person

Another person may say, "I have been going to church since I was a child, so I am pretty sure I am okay with God." Church attendance is good, so there is no reason to attack it. The real question is what the person believes makes him right with God.

If church attendance is the basis of his confidence, we might ask how much attendance would be enough or what he believes Christ's death accomplished.

Ephesians 2:8-9 reminds us:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith..."

and immediately excludes works as the basis of salvation. A person can spend his entire life around Christianity while trusting in religious activity rather than Christ. The gospel calls him away from confidence in what he has done and toward confidence in what Christ has done.

The Spiritual Person

Another person may say, "I believe in God. I pray all the time." That may sound encouraging, but it leaves many important questions unanswered. What does he mean by God? What does he believe God requires? Who does he believe Jesus is? What does he think Jesus came to accomplish? What is he trusting in for his relationship with God?

Romans 1 reminds us that simply possessing awareness of God is not the same as worshiping Him rightly. Humanity can know God and still refuse to honor Him as God.

Believing that some kind of God exists is therefore not the same thing as believing the gospel. The question is not merely whether someone believes in God. The question is **which God he believes in and what he is trusting in before that God.**

The Works-Based Person

Someone else may say, “I am just trying to live right, obey the commandments, and hopefully God sees that I am trying.” That statement reveals confidence in effort. A helpful response is to ask how good the person would need to become, how he would know when he had done enough, and what happens to the sins he has already committed.

The most important question may be this:

If we could earn salvation by obedience, why was Christ’s death necessary?

Romans 6:23 says that eternal life is:

“the free gift of God...”

The gospel directs us away from our works and toward Christ.

Can You Explain the Gospel Clearly?

Imagine now that there is no objection at all. Someone simply asks, “What exactly is the gospel?” Could you explain it clearly without hiding behind religious vocabulary?

A simple explanation might sound like this:

God created us and is holy. We have sinned against Him and cannot make ourselves righteous. Romans 3:23 says, **“all have sinned.”** Jesus Christ died for sinners, was buried, and rose from the dead. Eternal life is God’s gift rather than something we earn. Jesus calls sinners to **“repent and believe in the gospel.”**

That explanation does not need to take twenty minutes. But it should contain enough truth that the person understands who God is, what our problem is, what Christ accomplished, and how Scripture calls us to respond.

The Gospel and Things That Sound Like the Gospel

One of the best ways to gain clarity is to learn to recognize statements that sound Christian but do not actually communicate the gospel.

“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” is a phrase a good friend pastor used to say and it may communicate something true about God’s love, but by itself it does not explain the gospel.

“Jesus changed my life” is a testimony, but it does not explain what Christ accomplished for sinners.

“You need to start living right” is moral advice, not good news.

By contrast, Paul says:

“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures”

and that:

“He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

That takes us directly to the heart of the gospel.

Romans 6:23 tells us that eternal life is God’s gift. Mark 1:15 gives the proper response:

“repent and believe in the gospel.”

Even a statement such as “I prayed a prayer when I was eight” must be handled carefully. It is neither the gospel nor automatic proof that a person is saved. The central question remains whether the person is trusting Christ.

These distinctions matter because if gospel, testimony, moral advice, religious experience, and evangelistic method all become confused, our evangelism will become confused with them.

Return to 1 Corinthians 15

Now return to 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 and read the passage again.

The movement should be clearer.

- Paul receives the gospel.
- Paul delivers the gospel.
- Christ dies for sins.

- Christ is buried.
- Christ rises.
- Witnesses see Him.

Then Paul turns to his own life and says:

“But by the grace of God I am what I am...”

That statement gives us the balance we need for everything that will follow in this book.

We must know the message. We must communicate it clearly. We must be prepared to defend it faithfully. But we must never confuse our skill with God’s saving power.

We do not create spiritual life. We deliver the message God has entrusted to us.

That truth gives tremendous freedom in evangelism. We do not need to manipulate people. manufacture an emotional response, pressure someone into making a decision, or win every argument. We need to know the truth, speak the truth, defend the truth, and proclaim Christ faithfully. God handles the heart.

Main Truth to Remember

We proclaim the gospel. God saves the sinner.

Before we move further into apologetics, however, we need to understand something Scripture teaches about every person with whom we will speak. The unbeliever is not standing outside the discussion as a completely neutral observer waiting for enough evidence to arrive.

He already has a relationship to God, to truth, and to the world God created.

No One Approaches God Without Assumptions

That is where Chapter 2 begins.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. According to 1 Corinthians 15:1–4, what are the central facts Paul includes in the gospel?

2. Why is it important that Paul says he “received” the gospel and then “delivered” it to others?
3. What is the difference between sharing a personal testimony and actually proclaiming the gospel?
4. Why does Paul say that Christ died “for our sins,” and what does that teach us about the purpose of the cross?
5. According to Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23, what is humanity’s real problem before God?
6. Why is comparing ourselves with other people an unreliable way to decide whether we are “good”?
7. What does Christ’s burial and resurrection tell us about the historical nature of the Christian faith?
8. Why does Paul emphasize that Christ died and rose “according to the Scriptures,” and what does that teach us about the relationship between personal experience and biblical revelation?
9. According to 1 Corinthians 15:9–10 and Ephesians 2:1–10, who ultimately receives the credit for salvation and spiritual transformation?
10. How would you explain the gospel to someone using the basic movement of **God** → **Man** → **Christ** → **Response**, while making sure that salvation does not sound like something a person earns?

Chapter 2 — No One Approaches God Without Assumptions

Primary Text: Romans 1:18–25

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²²Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Supporting Texts: Proverbs 1:7; Psalm 36:9; Colossians 2:2–8; Ephesians 4:17–24; 1 Peter 3:15

Main Truth: Every person interprets reality from a foundation. The Christian begins with God and His revelation, while the unbeliever lives in God's world, knows God through His revelation, and yet suppresses that truth. There is common ground between believer and unbeliever, but there is no neutral ground.

Begin With the Text

Romans 1:18–25 is one of the most important passages in Scripture for understanding evangelism and apologetics because Paul does not begin by describing the unbeliever as someone who simply lacks enough information about God. He describes something much deeper.

Romans 1:18 says that God's wrath is revealed against ungodliness and unrighteousness because people "**suppress the truth in unrighteousness.**" Paul then explains that what can be known about God is evident because God has made it evident. Creation itself displays His invisible attributes, eternal power, and divine nature. Humanity therefore stands "without excuse."

Paul's description becomes even stronger. Although people know God, they do not honor Him as God or give thanks. Their reasoning becomes futile, their hearts are darkened, and in professing themselves wise they become fools. Rather than worshiping the Creator, humanity exchanges the glory of God for created things. Paul summarizes the rebellion by saying that they **"exchanged the truth of God for a lie"** and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

That is a very different picture from the one we often assume. The unbeliever is not standing in a completely neutral position saying, "I have no knowledge of God whatsoever. Give me enough information and I will evaluate it without any prior commitments."

According to Paul, God has already spoken through creation. Humanity already lives in relation to that revelation. The problem is not merely the absence of information.

The problem is **suppression**.

This changes the way we think about apologetics.

The Myth of Neutrality

We often enter conversations as though the Christian and the unbeliever are standing together on some completely neutral piece of intellectual ground. The Christian has one theory about reality. The unbeliever has another. Both supposedly step outside their beliefs, examine the evidence from a position of neutrality, and decide which worldview appears more reasonable. Scripture does not describe the situation that way.

Romans 1 tells us that the unbeliever already lives in God's world. He is surrounded by God's revelation. He bears God's image. He uses the mind God created, depends upon the order God established, makes moral judgments in a universe governed by God, and cannot escape the testimony of creation.

At the same time, he suppresses the truth. This means the apologetic encounter is not a meeting between two people who have no prior commitments. Two different ways of interpreting reality are already present.

The Christian begins by confessing: **God is Creator. God has spoken. His Word is true. Christ is Lord.**

The unbeliever may begin from a very different foundation: **Human reason is ultimate. Science is ultimate. Personal experience is ultimate. The self is ultimate. Matter is all that exists. Religious truth cannot be known.**

These commitments affect how every fact is interpreted. The question is therefore not whether someone has presuppositions. Everyone does. The question is whether those presuppositions are true and whether they can make sense of the world in which we actually live.

What Is a Presupposition?

A presupposition is a foundational belief or commitment through which other things are interpreted. We normally do not consciously recite our presuppositions before making every decision. They operate underneath our conclusions.

Suppose two people witness something they cannot immediately explain.

- One already believes that God exists and acts within His creation.
- The other believes from the beginning that supernatural action is impossible.

They may examine exactly the same event, but they will not interpret it in exactly the same way because they are bringing different foundational commitments to the evidence. The disagreement is therefore not always merely about the individual fact. Sometimes the disagreement concerns the worldview through which the fact is being interpreted. This is why apologetics must eventually go deeper than collecting isolated facts. Evidence matters, but evidence is always interpreted within a larger understanding of reality.

Everyone Has a Worldview

A worldview is the basic framework through which a person understands reality. It answers questions such as: What is ultimately real? How can we know anything? What makes something right or wrong? What is a human being? Why are we here? What happens when we die? Does history have meaning? Is there such a thing as objective truth?

A person does not need to have studied philosophy to possess a worldview.

- The college professor has one.
- The mechanic has one.
- The atheist has one.
- The Mormon missionary has one.
- The person who says, “I do not think about religion” has one.

Even the person who says, “I just believe what feels right to me” is expressing a worldview. He has made the individual self and personal experience important authorities for

determining truth. Throughout this book, three worldview questions will become especially useful.

What is real?

This is the question of reality. Does only matter exist? Is there a Creator? Are human beings merely physical organisms? Is there a spiritual realm?

How do we know?

This is the question of knowledge. Is human reason ultimate? Is scientific observation the only reliable path to truth? Has God revealed Himself? Can religious truth actually be known?

What is right?

This is the question of morality. Is morality objective? Does culture determine right and wrong? Does the individual determine morality? Is goodness grounded in God?

These questions allow us to move beneath individual objections and begin understanding the worldview from which they come.

The Christian Does Not Begin With Neutrality

Proverbs 1:7 says,

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

Notice what Scripture does not say. It does not say that autonomous human reasoning is the beginning of knowledge and that God may later be added if sufficient evidence is discovered. The fear of the Lord is the beginning.

Psalms 36:9 expresses the same principle when it says,

"In Your light we see light."

God is not merely one object of knowledge among millions of other objects. He is the Creator who makes knowledge possible. We know anything at all because we live in the world He created and possess minds He made.

This means the Christian should not approach apologetics by pretending, even temporarily, that God may not be relevant to knowledge. If God truly is the Creator of everything, there is nowhere we can stand outside His reality in order to evaluate Him independently.

There is no higher court before which God must appear. There is no standard of truth above God. There is no universe more ultimate than the universe He created.

This is why biblical apologetics begins with Christ as Lord rather than trying to arrive at His lordship after temporarily reasoning as though He were not Lord.

Colossians Warns Us About Captivity

Paul gives a similar warning in Colossians 2. He tells believers that in Christ are hidden “*all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*.” He then warns them not to be taken captive through philosophy and empty deception according to human tradition and the elementary principles of the world rather than according to Christ.

The warning is not against thinking. Paul himself reasons constantly. Christianity is not anti-intellectual. The warning concerns a way of thinking that operates “**rather than according to Christ.**” That phrase matters.

There are philosophies built on foundations that oppose the lordship of Christ. They may contain many individual truths. An unbelieving scientist can discover genuine facts about creation. An atheist mathematician can correctly solve equations. A non-Christian philosopher may recognize a valid logical inference. Scripture does not require us to deny these things.

The deeper question is whether the unbelieving worldview can provide a sufficient foundation for the knowledge it uses. That distinction will become central later. The unbeliever can know many things. The question is whether his worldview can **account for knowing them.**

Suppression Does Not Mean the Unbeliever Knows Nothing

Romans 1 must be handled carefully. When Paul says that unbelievers suppress the truth, he does not mean that every unbeliever consciously thinks, “I know Christianity is completely true, but I am pretending it is false.” People genuinely persuade themselves of false beliefs.

They may sincerely believe atheism, materialism, Islam, Mormonism, relativism, or some other worldview. Paul's point is deeper.

God has revealed Himself sufficiently that humanity cannot escape responsibility. The unbeliever's rejection of God does not occur in a universe in which God has left Himself without witness. He knows because God reveals. He suppresses because of sin.

This also explains something that can otherwise appear puzzling. Unbelievers can be highly intelligent. They can make discoveries, raise good children, recognize injustice, create beautiful art, perform complex mathematics, and conduct careful scientific investigation.

Presuppositional apologetics does not require us to say that the unbeliever knows nothing. It asks a different question:

How can his professed worldview account for the very knowledge he possesses?

That is the distinction between being able to use something and being able to explain its ultimate foundation.

Common Ground Is Not Neutral Ground

If there is no neutrality, does that mean Christians and unbelievers have nothing in common? No.

- We have enormous common ground.
- We live in the same world.
- We observe the same creation.
- We use the same laws of logic.
- We interact with the same physical regularities.
- We make moral judgments.
- We experience love, loss, beauty, injustice, guilt, joy, and death.

We can communicate because we share human nature and because both believer and unbeliever bear the image of God.

The Christian can discuss science with an atheist because both inhabit God's creation. The Christian can discuss morality with a skeptic because both possess moral awareness. The Christian can discuss logic with a materialist because both actually reason.

There is genuine common ground everywhere because **God owns all the ground**/ What does not exist is neutral ground. The unbeliever does not possess a portion of reality that belongs neither to God nor to the Christian worldview. Every fact belongs to God's world.

This distinction is extremely important. We do not need to avoid conversation with unbelievers because they supposedly have nothing in common with us. We have tremendous common ground. We simply refuse to pretend that our common ground is independent of God.

The Exchange at the Heart of Unbelief

Romans 1 repeatedly describes an **exchange**.

- Humanity exchanges the glory of God for images.
- Humanity exchanges the truth of God for a lie.
- Humanity worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator.

This gives us a deeper biblical description of idolatry. Idolatry is not limited to statues. Anything created can become ultimate.

- Human reason can become ultimate.
- Scientific methodology can become ultimate.
- Political ideology can become ultimate.
- Personal autonomy can become ultimate.
- Human happiness can become ultimate.
- The self can become ultimate.

The moment a created thing is given the place that belongs to the Creator, an exchange has taken place. This is one reason worldview apologetics eventually asks a person about his **ultimate authority**.

When two beliefs conflict, what finally decides the issue?

- For one person, the answer may be personal experience.
- For another, scientific consensus.
- For another, church tradition.
- For another, an alleged prophet.
- For another, autonomous human reason.

For the Christian, the final authority is God speaking in His Word. Every worldview has something that functions ultimately.

“Prove God to Me Without Using the Bible”

A common challenge sounds like this: “Prove God exists, but you cannot use the Bible.” At first the request may sound perfectly reasonable. But we need to ask what is being assumed. Why is Scripture disqualified before the discussion even begins? What authority has determined that God’s revelation cannot be used when discussing God? If the Christian accepts the restriction without examination, he may unintentionally grant that some supposedly neutral authority stands above God and determines what kinds of evidence God is permitted to provide.

That does not mean we cannot discuss creation, history, philosophy, science, morality, or evidence. We absolutely can. The issue is that we should not pretend God’s revelation has no authority until the unbeliever grants it authority.

God’s Word does not become authoritative when a skeptic approves it. It is authoritative because God has spoken.

Evidence Still Matters

At this point, someone may worry that presuppositional apologetics eliminates evidence. It does not. Romans 1 itself appeals to evidence. Paul points to creation. The created world reveals God’s eternal power and divine nature. First Corinthians 15 points to witnesses of the resurrection. Acts repeatedly appeals to events in history. Christianity is full of factual claims.

The distinction is not between using evidence and refusing to use evidence. The distinction concerns **how evidence is interpreted**. A Christian looks at the universe and sees creation. A materialist looks at the same universe and may see only matter and energy. A Christian sees the resurrection as the act of the Creator who has authority over life and death. A naturalist begins with a worldview in which resurrection is impossible and therefore interprets the reports differently.

The facts matter.

But the worldview also matters. This is why evidence alone does not automatically produce agreement. Two people can look at the same evidence and interpret it differently because they approach it with different foundational commitments.

The Argument Is Often Deeper Than the Objection

Suppose someone says: “Science has disproved God.” We could immediately begin discussing scientific evidence. But before doing that, several questions might help.

What does the person mean by science? Which scientific discovery disproved God? Does he believe scientific investigation is the only way knowledge can be obtained? Can that claim itself be demonstrated scientifically?

Now the conversation has moved below the original statement. The issue may not actually be one scientific discovery. The issue may be **scientism**—the philosophical belief that science is the only legitimate route to knowledge. That claim is not itself a scientific conclusion. It is a philosophical commitment about knowledge. Recognizing that changes the entire conversation.

Do Not Only Attack the Branches

Imagine a tree with unhealthy fruit. You can spend hours pulling individual pieces of fruit from the branches, but if the disease lies in the root, the problem will keep returning. Worldview objections often work the same way. Someone may object to biblical sexuality, then biblical judgment, then miracles, then Scripture, then the exclusivity of Christ.

We can answer each objection individually, and sometimes we should. But eventually we need to ask whether all of these objections are growing from the same root. Perhaps the person assumes: **No authority stands above individual autonomy.**

If that is the root, then dozens of apparently unrelated objections begin to make sense. The apologetic task becomes not merely answering each branch but exposing the root.

Learning to Ask Better Questions

This is where questions begin becoming indispensable. Suppose someone says: “There is no absolute truth.” Instead of immediately responding, ask:

What do you mean by absolute truth?

Perhaps the person does not mean what we assumed. Then ask:

How did you come to that conclusion?

Now the person must give reasons for the claim.

These two questions are remarkably powerful because they accomplish two things. The first gathers information. The second asks the person to carry the burden of supporting his own statement. Christians sometimes feel that whenever someone makes an objection, we immediately have to prove Christianity from beginning to end. We do not.

If someone claims: “Religion was invented to control people,” we can simply ask: **How did you come to that conclusion?** The person made the claim. The person should be able to support it. This is not evasion. It is normal rational conversation.

The Burden of Proof Does Not Belong Only to the Christian

Imagine someone says: “There is no evidence for God.” The Christian often feels immediate pressure to produce ten arguments. But the statement itself contains a claim.

- What counts as evidence?
- What evidence has been considered?
- Why has it been rejected?
- What would count as sufficient evidence?

The unbeliever also has a worldview to defend. If someone claims that matter is all that exists, that claim requires support. If someone claims morality is entirely subjective, that claim requires support. If someone claims miracles are impossible, that claim requires support. If someone claims human reason can operate independently of God, that claim requires support.

Apologetics is not a courtroom in which Christianity is permanently the defendant while unbelief sits in the judge’s chair. Both worldviews must give an account.

An Early Example of Internal Tension

Suppose someone says: “Truth is relative. Everyone has his own truth.” We might ask: **Is the statement “truth is relative” itself objectively true?** If the person says yes, he has just treated at least one truth as nonrelative. If he says the statement is only true for him, then there is no reason it must be true for us. The position begins turning against itself. This is an early example of what we will later call **internal critique**.

We temporarily examine the person’s claim according to its own rules and ask whether it can remain consistent. We do not need to develop the entire method yet. For now, the important point is that questions can expose tensions that a direct argument may leave hidden.

Morality Reveals the Same Problem

Consider someone who says: “Morality is completely subjective.” Then later he says: “Christians are wrong for imposing their morality on other people.”

Ask what he means by **wrong**.

If morality is completely subjective, then Christians cannot be objectively wrong. At most, the speaker personally dislikes what they are doing.

Yet people rarely live consistently with complete moral relativism.

- They condemn racism.
- They condemn abuse.
- They demand justice.
- They speak about human rights.
- They object to oppression.
- They expect others to treat them fairly.

These judgments reveal that human beings actually live as though some things really are right and wrong. Romans 2 will later help us understand why. For now, notice what has happened: a worldview has made a claim it struggles to live consistently with.

The Christian Worldview Must Also Be Presented

It is not enough to show that another worldview has problems. Christian apologetics must also explain why the Christian worldview makes sense of the things we all depend upon every day.

Suppose we show that relativism contradicts itself. That is useful, but we still need to explain why truth is real. Christianity gives that answer because God is true, He has created a real world, and truth does not change according to our preferences.

Suppose we show that materialism struggles to explain human dignity. Again, that is useful, but we should also explain why human beings have value. Christianity says that human beings are created in the image of God. Our worth does not depend upon intelligence, ability, wealth, usefulness, or what society thinks of us.

Suppose someone admits that logic, morality, or the order of the universe is difficult to explain from his worldview. We should not stop with, “Your worldview cannot explain that.” We should show how the Christian worldview does.

Reason makes sense because we are rational creatures made by a rational Creator. Morality makes sense because good and evil are not simply human inventions. We are accountable to

a holy God. Human dignity makes sense because people are made in God's image. The order of creation makes sense because God created and sustains the world. Truth makes sense because reality is not created by our opinions. God has made a real world that is what it is, whether we like it or not.

This is the positive side of apologetics.

We are not only exposing what is wrong with another worldview. We are also showing that Christianity gives a foundation for the very things people continue to use: truth, reason, morality, dignity, and an orderly creation.

The goal is not simply to tear down someone else's beliefs and leave him with nothing. We want to show that the Christian worldview gives a coherent account of reality and then move the conversation toward the God who created that reality. And ultimately, that conversation must move toward Christ.

Do Not Forget Romans 1

This entire discussion must remain connected to Paul's diagnosis. The unbeliever's problem is not simply intellectual. Romans 1 says truth is suppressed **"in unrighteousness."** That means apologetics cannot be reduced to the assumption that if we provide a sufficiently intelligent argument, every reasonable person will become a Christian.

- Arguments matter.
- Evidence matters.
- Clarity matters.

But the deepest problem is spiritual and moral. This should affect both our confidence and our humility. It gives us confidence because we do not need to be terrified when someone rejects an argument. God's truth does not become false because someone refuses to accept it. It gives us humility because we remember that our own faith is not the result of being intellectually superior to everyone else. Grace opened our eyes.

The Unbeliever Is Not the Enemy

Worldview conflict can easily produce the wrong attitude. Once Christians learn to identify contradictions, there is a temptation to begin treating conversations like competitions.

The unbeliever makes a statement.

We spot the contradiction.

We attack.

We win.

That is not the biblical goal.

First Peter 3:15 tells us to sanctify Christ as Lord and be prepared to give a defense, but Peter adds that it must be done with **“gentleness and reverence.”** The person in front of us is not merely a worldview to defeat. This person is an image-bearer. This person may be suppressing truth, but apart from grace we would do the same. The purpose of exposing a false foundation is not humiliation. It is to help remove what stands between the person and the truth.

What Faithfulness Looks Like

A successful apologetic conversation may not end with someone becoming a Christian. Sometimes the conversation moves only one step. A person may begin by saying that all Christians believe blindly and leave realizing that Christianity actually has intellectual substance. Someone may begin by saying morality is subjective and leave recognizing that he cannot consistently live according to that claim. Someone may begin convinced that science has disproved God and leave realizing that science itself depends upon philosophical assumptions he has never examined. That may be progress.

The apostle Paul uses agricultural language elsewhere: one person plants, another waters, but God gives the growth. We do not determine success only by whether someone converts during the conversation. Our task is to be faithful.

- We speak the truth.
- We ask honest questions.
- We challenge false beliefs.
- We present the Christian worldview.
- We proclaim Christ when the opportunity comes.

God handles the heart.

A Simple Process for Beginning a Worldview Conversation

At this stage, the process does not need to be complicated. First, listen to what the person actually says. Do not answer the argument you expected to hear. Then clarify the claim. A simple question such as **“What do you mean by that?”** can prevent an enormous amount of misunderstanding. Next, ask for the reason: **“How did you come to that conclusion?”**

Then begin looking underneath the statement. What does the person appear to assume about God, knowledge, truth, morality, or human autonomy? Do not feel obligated to answer everything at once. One thoughtful question may accomplish more than ten rapid arguments. The goal is to understand the worldview before attempting to dismantle it.

Consider the Statement: “There Is No Evidence for God”

If someone says there is no evidence for God, begin by understanding the claim. What counts as evidence? Has the person considered creation itself as evidence? What about the existence of rational order, moral obligation, human consciousness, or the historical claims surrounding Christ? Perhaps the person will respond that none of those things count because only scientific evidence is acceptable.

Now a deeper worldview commitment has appeared. Why is scientific evidence the only acceptable evidence? Can that rule itself be proven scientifically?

The conversation is changing. You began with:

“There is no evidence for God.”

You discovered:

“Only scientifically testable propositions count as knowledge.”

Those are not the same claim. The second is the foundation underneath the first. That is exactly what worldview apologetics is trying to uncover.

Consider the Statement: “All Religions Are Basically the Same”

Again, do not immediately give a speech. Ask: **In what way are they the same?** The person may say: “They all teach people to be good.” Now you have something specific to examine. Christianity teaches that sinners cannot make themselves right with God through goodness. Christ had to die for sins. Other religious systems may teach very different understandings of God, salvation, humanity, and eternity.

A second question might be: **Can two religions teach contradictory things about God and both be true in the same sense?**

Christianity says Jesus is the eternal Son of God. Islam denies that God has a Son. Those claims cannot both describe reality accurately in the same sense. Again, the question has exposed an assumption beneath the original slogan.

Consider the Statement: “You Have Your Truth, and I Have Mine”

Ask what the person means by *your truth*. Sometimes people simply mean that individuals have different experiences or opinions. That is obviously true. You may prefer one food and I may prefer another. But truth is different from preference.

If someone says that George Washington was the first president of the United States, the statement does not become false because someone dislikes it. If Jesus actually rose from the dead, then He rose whether a person believes it or not. Christianity makes claims about reality. It is therefore not sufficient to say: “That is your truth.” The real question is: **Is it true?**

From Worldview to Gospel

Even in this chapter, we must remember why we are learning these things. Suppose someone eventually admits: “I never realized that saying all truth is relative contradicts itself.” Good. But that realization is not salvation.

The conversation must eventually go further. Truth is not merely an abstract philosophical category. There is a God of truth. He created us. We live in His world. He has revealed Himself. We have refused to honor Him as God. And the God whose truth we suppress has acted in history to save sinners through Jesus Christ. This brings us directly back to Chapter 1.

Apologetics serves evangelism. We expose false foundations because we want people to see the truth. And ultimately, the truth we want them to hear is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Main Truth to Remember

There is common ground, but there is no neutral ground.

The unbeliever is not outside God’s world examining Christianity from a place untouched by God. He already lives in the Creator’s world, bears the Creator’s image, depends upon the Creator’s order, and receives the Creator’s revelation. Romans 1 tells us that the problem is not that God has remained silent. The problem is that humanity suppresses the truth.

That means our apologetic task is deeper than simply piling up isolated facts. We must learn to recognize the worldview through which those facts are being interpreted.

In the next chapter, Acts 17 will show us what this looks like in practice. Paul will walk into Athens, observe a city filled with idols, engage people with competing philosophies, identify their religious assumptions, challenge their view of God, and proclaim the Creator, judgment, repentance, and the resurrection.

He does not surrender the biblical worldview in order to reach them. He brings the biblical worldview directly into the conversation.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. According to Romans 1:18–25, what does humanity do with the truth God has revealed, and how is this different from simply being ignorant of God?
2. What does Romans 1 teach about the ways God has made Himself known to humanity through creation?
3. What is the difference between **common ground** and **neutral ground**, and why is that distinction important in evangelism?
4. Proverbs 1:7 says, “**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.**” How should that statement affect the way a Christian approaches reasoning and apologetics?
5. What is a worldview, and how might a person’s beliefs about reality, knowledge, and morality affect the way he interprets evidence for Christianity?
6. Why does recognizing that an unbeliever can know many true things not contradict the teaching of Romans 1 about the suppression of truth?

7. When someone says, "There is no evidence for God," why might asking "**What do you mean by evidence?**" be more useful than immediately presenting a list of arguments?
8. How does the statement "**Everyone has his own truth**" create a problem for itself when it is treated as a universal claim?
9. Why is it not enough for apologetics merely to expose contradictions in an unbelieving worldview? What positive account must the Christian also provide?
10. How can remembering that conversion belongs to God change the way we respond when someone rejects our argument or refuses to believe the gospel?

Chapter 3 — Paul at Athens: Reading the Worldview Behind the Words

Primary Text: Acts 17:16–34

Paul at Athens

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. ¹⁷ So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. ¹⁸ And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming?” ²⁰ “For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” ²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.) ²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ “For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ ²⁹ “Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” ³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you

again concerning this.”³³ So Paul went out of their midst.³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

Supporting Texts: Romans 1:18–25; Isaiah 42:5; Genesis 1:26–27; Acts 14:15–17; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25

Main Truth: Effective evangelism requires more than hearing a person’s words. We must learn to recognize the worldview beneath those words. Paul listened, observed, understood the beliefs of the Athenians, challenged their false assumptions, and then proclaimed the true God, repentance, judgment, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Begin With the Text

Acts 17 gives us one of the clearest biblical examples of worldview evangelism. Paul arrives in Athens and finds himself surrounded by religious devotion, competing philosophies, idols, intellectual curiosity, and people who have very different ideas about God and reality.

He does not respond by pretending that these differences are insignificant. He also does not simply begin reciting a memorized gospel presentation without regard for what the Athenians already believe. He observes the city, listens to its people, understands something about their beliefs, and then speaks directly to the worldview beneath those beliefs.

Acts 17:16 describes Paul’s initial reaction:

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.”

Paul does not see Athens merely as an interesting cultural experience. The idolatry troubles him because he understands what idolatry means. These people are religious, but they are worshiping wrongly.

Verse 17 says:

“So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.”

Paul does not withdraw from the culture. He enters conversation with it.

Acts 17:18 tells us that some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers begin talking with him. They hear Paul preaching Jesus and the resurrection, but they interpret his words through

categories they already possess. Some call him an “idle babbler,” while others think he is proclaiming “strange deities.” Already we can see the problem of worldview. Paul is speaking. They are listening. But they are interpreting what Paul says according to what they already believe. That is exactly what happens in evangelism today.

People Do Not Hear Us From a Blank Slate

One of the easiest mistakes in evangelism is assuming that words mean the same thing to everyone. Consider the word **God**. A Christian may hear that word and think of the eternal, self-existent Creator revealed in Scripture. A Mormon may use the word *God* while holding a very different understanding of God’s nature. A Muslim may speak of God while explicitly rejecting the Trinity and the Sonship of Christ. A spiritual person may use *God* to mean a universal force. An atheist may hear *God* and imagine an invisible human-like being somewhere inside the universe.

The same word can carry very different meanings. This is why learning someone’s worldview matters. When Paul speaks in Athens, he is not communicating with people who lack beliefs. They already possess ideas about the gods, nature, humanity, knowledge, death, morality, and the meaning of life. The gospel enters an already occupied mind.

Paul Observes Before He Speaks

Acts 17:16 says Paul was “**observing the city full of idols.**” That detail matters. Paul pays attention. He does not merely know what he wants to say. He notices the people to whom he will say it. Later, when he addresses the Athenians, he refers to what he has observed:

“Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects.” — Acts 17:22

He then mentions an altar carrying the inscription:

“TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” — Acts 17:23

Paul has been looking. He has been listening. He understands something about the religious environment before he begins directly challenging it. This is an important lesson for evangelism. We should learn to pay attention before giving an answer. A label rarely tells us everything we need to know. Someone may call himself an atheist but still believe in objective morality, human dignity, and universal rational laws. Someone may call herself Catholic but have little understanding of official Roman Catholic doctrine. Someone may describe herself as spiritual without having any clear idea what she means by spirituality. Someone may say, “I am Christian,” while believing that salvation comes through being a

good person. Before deciding what someone needs to hear, we should understand what he actually believes.

Sincerity Is Not the Same as Truth

Athens was intensely religious. Paul acknowledges this. But he does not conclude that the Athenians must therefore be spiritually safe.

- They are sincere.
- They are worshiping.
- They have temples.
- They have altars.
- They discuss religious ideas.

Yet Paul's spirit is provoked because their worship is directed toward false gods. That distinction is essential in a culture that often treats sincerity as though it guarantees truth. We frequently hear: "It does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." But sincerity cannot turn falsehood into truth.

- A person can sincerely believe a medicine will cure him and still be mistaken.
- A person can sincerely follow the wrong directions and still arrive at the wrong location.
- A person can sincerely worship a false god and still be worshiping falsely.

The issue is not merely: **Do you believe strongly?**

The issue is: **Is what you believe true?**

Paul respects the Athenians enough to take their beliefs seriously rather than pretending every religion says the same thing.

Paul Reasons With People

Acts 17:17 says Paul was "**reasoning**" with people. Christian faith is not opposed to reason. Paul does not tell the Athenians to stop thinking and simply have faith.

- He engages their ideas.
- He explains.
- He challenges.
- He proclaims.

This is important because Christians sometimes present an unnecessary choice between faith and reason. Biblical faith is not blind belief in the absence of truth. Christian faith rests upon the God who has spoken and upon what He has done in history.

The question is not whether we reason. The question is whether our reasoning begins with God or attempts to operate independently of Him. Paul reasons as a Christian. He does not become neutral in order to speak with unbelievers.

The Epicureans and Stoics Did Not Start From the Same Place

Luke specifically mentions Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Acts 17:18. These groups represented different ways of understanding reality.

The Epicureans generally viewed the gods, if they existed, as distant and uninvolved in human affairs. They sought tranquility and attempted to avoid unnecessary fear, including fear of divine judgment and death.

The Stoics emphasized a rational order permeating the universe and valued living consistently with nature and reason. Their understanding of God, humanity, and reality was not the biblical Creator-creature distinction Paul proclaimed.

Paul therefore encounters more than individual people. He encounters **worldviews**. This matters because two people may ask the same question while arriving at it from entirely different assumptions. One person may reject resurrection because he believes matter is all that exists. Another may reject resurrection because he believes physical existence is inferior to spiritual existence.

The objection sounds similar: "Resurrection does not make sense." But the worldview underneath it differs. Good apologetics tries to understand the root before cutting at the branches.

People Interpret New Information Through Existing Beliefs

Acts 17:18 says that because Paul was preaching Jesus and the resurrection, some Athenians thought:

"He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities."

Paul said one thing. They heard something else. Why? Because they interpreted his message through categories already present in their worldview.

The same thing happens when Christians say:

“Jesus is the Son of God.”

A Mormon may hear one thing. A Muslim another. A biblical Christian means something different from both.

Or consider the statement:

“We are saved by faith.”

Someone may interpret *faith* as intellectual agreement. Another may interpret it as religious sincerity. Another may imagine that faith is a special work performed in order to earn salvation.

Simply using Christian vocabulary does not guarantee Christian communication. We must sometimes stop and ask: **What did the other person hear when I said that?**

Paul Finds a Point of Contact

Acts 17:23 records Paul saying:

“What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”

Paul uses their altar to an unknown god as a point of contact. But notice what he does not do. He does not say:

“You already know the true God, so I am simply giving Him another name.”

He says their worship involves **ignorance**. The altar gives Paul a place to begin the conversation, but it does not mean he accepts their theology. This distinction is extremely important. We can begin with something another person already recognizes without agreeing with the worldview he uses to explain it.

Suppose an atheist says: “Every human being has equal dignity.”

The Christian can say: “I agree.”

That is common ground. But then we can ask:

“What makes every human being objectively valuable?”

Now the worldview question emerges. Agreement on one conclusion does not mean agreement about the foundation supporting it.

The God Paul Proclaims Is the Creator

Paul begins correcting the Athenian worldview immediately. Acts 17:24 says:

“The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth...”

Paul begins with creation. That is not accidental. The Athenians must understand that God is not one more being within the universe. He is the One who made the universe.

This establishes what theologians often call the **Creator-creature distinction**. There is God. And there is everything God created.

God does not belong to the same category as His creation. He is not a larger version of us. He is not part of nature. He does not depend upon the universe. The universe depends upon Him.

Isaiah 42:5 describes God as the One:

“who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it...”

This is the God Paul brings into Athens. Not one god among many. The Creator of all.

God Does Not Need Us

Paul continues in Acts 17:25:

“nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything...”

This attacks another false assumption. Pagan temples often involved people bringing offerings and performing rituals for the gods. Paul says the true God is not needy. God does not depend upon us. We depend upon Him.

Paul continues:

“since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.” - Acts 17:25

That reverses the relationship. We do not sustain God. God sustains us. This is one of the deepest truths of the biblical worldview. Every breath the unbeliever uses to deny God is a breath God gives. Every mind used to reason against God is a mind created and sustained by God. Every universe examined in an attempt to explain reality without God is the universe God made. The creature never becomes independent of the Creator.

Humanity Comes From God

Acts 17:26 says:

“and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth...”

Humanity is not self-created. We belong to a common human family because we share a Creator. Genesis 1:27 gives the deeper foundation:

“God created man in His own image...”

Human dignity therefore does not depend upon intelligence, race, wealth, social usefulness, physical strength, age, or power. Human beings possess dignity because they bear the image of God. This becomes extremely important in apologetic conversations about human rights and equality.

The Christian does not merely say: “I believe everyone should be treated equally.” The Christian has a worldview that explains **why** every human life possesses value.

God Rules History

Acts 17:26 also says God determined:

“their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.”

Paul’s worldview includes divine sovereignty over history. Nations do not exist outside God’s providence. Human history is not a collection of random events moving without meaning. The Creator remains Lord over His creation. This again challenges any worldview that imagines God as distant or irrelevant. The God Paul proclaims is not merely the explanation for how the universe began. He is presently Lord over history.

Humanity Is Completely Dependent Upon God

Paul says in Acts 17:28:

“for in Him we live and move and exist...”

That sentence captures human dependence. We do not possess autonomous existence. Every moment of our lives depends upon God.

Paul then quotes some of their own poets:

“For we also are His children.”

Paul is willing to use something familiar to his audience. But this does not mean he accepts the worldview of the pagan poet. He takes a statement they recognize and places it within the biblical worldview. This gives us an important apologetic principle. We can use truth wherever unbelievers recognize it. If an atheist recognizes objective morality, we can use that. If a secular person recognizes universal human dignity, we can use that. If a materialist values rational consistency, we can use that. We are not claiming that their worldview correctly explains those things. We are showing that the truths they recognize make better sense within God's world.

Paul Challenges Their View of God

Having established that humanity is God's offspring in the sense of being His creation, Paul draws a conclusion.

Acts 17:29 says:

"we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone..."

Think about Paul's reasoning. If humans are creatures of God, how can humans manufacture God? How can something created by human hands adequately represent the One who created the hands? The Athenian worldview begins collapsing under its own assumptions. Their own existence should tell them that God cannot be reduced to an idol. This is an example of the kind of internal critique we introduced in the previous chapter.

Paul is not only declaring: "Your idols are wrong because I say so." He is showing why their view of God is inconsistent with the reality they themselves inhabit.

Internal Critique Asks What Follows

This kind of reasoning can be applied in many modern conversations.

Suppose someone says: "Humans are nothing more than matter produced by unguided processes." Then later says: "Every human being possesses equal and inherent dignity." The Christian can ask: **What is it about matter that creates inherent moral worth?**

Or someone says: "There is no objective truth." Then insists: "Christianity is objectively false." Ask: **If there is no objective truth, in what sense is Christianity objectively false?**

Or suppose someone says: "Everything we think is completely determined by physical causes." Then says: "You should accept my worldview because it is rational." Ask: **If every belief is merely the inevitable product of physical causes, what makes one belief rationally justified and another irrational?**

We are not playing verbal games. We are asking whether a worldview can live consistently with its own claims.

Paul Does Not Stop With Criticism

This is where Christian apologetics must remain Christian. Paul does not merely expose Athenian inconsistency and then congratulate himself.

Acts 17:30 says:

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent.”

There is the evangelistic turn. Paul moves from worldview to accountability. The Athenians do not merely possess incorrect ideas. They are accountable to God. False worship is not simply an intellectual mistake. It is sin. Therefore God commands repentance. This is where apologetics must ultimately lead. The goal is not merely: “Your worldview has a contradiction.” The deeper message is: “You are a creature accountable to the God whose truth you have rejected.” And then the gospel becomes necessary.

Christianity Does Not Invite Jesus Into an Unchanged Worldview

Notice the nature of Paul’s call. He does not tell the Athenians: “Keep your understanding of reality and simply add Jesus to it.”

- He corrects their view of God.
- He corrects their understanding of worship.
- He corrects their understanding of humanity.
- He corrects their understanding of history.
- He corrects their understanding of judgment.
- Then he calls for repentance.

Conversion is not merely adding Jesus to the worldview we already possess. The gospel confronts the entire person. Christ is Lord. Our thinking must change along with our allegiance.

Judgment Gives Urgency to the Conversation

Acts 17:31 explains why repentance is necessary:

“because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness...”

God is not merely Creator. He is the Judge. History is moving somewhere. There will be a final accounting. This gives evangelism urgency. If Christianity were merely one possible philosophy for achieving a meaningful life, rejecting it would be unfortunate but not ultimate.

But if the Creator has fixed a day of judgment, then the issue is far more serious. Everyone will answer to God. This also connects directly to the gospel. The One through whom God judges is the same One whom God raised from the dead.

Paul says God furnished proof:

“by raising Him from the dead.”

The resurrection therefore means more than that Christianity is true. It announces that Jesus Christ is the risen Lord before whom humanity is accountable.

The Resurrection Brings the Conversation to Christ

Paul’s message in Athens moves through a clear progression. God is Creator. Humanity depends upon Him. Idolatry misrepresents Him. God commands repentance. Judgment is coming. Christ has been raised.

Notice that Paul does not remain in abstract philosophy. The conversation reaches history. It reaches judgment. It reaches resurrection. It reaches Christ.

This should sound familiar from Chapter 1. Apologetics serves evangelism. Paul challenges the worldview because he wants the Athenians to understand reality correctly before God. But the destination is not merely a corrected philosophy. The destination is repentance before the risen Christ.

Evidence Is Used Within the Christian Worldview

Paul’s reference to the resurrection also helps us avoid another misunderstanding. A presuppositional approach does not require us to say: “Evidence does not matter.”

Paul appeals to the resurrection. First Corinthians 15 appeals to witnesses. Christianity makes claims that happened publicly in history. What we reject is the idea that evidence must be interpreted from a position that pretends God is irrelevant.

The resurrection is evidence. But its meaning belongs within the Christian worldview. The Creator entered history. Christ died. Christ rose. God has appointed Him as Judge. The facts and their interpretation belong together.

Not Everyone Responds the Same Way

Acts 17:32–34 describes three different responses.

1. Some mocked.
2. Others said: “We shall hear you again concerning this.”
3. And some believed.

That is an important ending. The same sermon produced different responses. Paul did not control them. Some ridiculed the resurrection. Some became curious. Some believed.

Our evangelistic conversations will be similar. One person may reject everything we say. Another may begin thinking. Another may ask to continue the conversation. Another may believe. Faithfulness cannot be measured only by the immediate response. Paul proclaimed the truth. The response belonged to the hearers under the sovereign work of God.

Learning the Athens Pattern

Acts 17 gives us a useful pattern for worldview evangelism. Paul first **observes**. He pays attention to the people and their beliefs. He then **engages**. He reasons with them rather than remaining distant. He **identifies a point of contact**. He refers to something they already recognize. He **corrects their worldview**. Their understanding of God, humanity, worship, and reality is wrong. He **presents the biblical worldview**. God is Creator, Lord, Sustainer, and Judge. He **calls for repentance**. He **proclaims the resurrection**. And then he leaves the response to God.

This is not a formula that every conversation must follow in exactly the same order. It is a biblical example of what happens when evangelism takes worldview seriously.

Reading the Worldview Behind Modern Statements

Imagine someone says: “I am spiritual, but I am not religious.” Do not assume you know what that means.

- Ask: **What do you mean by spiritual?**
- Then: **What do you believe God is like?**
- Then: **How did you come to that conclusion?**

You may discover that the person believes God is an impersonal energy. Now the worldview becomes visible. The issue is not simply whether spirituality is good. The issue is: **Who is God?** Christianity answers with the Creator Paul proclaimed in Athens.

The Materialist

Suppose someone says: “We are just highly evolved animals.” Again, ask questions.

- Does the person mean human beings are entirely material?
- Does he believe human beings nevertheless possess objective dignity?
- Does he believe human reason can discover truth?
- Does he believe people are morally responsible?

Those answers begin revealing the worldview. Then ask whether that worldview can account for the things the person continues to affirm. Christianity offers a different account. Human beings are creatures. They are dependent upon God. They bear His image. They possess dignity. They are capable of knowledge because God created minds in a knowable world. And they are morally accountable to their Creator.

The Religious Pluralist

Suppose someone says: “All religions are different ways of reaching God.” Paul’s approach in Athens does not allow that conclusion. Athens was full of religion. Paul did not say: “Your many expressions of spirituality are different paths to the same reality.” He told them they were ignorant of the God they claimed to worship. He corrected them. Religion itself does not save. Sincerity itself does not save. Only the true God can save, and He has acted through Jesus Christ.

A helpful question might therefore be: **If two religions contradict each other about who God is, can they both be true in the same sense?** Then let the person think.

The Person Who Believes Humanity Is Basically Good

Suppose someone says: “I think people are basically good.”

- Ask: **What do you mean by good?**
- Then: **What standard determines goodness?**
- Then perhaps: **Why do human beings consistently violate even the moral standards they claim to believe?**

The conversation may eventually move from worldview to conscience. That will become increasingly important later in the book. Again, the purpose is not to ask questions forever. We are trying to help the person recognize the world as God describes it.

From Worldview to Christ

One of the dangers in worldview apologetics is becoming so interested in philosophy that the conversation never reaches the gospel. Imagine discussing objective morality for an hour and successfully showing someone that his worldview cannot account for moral obligation. Excellent. But he still needs Christ.

Eventually the conversation needs to move from: **“What explains objective morality?”** to: **“If there really is a moral Creator, how have you and I lived before Him?”**

Now morality becomes personal. If God defines good and evil, then His moral standard does not only condemn murderers, dictators, and people we dislike. It judges us. That opens the door to sin. And sin brings us back to the cross. The God who created us is the God against whom we have sinned. The Judge before whom we will stand is the God who has provided salvation through His Son. Christ died for sins. Christ rose. God commands repentance. That is where worldview apologetics is supposed to go.

The Goal Is Understanding, Not Showing Off

Paul knew the philosophies of his audience well enough to engage them, but the point was never to impress Athens with his intellectual sophistication.

The same must be true for us. Learning apologetics can create pride. We learn arguments. We recognize contradictions. We begin noticing bad reasoning everywhere. Then something dangerous can happen: people become targets rather than people. The goal shifts from helping someone see truth to proving that we are smarter. That is not Christian apologetics.

The person standing in front of us bears God’s image. The reason we challenge his worldview is not because we enjoy watching it collapse. We want him to know the God he has misunderstood. We want him to hear about Christ.

What a Successful Conversation May Look Like

Not every conversation must end with a full gospel presentation. Sometimes a person is not ready to listen for very long. Sometimes one question is enough. Perhaps someone begins by saying: “Christians just believe whatever the Bible says without thinking.” After a short conversation, he leaves realizing that Christians actually have thoughtful reasons for what they believe. That may be progress.

Another person begins: “All religions are basically the same.” After a conversation, she leaves recognizing for the first time that religions make contradictory claims. That may be progress.

Another person begins: “There is no objective morality.” He leaves realizing that he cannot consistently condemn injustice while maintaining that all morality is purely subjective. That may be progress.

1. We plant.
2. We water.
3. God gives the growth.

The goal is faithful movement toward truth and ultimately toward Christ.

Main Truth to Remember

Paul did not walk into Athens and treat the Athenians as people who were religiously neutral. He observed their worship, understood something about their philosophies, recognized where their beliefs were false, and challenged their worldview from the standpoint of the biblical worldview.

He met them where they were without leaving where Scripture stood. That distinction matters.

- We should understand the person’s worldview without surrendering our own.
- We should listen without pretending all beliefs are equally true.
- We should find points of contact without accepting false foundations.
- We should expose contradictions without humiliating people.
- We should present the Christian worldview positively rather than merely destroying alternatives.

And ultimately, we should move toward the Creator, repentance, judgment, the resurrection, and **Jesus Christ**.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. According to Acts 17:16–18, what did Paul observe in Athens, and how did what he saw affect him before he began addressing the city’s beliefs?

2. Why is it important to understand what another person means by words such as *God, faith, truth, or spiritual* before attempting to answer him?
3. In Acts 17:22–23, how does Paul use the altar “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” as a point of contact without accepting the Athenians’ religious worldview as true?
4. According to Acts 17:24–25, what truths about God directly challenge the pagan understanding of the gods?
5. What does Acts 17:26–28 teach about humanity’s dependence upon God, and how does this challenge the idea that people can exist or reason autonomously from their Creator?
6. How does Genesis 1:27 provide a foundation for human dignity that differs from a worldview in which human beings are only the accidental products of material processes?
7. In Acts 17:29, how does Paul expose an inconsistency in the Athenians’ view of God, and how does this illustrate the use of internal critique?
8. Why does Paul move from discussing God as Creator to commanding repentance and warning about judgment in Acts 17:30–31?
9. What do the different responses in Acts 17:32–34 teach us about measuring success in evangelism and apologetics?

10. Think of a statement you have heard such as “I am spiritual but not religious,” “All religions lead to God,” or “We are just evolved animals.” What questions could you ask to discover the worldview underneath that statement before giving an answer?

Chapter 4 — Answering Questions by Asking Better Questions

Primary Text: Mark 10:17–27

The Rich Young Ruler

¹⁷ As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ “You know the commandments, ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰ And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.” ²¹ Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” ²² But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. ²³ And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴ The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶ They were even more astonished and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ Looking at them, Jesus said, “With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

Supporting Texts: Matthew 19:16–26; Luke 18:18–27; Proverbs 18:13; Proverbs 20:5; James 1:19; 1 Peter 3:15

Main Truth: A good question can expose assumptions that a direct answer may never reach. Biblical evangelism requires us to listen carefully, understand what a person means, discover what stands behind his beliefs, and then use those questions to move the conversation toward God’s truth and ultimately toward Jesus Christ.

Begin With the Text

Mark 10:17–27 begins with what appears to be the ideal evangelistic opportunity. A man runs to Jesus, kneels before Him, and asks about eternal life. If someone approached us today and asked how to inherit eternal life, most Christians would immediately begin presenting the gospel. We might move to Romans Road, explain sin and grace, or begin describing the death and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus does something different. Before directly answering the man's question, He asks one of His own. The man has called Him "Good Teacher," so Jesus focuses on the word *good*. He asks why the man calls Him good and reminds him that goodness ultimately belongs to God.

Jesus is not denying His own goodness, nor is He denying His deity. He is forcing the man to think carefully about the word he has used and the assumptions behind it. The man wants to know what good thing he must **do** to receive eternal life. Jesus first makes him confront the much deeper question of what goodness actually is.

That is where this chapter begins. A person may ask us one question while carrying several other beliefs beneath it. If we rush immediately to answer the surface question, we may never discover the deeper problem.

The First Question Is Not Always the Real Question

People rarely enter spiritual conversations as blank slates. They bring history, assumptions, experiences, emotions, and beliefs with them.

Someone asks: "Why would a loving God allow suffering?" That may be primarily an intellectual question about the problem of evil. But perhaps the person recently lost a child. Now the question is not merely philosophical.

Someone asks: "Why should I believe the Bible?" That may be a historical question about manuscripts and transmission. But perhaps what the person really means is: "I do not believe anyone has the right to tell me how to live."

Someone says: "Christians are hypocrites." Perhaps the issue genuinely concerns hypocrisy. Or perhaps hypocrisy is being used as a reason to dismiss Christianity without considering whether Christ Himself is true.

Good evangelism learns not merely to hear words but to listen for what stands behind them. Proverbs 18:13 warns against answering before listening. That principle is especially important in apologetics. We can give a completely accurate answer to a question the person was not actually asking.

Jesus Makes the Man Examine His Definition of Goodness

The rich young ruler approaches Jesus with a fundamentally works-oriented question. He wants to know what he must do. His question already assumes that eternal life may be obtained through some achievement he can perform.

Then he calls Jesus good. Jesus presses on that word.

- What is goodness?
- Who defines it?
- What standard is being used?

These are worldview questions. The man is not merely asking about one religious action. His question reveals a larger understanding of himself, God, morality, and salvation. He seems to believe that goodness is something he can successfully achieve. Jesus is going to expose the weakness of that assumption.

This gives us one of the most useful questions in evangelism: **What do you mean by that?**

Someone says: "I am a good person." Rather than answering immediately, ask: **What do you mean by good?**

Someone says: "Christianity is intolerant." Ask: **What do you mean by intolerant?**

Someone says: "I only believe in science." Ask: **What do you mean by science?**

Someone says: "I am spiritual." Ask: **What do you mean by spiritual?**

The question is simple, but it does something important. It makes the other person define his terms before we respond to them.

Words Often Carry Hidden Assumptions

Many arguments depend upon words that are never defined. Consider the statement: "God is unfair." The word *unfair* carries an entire moral judgment. What standard of fairness is being used? Where did that standard come from? Does the person believe fairness is objectively real? Does that standard also apply to the person making the accusation?

Or consider: "A loving God would never judge people." What does *loving* mean? Why are love and judgment being treated as opposites? Can a loving judge punish evil? Would it actually be loving for God never to judge cruelty, oppression, murder, or abuse?

These questions do not immediately solve the entire issue. They reveal what assumptions are driving it. This is exactly why questions are so useful. They make invisible assumptions visible.

Asking for the Reason Behind the Belief

Once we understand what someone means, a second question becomes extremely useful: **How did you come to that conclusion?** This question moves from definition to justification.

Someone says: "Religion was invented to control people." Ask: **How did you come to that conclusion?**

Someone says: "The Bible has been changed." Ask: **How did you come to that conclusion?**

Someone says: "All religions lead to the same place." Ask: **How did you come to that conclusion?**

Someone says: "There is no God." Ask: **What led you to that conclusion?**

Now the person must move from merely making a claim to explaining why he believes it. This is important because statements are not self-proving.

A confident tone does not make a claim true. A popular idea does not become true because many people repeat it. The person making a claim also bears responsibility for supporting it.

The Burden of Proof Does Not Always Belong to the Christian

Christians sometimes respond to objections as though Christianity is permanently on trial and the unbeliever is permanently the judge.

- Someone says: "Prove God." Immediately the Christian begins producing arguments.
- Someone says: "The Bible is unreliable." Immediately the Christian begins defending manuscript history.
- Someone says: "Christian morality is harmful." Immediately the Christian begins defending Christian ethics.

There may be a time for each of those answers. But first we are allowed to ask: **What reasons do you have for that claim?**

1. If someone says there is no evidence for God, he should be able to explain what he means by evidence and what evidence he has considered.
2. If someone says morality does not require God, he should be able to explain what provides the foundation for objective moral obligation.
3. If someone says all religions are basically the same, he should be able to explain how contradictory teachings can all describe reality accurately.

Questions return responsibility to the person making the assertion. This approach is especially associated with **Greg Koukl**, Christian apologist and founder of Stand to Reason. In his book *Tactics*, Koukl describes what he calls the **Columbo approach**, named after the

television detective who often uncovered important information simply by asking careful questions.

The strength of Koukl's approach is that the Christian does not have to carry the entire burden of the conversation. Rather than immediately giving a long defense every time someone makes a claim, we can ask the person to explain what he means and why he believes it.

Two of Koukl's most useful questions are:

"What do you mean by that?"

and

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

The first question clarifies the claim. The second asks the person to give reasons for it. These questions slow the conversation down and prevent us from answering assumptions that have never been examined.

If someone says, "The Bible has been changed," we do not need to immediately deliver a lecture on manuscripts. We can first ask, **"How did you come to that conclusion?"**

If someone says, "There is no evidence for God," we can ask, **"What do you mean by evidence?"**

If someone says, "All religions are basically the same," we can ask, **"In what way are they the same?"**

Koukl's point is not that questions replace answers. They help us understand the person, clarify the argument, and place the responsibility for defending a claim back on the person who made it. Sometimes the wisest response is not to answer immediately, but simply to ask the person to explain his own statement.

Questions Should Not Become Weapons

There is a danger in learning this method. Questions can be used to understand someone, or they can be used to embarrass someone. The same words can accomplish either purpose depending upon our attitude.

Imagine asking: "How did you come to that conclusion?" with genuine curiosity.

Now imagine asking exactly the same words while smirking and waiting for the person to fail.

The sentence is identical. The spirit is completely different. Mark 10 gives us an important safeguard.

Before Jesus exposes the rich man's deepest problem, the text tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. That matters. Jesus does not expose the man because He enjoys humiliating him. Truth and love are working together.

First Peter 3:15 gives the same balance. Christians are commanded to be prepared to give a defense, but that defense is to be given with gentleness and respect. The goal is not to make another person look foolish. The goal is to help him see truth.

Jesus Uses the Law to Expose Self-Righteousness

After confronting the man's use of the word *good*, Jesus directs him toward God's commandments. He mentions prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, false testimony, and fraud, along with the command to honor father and mother. The man responds that he has kept these things from his youth. That answer reveals his problem. He believes he has succeeded. He does not yet see himself as a guilty sinner who needs grace. This is why simply giving him more information would not address the deepest issue. The man needs his understanding of himself exposed. He thinks he is righteous. Jesus is about to show him otherwise.

The Law Reaches Deeper Than External Behavior

The man can look at several commandments and conclude that he has kept them outwardly.

- He has not murdered.
- He has not committed adultery.
- He has not stolen.

At least that is his assessment of himself. But God's law reaches the heart. The final command Jesus gives exposes what the man truly loves. He is told to release his wealth and follow Christ. The man leaves grieving because he has many possessions. Now the real problem becomes visible. The man who believed he had kept God's commandments is confronted with the god he actually serves. His wealth. Jesus has moved from the surface of his moral life to the allegiance of his heart.

The Command to Sell Everything Is Not a Universal Formula for Salvation

This passage is sometimes misunderstood. Jesus is not teaching that every person must sell every possession in order to earn eternal life. If that were the meaning, salvation would become another work. The command is specifically suited to exposing this man's heart. He has come believing that he has successfully kept God's law.

Jesus reveals that his wealth has become an idol. The man is willing to discuss eternal life. He is willing to discuss commandments. He is willing to call Jesus good. But when following Christ threatens the thing he loves most, he walks away. That is what Jesus needed to expose. Questions and commands have brought the hidden foundation into the open.

Good Questions Dig Below the Surface

Proverbs 20:5 describes the purpose in a person's heart as deep water and the man of understanding as one who draws it out. That is an excellent picture of what questions can accomplish.

People often reveal more than they realize when they speak. Someone says: "I could never believe in a God who tells people how to live." The obvious subject seems to be God. But the deeper issue may be autonomy.

Someone says: "I think everyone should be able to decide morality for himself." The surface subject is morality. The deeper commitment may be that no authority has the right to stand above the individual.

Someone says: "I do not need religion because I am a good person." The surface subject is religion. The deeper issue may be self-righteousness.

Good questions help draw these commitments out.

Clarifying Questions

The first category of questions simply helps us understand what the person means.

Examples include:

- 1. What do you mean by that?**
- 2. Could you explain that a little more?**
- 3. When you use the word God, what do you mean?**
- 4. When you say evidence, what kind of evidence are you looking for?**

5. **When you say Christianity, what do you understand Christianity to teach?**
6. **Let me make sure I understand you. Are you saying that...?**

These questions may seem elementary, but they prevent one of the most common mistakes in apologetics: answering a position the other person does not actually hold. If someone corrects us and says, “No, that is not what I meant,” that is not a defeat. It is progress. Now we understand the person better.

Questions That Ask for Reasons

The next category asks how the person reached the belief.

1. **How did you come to that conclusion?**
2. **What led you to believe that?**
3. **What evidence convinced you?**
4. **Why do you think that explanation is better than the alternatives?**
5. **What is that belief based on?**

These questions reveal whether the person has actually thought through the claim. Sometimes he has. Good. Now we have something substantial to discuss. Sometimes he has not. That can also be useful. A person may discover that a belief he has repeated for years was never actually examined.

Questions That Expose Assumptions

Eventually we begin asking what must already be assumed for an argument to work.

Someone says: “Science disproves miracles.” What is being assumed? Perhaps: **Only natural causes can exist.** But if supernatural causes have been excluded before the evidence is examined, then the conclusion has already been built into the starting point.

Someone says: “A loving God would never punish people.” The assumption may be: **Love and justice cannot coexist.**

Someone says: “Humans should be free to create their own morality.” The assumption may be: **Individual autonomy is the highest authority.**

Someone says: “Christianity is wrong because it judges other beliefs.” The assumption may be: **Judging beliefs is itself morally wrong.**

But that statement is also a judgment about another belief. The assumption needs to be examined.

Questions That Test the Worldview

Once the assumption becomes visible, we can begin asking what happens if the person's worldview is actually followed consistently.

Suppose someone says: "There is no absolute truth." Ask: **Is that statement absolutely true?**

Suppose someone says: "No one should judge anyone else's beliefs." Ask: **Is that a judgment about people who judge beliefs?**

Suppose someone says: "Everything about human thinking is completely determined by physical processes." Ask: **Then what makes your belief the result of rational evaluation rather than simply a predetermined physical event?**

These questions introduce internal critique. We are temporarily asking whether the worldview can survive its own principles. The next chapter will develop this much more deeply. For now, the important habit is learning to notice when a person's conclusion conflicts with his foundation.

Randy Newman and Questioning Evangelism

Another helpful voice in this area is **Randy Newman**, a Christian author and evangelist best known for his book *Questioning Evangelism*. Newman spent many years working in campus ministry and became especially interested in how Jesus often used questions to make people think rather than simply giving immediate answers.

Newman's emphasis is slightly different from Greg Koukl's. Koukl often uses questions to clarify a claim, uncover assumptions, and place the burden of proof back on the person making the assertion. Newman focuses more on how questions can help people think through spiritual issues personally and can make evangelistic conversations more natural.

Instead of treating evangelism as a speech that one person delivers while the other person listens, Newman encourages us to engage the other person in the process of thinking.

Suppose someone asks: "**How could a loving God judge people?**" We could immediately begin explaining divine justice. Sometimes that may be appropriate. But we could also ask: "**What do you think a loving God should do with evil?**" Now the person has to think about his own assumptions. If he says: "**He should stop it.**" We might ask: "**Do you think it is good for God to judge evil?**"

The conversation has changed. The person who originally assumed that love and judgment are opposites may begin to see that justice can actually be an expression of goodness.

This is one of Newman's central insights: a good question can help a person discover the weakness of his own assumptions rather than simply hearing us tell him that he is wrong.

Questions also help us listen better. Someone may ask a theological question, but there may be something deeper behind it. A person asking about suffering may have experienced terrible loss. Someone criticizing Christians may have been hurt by a church. Someone questioning the Bible may actually be struggling with the authority Scripture claims over his life.

Newman's approach reminds us not to rush past the person in order to give the answer. Questions do not replace truth, Scripture, or gospel proclamation. Eventually we must explain what Christianity teaches. But questions can help prepare the conversation for that explanation. They allow the other person to participate in the reasoning, reveal what he really believes, and often make the path toward Christ much clearer.

Why “How Did You Come to That Conclusion?” Often Works Better Than “Why?”

The word *why* is not wrong, but it can sometimes sound accusatory. Imagine someone says: “I stopped believing in Christianity.” Then we respond: “Why?” Depending upon tone, it may sound as though we are challenging the person before he has explained anything.

A softer version is: **What led you to that conclusion?**

Or: **How did you come to see it that way?**

The purpose is the same. We want to understand the reason. But wording and tone matter because we are speaking to people, not merely examining arguments. James 1:19 reminds believers to be quick to hear and slow to speak. That principle belongs in apologetics.

Not Every Question Should Be Challenged Immediately

Suppose someone tells us: “My daughter died, and I do not understand how God could let that happen.” There is a worldview question present. There is a problem-of-evil discussion we could have. But wisdom recognizes that this may not be the moment for immediate philosophical analysis. Perhaps the first response should be: **Tell me about your daughter.** Or simply: **What happened?**

The same Christian worldview is still true. God remains sovereign. Objective evil still requires an account. Suffering still raises theological questions. But biblical wisdom asks what this particular person needs at this particular moment. Questions should help us understand not only beliefs but people.

The Rich Young Ruler Shows That the Heart Matters

Return to Mark 10. The man begins with an intellectual and religious question. By the end of the encounter, his heart has been exposed. He wants eternal life. But he does not want Christ more than his possessions. The issue was never merely whether he knew the correct answer to a religious question. His allegiance was the problem.

This reminds us of Romans 1. Humanity's problem is not merely ignorance. Sin affects what we love, what we worship, and what we are willing to accept as ultimate. A good apologetic conversation must therefore recognize that intellectual objections may sometimes protect deeper commitments. That does not mean every objection is dishonest. It means human beings are whole persons. Our thinking, desires, loves, and loyalties are connected.

Jesus Does Not Manipulate the Man

One of the most striking moments in Mark 10 is the man's departure. He leaves grieving. Jesus does not run after him and lower the demand. He does not change the message because the man is disappointed. He does not attempt to manufacture an emotional decision. He tells the truth. The man walks away.

That is sobering for evangelism.

- We care about people.
- We plead with people.
- We want them to believe.

But we cannot manufacture conversion. Sometimes a person will understand what Christ demands and reject Him. Our responsibility is faithfulness.

Salvation Is Impossible for Man

After the rich man leaves, Jesus explains how difficult it is for those who trust in wealth to enter the kingdom. The disciples are astonished and ask who can be saved.

Jesus' answer brings the entire passage into focus. What is impossible with man is possible with God. That statement guards us from a dangerous misunderstanding of evangelism.

The rich man began by asking what **he could do**. By the end of the conversation, Jesus has brought the disciples to the impossibility of human salvation apart from God.

That movement is crucial. The sinner cannot rescue himself by works. The evangelist cannot rescue him by technique. The apologist cannot rescue him through a flawless argument. God saves.

That does not make questions, arguments, evidence, or gospel proclamation unnecessary. It puts them in their proper place. We speak. God gives life.

Questions Must Eventually Lead to Answers

There is another danger we need to avoid. Once Christians discover the power of questions, they may become hesitant to ever make a positive statement. Every objection receives another question. Every claim receives another question. Eventually the conversation becomes an interrogation.

That is not the goal.

Questions serve truth. At some point, we must speak. We must explain what Christianity teaches. We must present the biblical worldview. We must proclaim Christ. Jesus asked the rich man a question, but He did not only ask questions. He taught him. He confronted him. He commanded him.

Paul asked and answered. Peter commanded believers to give a defense. Questions are tools. They are not the message.

Moving From Questions to the Christian Worldview

Suppose someone says: "I do not need God to be moral." You ask: **What do you mean by morality?** Then: **Do you believe some things are objectively wrong?** The person says yes. Then: **What makes them objectively wrong?** Now you begin discovering the foundation. Perhaps the person cannot give an account that supports objective morality. At that point, do not simply say: "Your worldview fails."

Present the Christian account.

You might explain that Christianity grounds morality in the character of the holy God and understands human beings as morally accountable creatures made in His image.

Then make the issue personal. **If God really is the moral standard, how have you and I lived before Him?** Now the conversation begins moving toward conscience, sin, and gospel. That is where apologetics is supposed to go.

The Five-Question Progression

As the book continues, five questions will become especially useful.

The first is a question of clarification: **What do you mean by that?**

The second asks for the foundation: **How did you come to that conclusion?**

The third seeks the assumption: **What has to be true for that argument to work?**

The fourth tests the worldview: **If that were true, what would follow?**

And the fifth begins presenting Christianity positively: **Can I show you how Christianity makes sense of what you are trying to explain?**

These questions are not a script. Real conversations will not always follow this order. Sometimes only one is necessary. Sometimes none is appropriate. But together they provide a useful way to think.

- Clarify.
- Understand.
- Expose.
- Test.
- Present.
- And eventually:

Bring the conversation to Christ.

A Conversation About “All Religions”

Imagine someone says: “All religions basically teach the same thing.” Instead of immediately correcting him, begin: **In what way do you think they are the same?** Perhaps he says: “They all teach people to be good.” Then ask: **Do Christianity and Islam teach the same thing about who Jesus is?** No. Christianity identifies Him as the divine Son and risen Lord. Islam rejects that understanding. Then ask: **Can Jesus be God and not God in the same sense at the same time?** Now the contradiction becomes clear. Then move positively. Christianity is not primarily the message that we should become good enough to reach God. The gospel announces that sinners could not save themselves, so God acted through Christ. The question has opened the door to the gospel.

A Conversation About “My Truth”

Someone says: “You have your truth and I have mine.” Ask: **What do you mean by your truth?** Perhaps the person really means: “You have your opinion and I have mine.” Now we can clarify the difference between opinion and truth. Then ask: **If Jesus actually rose from the dead, would that be true only for Christians or would it be something that happened in history?** The person must now confront the distinction between personal preference and objective reality. Again, the goal is not merely to expose relativism. The destination is the risen Christ.

A Conversation About Being a Good Person

Someone says: “I do not need Christianity. I am a good person.” This brings us directly back to Mark 10. Ask: **What do you mean by good?** Then: **What standard are you using?** Then: **Have you always lived according to even your own standard?** Eventually: **Would you be willing to see how Jesus defines the problem?** Now the conversation can move toward God’s law, sin, grace, and Christ. The questions have not avoided the gospel. They have prepared the way for it.

A Conversation About Morality Without God

Someone says: “I can be moral without religion.” Be careful with the response. Do not say: “Atheists cannot be moral.” That is not the claim we need to make. Unbelievers can behave morally in many ways. Romans 2 helps explain why human beings possess moral awareness. The apologetic question is different: **What makes morality objectively binding within your worldview?** The issue is not whether the atheist can perform a moral action. The issue is whether his worldview can account for the objective moral standard he uses. That distinction is crucial.

The Goal Is Not to Become Difficult to Talk To

A person trained in apologetics should become a better listener, not a more exhausting conversational partner. If every casual statement receives five philosophical questions, something has gone wrong. Wisdom matters.

Sometimes someone says: “That movie was terrible.” You do not need to ask: “What is your epistemological foundation for aesthetic judgment?” Normal conversation is still normal conversation. The purpose of these tools is to help when spiritual and worldview issues arise. We want questions to open conversations, not make people afraid to speak around us.

Main Truth to Remember

Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler shows us that the first question asked is not always the deepest issue. The man asks about eternal life. Jesus exposes his understanding of goodness. The law exposes his self-righteousness. The final command exposes his idol. And when the disciples ask who can be saved, Jesus brings the entire discussion to God's saving power. That is an excellent picture of biblical evangelism.

- We listen beneath the words.
- We ask what a person means.
- We ask how he reached his conclusions.
- We look for the assumptions beneath those conclusions.
- We use questions to expose inconsistencies and deeper commitments.

But we do not ask questions merely to win conversations. We want to bring people to truth. And ultimately, we want to bring the conversation to **Jesus Christ**.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. In Mark 10:17–27, what does the rich young ruler's original question reveal about how he may have understood eternal life and human achievement?
2. Why does Jesus focus on the man's use of the word *good*, and what does this teach us about clarifying important terms in evangelistic conversations?
3. What does the man's claim that he has kept the commandments reveal about his understanding of himself before God?
4. Why does Jesus specifically confront the man's possessions, and what does his reaction reveal about the deeper allegiance of his heart?
5. How does the statement that Jesus looked at the man and loved him shape the way Christians should use challenging questions in apologetics?

6. What is the difference between asking **“What do you mean by that?”** and **“How did you come to that conclusion?”** What does each question help us discover?
7. Why does a person who makes a claim such as “All religions are basically the same” or “There is no evidence for God” also carry a burden to support that claim?
8. How can questions be used to expose an assumption without becoming a method of embarrassing or attacking another person?
9. According to the end of Mark 10:17–27, what does Jesus teach about the human ability to save oneself, and how should this affect our confidence in evangelistic methods or apologetic arguments?
10. Think of one spiritual objection you have heard recently. What questions could you ask first to clarify the person’s meaning, discover the reason for the belief, identify the underlying assumption, and eventually move the conversation toward Christ?

Chapter 5 — Testing a Worldview From the Inside

Primary Text: 2 Corinthians 10:3–5

³ For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵ We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,

Supporting Texts: Proverbs 26:4–5; Colossians 2:8; Romans 1:18–25; Proverbs 1:7; Psalm 36:9

Main Truth: Biblical apologetics does more than answer isolated objections. It examines the foundation beneath a worldview, asks whether that worldview can consistently account for the things it claims to know, and then presents the Christian worldview as the necessary foundation for truth, reason, morality, knowledge, and human experience.

Arguments Have Foundations

In the previous chapters, we learned to listen for the worldview beneath a person's words. We also learned to ask questions that clarify what someone means and how he reached his conclusion. Now we go one step deeper. Suppose someone says, "I do not believe in God because science explains reality." We could immediately begin discussing scientific evidence. We could talk about the origin of the universe, fine-tuning, DNA, or the limits of scientific explanation. Those discussions may be useful. But there is another question we can ask: **What must already be true for science itself to be possible?** That question changes the conversation. Or suppose someone says, "I do not need God to know that murder is wrong." Again, we might immediately begin arguing for the existence of objective morality. But we can first ask: **What makes murder objectively wrong within your worldview?** Now we are no longer dealing only with the conclusion. We are examining the foundation that makes the conclusion possible. That is the heart of worldview apologetics.

Paul Speaks About Destroying Arguments

Second Corinthians 10 does not describe Christianity as intellectually passive. Paul speaks of destroying "speculations" and every lofty thing raised against the knowledge of God. This does not mean Christians should become argumentative people who enjoy conflict. Paul is describing the spiritual nature of opposition to God.

- Ideas matter.
- Arguments matter.

- Beliefs matter.

A false belief about God does not remain isolated in the mind. It affects how a person understands himself, morality, truth, authority, sin, salvation, and the world around him.

Paul therefore speaks about taking:

“every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”— 2 Corinthians 10:5,

Notice the scope. Every thought.

Christ is not Lord only over church attendance, prayer, and explicitly religious subjects. He is Lord over human thinking itself. That includes apologetics.

Christ Is Lord Over Our Method

One of the dangers in defending Christianity is that we may attempt to defend Christ by reasoning as though Christ were not Lord. We can subtly accept the unbeliever’s starting point and then attempt to climb back toward Christianity. But if Scripture says Christ is Lord over every thought, the Christian cannot temporarily suspend His lordship in order to appear neutral.

Proverbs 1:7 says:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.”

The verse does not say that autonomous human reason is the beginning of knowledge and that belief in God may be added later if enough evidence accumulates. The fear of the Lord is the beginning.

Psalms 36:9 expresses the same principle:

“In Your light we see light.”

God is not simply one fact among millions of other facts. He is the One who gives all facts their existence and meaning.

The Worldview Is the Foundation Beneath the Argument

Imagine two houses. From the street, both may look impressive. They may have walls, windows, doors, furniture, and carefully decorated rooms. But eventually the strength of the house depends upon the foundation beneath it. Worldviews work similarly. A person may hold many beliefs that appear reasonable:

- Human beings have dignity.
- Science gives us real knowledge.
- Logic is universal.
- Racism is wrong.
- Truth matters.
- People should follow evidence.
- Murder is objectively evil.
- Human beings are responsible for what they believe and do.

Those beliefs are like rooms in the house. The deeper question is: **What foundation supports them?** A worldview must do more than contain individual beliefs. It must be able to account for them.

Being Able to Use Something Is Not the Same as Accounting for It

This distinction is essential. Presuppositional apologetics does not say that an atheist cannot reason. It does not say that an atheist cannot perform science. It does not say that an atheist cannot recognize moral truth. It does not say that an unbeliever knows nothing. Romans 1 actually explains why unbelievers know so much. They live in God's world and receive His revelation, even while suppressing the truth about Him.

Paul says humanity:

"suppress[es] the truth in unrighteousness."— Romans 1:18,

A person can therefore use logic while denying the God who provides the foundation for rationality. He can recognize moral obligation while denying the God whose character grounds morality. He can perform science while denying the Creator who sustains the orderly universe science investigates. The question is not whether he can **use** these things. The question is whether his worldview can **account for** them.

What Is an Internal Critique?

An internal critique temporarily examines a worldview according to its own principles. We ask: **If this worldview were true, what would follow?** We do not accept the worldview as true. We step inside it for the sake of testing whether it can remain consistent. Suppose someone says: "There is no objective morality." For the sake of discussion, grant the claim. Then ask: **If there is no objective morality, can anything be objectively evil?** If the person says no, then he cannot consistently turn around and say: "Christianity is objectively immoral." He may dislike Christianity. He may prefer another moral system. But if morality

is entirely subjective, he has lost the foundation for saying Christianity is objectively wrong. If he insists that some things really are objectively evil, then his original claim has changed. That is internal critique.

Proverbs 26 and Answering a Person According to His Folly

Proverbs gives us an interesting pair of statements.

“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will also be like him.” — Proverbs 26:4,

Immediately afterward:

“Answer a fool as his folly deserves, that he not be wise in his own eyes.” — Proverbs 26:5,

These verses are not contradictory. They present two sides of wise response. We must not accept false assumptions as our own. In that sense, we do **not** answer according to folly. But we may also enter the person’s reasoning for the purpose of exposing where it leads. In that sense, we **do** answer the folly on its own terms. This gives us a useful apologetic movement. We can say: **“Let us assume that for a moment. If your position is true, what happens next?”** Then follow the worldview to its consequences.

Consider Moral Relativism

Suppose someone says: “Morality is relative. There are no universal moral standards.” Do not begin with a speech. Ask: **What do you mean by relative?** Then: **Do you believe slavery was wrong even in societies that approved of it?** If the answer is yes, ask: **Was it merely wrong according to your personal preference, or was it actually wrong?** If the person says it was actually wrong, then he is affirming something stronger than moral relativism allows. His stated worldview says: There is no objective morality. His moral judgment says: Some actions are objectively wrong. The tension is now visible. The purpose is not to shout, “Got you!” The purpose is to help the person recognize that he is living according to realities his worldview has difficulty explaining.

The Goal Is Not to Humiliate

Internal critique can easily become arrogant if we forget why we are doing it. When someone realizes that his position is inconsistent, the Christian should not celebrate his embarrassment. A better response might be: “That is one of the reasons I have difficulty with moral relativism. We seem unable to live consistently as though nothing is really right

or wrong.” That changes the tone. Now we are inviting the person to think with us rather than treating him as an opponent to crush.

First Peter 3:15 remains the controlling attitude:

“with gentleness and reverence.”

Truth does not need arrogance to defend it.

The Negative Side of Presuppositional Apologetics

One part of the apologetic task is negative. We ask whether an unbelieving worldview can account for the things upon which it depends. Can it account for:

- logic?
- knowledge?
- objective morality?
- the reliability of human reasoning?
- the uniformity of nature?
- human dignity?
- truth?
- meaning?
- moral responsibility?

We are asking whether the worldview has enough foundation to support its own claims. But this cannot be the entire argument. If all we do is destroy, we have not completed the task.

The Positive Side of Presuppositional Apologetics

Christian apologetics must also explain how the Christian worldview accounts for the realities under discussion. If someone cannot account for objective morality, we should not stop with: “Your worldview fails.” We must explain why morality makes sense in Christianity. If someone cannot explain why human beings possess inherent dignity, we should show why human dignity makes sense if humanity bears God’s image. If someone has difficulty explaining why the universe is orderly enough for science, we should explain why an orderly creation is exactly what Christianity expects.

This gives us two movements: **Expose the failure of the unbelieving worldview.** Then: **Present the Christian worldview positively.** Both are necessary.

The Impossibility of the Contrary

Presuppositional apologists sometimes speak about the **impossibility of the contrary**. The phrase may sound technical, but the basic idea is simple. Christianity is not merely one possible explanation among many equally self-sufficient explanations. The Christian worldview provides the necessary foundation for the very things we depend upon when reasoning about reality. Without God, we do not simply lose one religious belief. We lose the sufficient foundation for knowledge, logic, morality, human dignity, rational responsibility, and an orderly creation. This does not mean that unbelievers stop using those things. They use them constantly. The argument is that they can do so because they continue living in God's world. Their professed worldview does not erase the reality God created.

Logic

Consider the laws of logic. We expect a statement and its contradiction not to be true in the same sense at the same time. We depend upon logical consistency in every argument. But what kind of thing is a law of logic?

- You cannot weigh it.
- You cannot photograph it.
- It does not belong only to Texas, Europe, or Asia.
- It is not merely a personal preference.

We expect logical laws to apply universally. The question becomes: **What worldview makes sense of universal, immaterial, rational laws?** Christianity begins with an eternal, rational God who does not contradict Himself and who created a rationally ordered world. Human reasoning makes sense because humans are creatures made in His image. We are not claiming that God submits to some higher authority called "logic." Rather, logical consistency reflects the rational character of God and the order of the reality He created.

Science and the Order of Nature

Science depends upon regularity. Experiments performed today are expected to tell us something about what will happen under comparable conditions tomorrow. Scientific laws assume that nature behaves in consistent patterns. But why should we expect that? Why should the future resemble the past? The Christian worldview gives us a foundation.

- God created the universe.
- God sustains it.
- God is faithful.

The universe is therefore not an ultimately chaotic accident that somehow happens to behave rationally. Scientific investigation makes sense because creation is orderly. This does not mean every scientific theory is correct or that Christians possess instant answers to every scientific question. It means that the basic possibility of science fits naturally within the Christian worldview.

Ask the Question Like a Normal Person

Understanding philosophy does not mean we need to sound like philosophy textbooks. Do not ask your coworker: “What are the transcendental preconditions necessary for induction?” Ask: **Why do you think the universe is orderly enough for science to work?** Or: **Why should we expect the laws of nature tomorrow to behave as they did today?** The question is essentially the same. Good apologetics translates deep ideas into normal conversation. If we understand the argument only in technical language, we probably do not yet understand it well enough to use naturally.

Objective Morality

Now consider morality. An unbeliever may say:

- “Racism is wrong.”
- “Child abuse is evil.”
- “Human trafficking is immoral.”
- “People deserve justice.”

Christians can agree. The question is not whether unbelievers can recognize moral truths. They clearly can. The question is: **What makes those things objectively wrong?**

Suppose someone says morality comes from society. Ask: **Was slavery morally right when societies approved of it?** If not, then society cannot be the ultimate moral standard.

Suppose morality comes from evolution. Evolution may describe why certain behaviors developed or contributed to survival. But describing why a behavior exists is different from explaining why someone **ought** to behave morally. Survival and moral goodness are not identical concepts.

Suppose someone says morality comes from empathy. Empathy may influence moral behavior. But what happens when two people’s feelings of empathy conflict? The question remains: What makes one action actually right and another actually wrong?

The Christian Foundation for Morality

Christianity gives a different answer. Morality is grounded in the character of God.

- God is holy.
- God is righteous.
- God is just.
- God is good.

His commands are not random rules created without reason, nor is God subject to a moral law higher than Himself. Goodness reflects who God is.

Human beings are morally accountable because they are creatures made by Him and responsible to Him. Therefore, when someone says that murder or oppression is objectively evil, the Christian can say: "I agree. My worldview gives me a reason why. What does yours provide?" That is a worldview conversation.

Human Dignity

Now consider the statement: "Every human being possesses equal dignity." Again, Christianity agrees. But why?

If human beings are ultimately accidental arrangements of matter produced through unguided processes, what makes every person objectively valuable?

1. Is value based upon intelligence? Then highly intelligent people would possess more value.
2. Is it based upon usefulness? Then the disabled, elderly, or dependent could possess less value.
3. Is it based upon consciousness? Then difficult questions immediately arise about infants or people with severe cognitive impairment.

Christianity gives a different answer.

Genesis 1:27 says:

"God created man in His own image."

Human dignity is therefore not earned. It is given by the Creator. The newborn child, the disabled adult, the elderly person, the wealthy executive, the prisoner, the atheist, and the Christian all possess human dignity because they bear God's image.

Knowledge

Now ask an even larger question: **How do we know anything at all?** Christianity gives us a world in which knowledge is possible. God created reality. God created human minds. God created us to interact with His world. God communicates. God is truthful. Therefore, there is a meaningful relationship between the human mind and the world it seeks to understand.

Again, Proverbs 1:7 tells us:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.”

Christianity does not answer every possible question about epistemology in one verse. But it gives us the kind of universe in which genuine knowledge makes sense.

The Unbeliever Really Does Know Things

We must keep saying this because it prevents a serious misunderstanding. Presuppositional apologetics does not teach: “Atheists cannot know anything.” Of course they can. An atheist can know mathematical truth. He can know that fire burns. He can know another person exists. He can recognize injustice. He can perform extraordinary scientific research. The question is not whether unbelievers possess knowledge. The question is whether their stated worldview can provide an adequate foundation for the knowledge they possess.

Romans 1 tells us why the unbeliever can know.

1. He lives in God’s creation.
2. He receives God’s revelation.
3. He bears God’s image.
4. He suppresses the truth about the One who makes his knowledge possible.

Borrowed Capital

A useful illustration is **borrowed capital**. Imagine a businessman who publicly insists that he has no need of a bank while secretly using money borrowed from the bank every day to keep his company operating. The business runs. But not because his claim is true. It runs because he continues depending upon the very thing he denies needing. Something similar happens in unbelieving worldviews. A person may reject God while continuing to use:

- logic,
- objective morality,
- rational inference,
- human dignity,

- scientific regularity,
- truth.

The Christian claim is that these things belong naturally within God's world. The unbeliever can use them because he cannot actually escape the world God created.

The Transcendental Question

One question captures much of this method: **What must be true in order for this to be possible?**

- If we are discussing science, ask: **What must be true for science to be possible?**
- If discussing objective morality: **What must be true for objective moral obligations to exist?**
- If discussing knowledge: **What must be true for human beings to know anything?**
- If discussing human dignity: **What must be true for every human being to possess equal objective worth?**

This is transcendental reasoning in simple form. Rather than asking only whether something exists, we ask what conditions must exist for that thing to make sense.

Do Not Turn One Question Into a Trick

A common mistake is learning one presuppositional question and using it against everyone.

Someone learns: "How do you account for logic?"

- Then every conversation becomes: "How do you account for logic?"
- An atheist mentions suffering. "How do you account for logic?"
- A Mormon discusses revelation. "How do you account for logic?"
- Someone grieving asks where God was when her husband died. "How do you account for logic?"

That is not wisdom. Presuppositional apologetics is a worldview method, not a magic sentence. The right question depends upon the person and the issue.

A Simple Internal Critique

The process can remain simple. First, identify the claim. **What does the person actually believe?** Then identify the foundation. **Why does he believe it?**

Next, grant the position temporarily. **If that worldview were true, what would follow?** Then look for tension. Can the worldview account for the things it needs in order to make its own argument? Finally, present Christianity positively. **How does the Christian worldview make sense of the same issue?** That final step is essential.

Do Not Stop After Tearing Down

Suppose an atheist admits that he has difficulty grounding objective morality. Do not end the conversation with: “See? Atheism fails.” Explain Christianity. You might say: “Christianity explains why moral obligations are real because goodness is grounded in God’s character and we are creatures accountable to Him.”

Suppose someone recognizes the difficulty of explaining human dignity through strict materialism. Explain: “Christianity says every human being has dignity because each person bears God’s image.”

Suppose someone struggles to explain why science assumes an orderly universe. Explain: “Christianity gives us reason to expect order because a faithful Creator sustains His creation.”

Negative critique and positive presentation belong together.

Then Move Toward the Gospel

There is still another step. Imagine someone agrees: “Yes, objective morality seems to fit Christianity better.” That is not conversion. Now the moral question becomes personal. You might say: “If God really is the foundation of moral law, then that standard does not only help us identify evil in other people. It also judges you and me.” Now we have moved from philosophy to conscience.

Romans 3:23 says:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The moral law that helps us identify injustice also reveals our own guilt. And now the gospel becomes necessary.

1. Christ died for sinners.
2. Christ rose.
3. Salvation is by grace.
4. Repent and believe.

The transcendental argument is not the gospel. It serves the gospel.

A Conversation About Morality

Imagine someone says: "I do not believe in God, but obviously some things are just wrong." A good beginning might be: "I agree. What do you think makes those things objectively wrong?" Perhaps the person says: "Society decides." Ask: "Could society approve something that is still wrong?" If the answer is yes, society cannot be ultimate. After exploring the issue, present the Christian account. "Christianity says morality makes sense because there is a holy Creator whose character defines goodness." Then move further: "But if God's moral standard is real, it also judges us. Have we lived according to it?" Now apologetics has moved toward evangelism.

A Conversation About Science

Someone says: "Science explains the world. We do not need God." Do not attack science. Christians should value genuine scientific investigation. Ask: "Why do you think the universe is orderly enough for science to work?" Or: "Why should we expect nature to continue behaving consistently?" Then explain the Christian worldview. "Christianity gives me reason to expect an orderly universe because it was created and is sustained by a rational and faithful God." The goal is not to prove every point in five minutes. Sometimes one question is enough to make someone rethink an assumption he has never examined.

A Conversation About Human Value

Someone says: "Every person deserves equal respect." Agree. Then ask: "What do you think gives every human being equal value?" Perhaps the person answers: "Because we are human." Then ask: "What is it about being human that creates objective value?" Eventually explain: "Christianity says human value does not depend upon intelligence, usefulness, health, wealth, or power. We have dignity because we are made in God's image." Now the Christian worldview is not merely criticizing. It is explaining.

A Conversation About Truth

Someone says: "There is no absolute truth in religion." Ask: "Is that statement absolutely true?" Perhaps the person corrects himself: "I mean nobody can know which religion is true." Ask: "How did you come to know that nobody can know?" Again, the goal is not mockery. We want the person to recognize that his claim may require the very kind of knowledge he says no one can possess. Then present Christianity as a claim about reality rather than a private preference.

A Conversation About Materialism

Suppose someone says: “We are nothing more than matter and chemical reactions.” Ask: “Are your thoughts also only chemical reactions?” If yes, continue: “Then is your belief in materialism something you rationally concluded, or simply the chemical event your brain was determined to produce?” The issue is not that brain chemistry is irrelevant to thinking. The issue is whether strict materialism can account for rational evaluation, truth, and responsibility for beliefs.

Christianity gives a different account. Human beings are creatures made by a rational God, capable of genuine thought and responsible for what they believe and do.

The Purpose of All of This

It is easy to become fascinated with arguments. Logic is interesting. Philosophy is interesting. Worldview analysis is interesting. But apologetics is not an intellectual sport. Paul speaks about arguments raised against the **knowledge of God**. The ultimate issue is God. The person standing in front of us is not merely holding an inconsistent philosophy. He is a creature made by God, living in God’s world, responsible to God, and in need of reconciliation with God. That is why every apologetic method must eventually serve evangelism. We expose false foundations because we want people to see truth. We present the Christian worldview because it is true. And we proclaim Christ because sinners need more than a better philosophy. They need a Savior.

Main Truth to Remember

Biblical apologetics does not merely ask whether an individual argument is persuasive. It asks what worldview stands beneath the argument and whether that worldview can consistently support the things upon which it depends. We do not surrender the Christian worldview in order to examine unbelief. Christ remains Lord over every thought.

1. We listen carefully.
2. We clarify the claim.
3. We identify the foundation.
4. We ask what follows if the worldview is true.
5. We expose inconsistency where it appears.
6. Then we present the Christian worldview positively.

And eventually, we move toward the deepest issue of all. The God who makes knowledge, morality, reason, and human dignity possible is also the God against whom we have sinned. The answer to that problem is not a better argument. It is **Jesus Christ**.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. According to 2 Corinthians 10:3–5, what kinds of things does Paul describe as being raised against the knowledge of God, and what does it mean to take every thought captive to Christ?
2. How should Proverbs 1:7, which says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, affect the starting point of Christian apologetics?
3. What is the difference between an unbeliever being able to **use** logic, morality, or scientific reasoning and being able to **account for** those things within his worldview?
4. In your own words, what is an internal critique, and why does temporarily asking “If your worldview were true, what would follow?” help expose inconsistencies?
5. How do Proverbs 26:4–5 illustrate both refusing to adopt an unbelieving assumption and temporarily examining where that assumption leads?
6. Why does moral relativism have difficulty consistently condemning actions as objectively evil, and how might you expose that problem through questions rather than accusation?
7. What does it mean to say that the Christian worldview provides the preconditions for logic, science, morality, knowledge, and human dignity?
8. Why is it insufficient merely to show that another worldview has problems? What positive account should the Christian also provide?

9. Choose one area—logic, morality, science, human dignity, or knowledge. How would you ask a simple conversational question that gets beneath the surface and examines its worldview foundation?

10. Why must an apologetic conversation eventually move beyond worldview critique to sin, accountability, Christ, repentance, and faith?

Chapter 6 — The Law, the Conscience, and the Guilty Sinner

Primary Text: Romans 2:12–16

¹² For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; ¹³ for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. ¹⁴ For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

Supporting Texts: Romans 3:19–24; Romans 7:7–13; Exodus 20:1–17; Mark 10:17–27; Romans 5:8; Romans 6:23

Main Truth: The moral law does more than help us argue that objective morality exists. It exposes our own guilt. The conscience bears witness that human beings are morally accountable, and the law brings that accountability into focus so that the sinner can understand why he needs Jesus Christ.

From Morality to Personal Guilt

In the previous chapter, we examined objective morality as part of a worldview. If someone says that murder, abuse, racism, or oppression is truly wrong, we can ask what makes those actions objectively wrong rather than merely personally disliked. That is an important apologetic question. But suppose the person eventually agrees that objective morality makes more sense if there is a holy God.

What happens next? We have not yet reached the gospel. A person can believe that God provides the foundation for morality and still think that he himself is morally acceptable before God. He may say, “I believe in God. I just try to be a good person.” At that point, the conversation needs to change. The question is no longer only: **What makes morality possible?** It becomes: **How have you lived according to the moral standard you recognize?** The moral law does not only point upward toward a moral Lawgiver. It also points inward. And when it does, the conscience begins to speak.

The Conscience Bears Witness

Romans 2 explains that even Gentiles who did not possess the Mosaic Law in the same manner as Israel still demonstrated an awareness of moral obligation. Paul says their conscience bears witness, while their thoughts alternately accuse or defend them. That description is remarkably close to ordinary human experience.

- We do something wrong and attempt to justify it.
- We feel guilt and try to silence it.
- We condemn another person for conduct we excuse in ourselves.
- We say:
 - “That was unfair.”
 - “You should not have done that.”
 - “He had no right.”
 - “That was wrong.”

Those statements reveal something about us. Human beings do not naturally live as though morality were merely equivalent to personal preference. We speak in terms of **ought** and **ought not**. And those words require explanation.

“Ought” Is More Than Preference

Consider the difference between two statements. “I prefer chocolate ice cream.” “You should not torture children for entertainment.” The first is a personal preference. Someone else may prefer vanilla, and neither person has committed a moral offense. The second statement is completely different. When we say that someone should not torture a child, we do not merely mean: “I personally dislike child torture.” We mean that the act is wrong even if the person committing it enjoys it. We mean he **ought not** do it. That is moral obligation. Romans 2 helps us understand why human beings think this way. We were created by God and live in His moral world. Even where the written law has not been possessed in the same covenantal form, human beings reveal an awareness of moral accountability. The conscience testifies.

The Conscience Is Not the Final Authority

This does not mean the conscience is infallible.

- A person can possess a poorly informed conscience.
- A conscience can be shaped by false beliefs.
- Repeated sin can dull moral sensitivity.
- Religious traditions can bind the conscience where God has not bound it.

Culture can train people to accept conduct Scripture condemns or condemn conduct Scripture permits. So Christianity does not teach: **“Whatever your conscience tells you must be right.”** The conscience is not the lawgiver. God is.

The conscience bears witness to moral responsibility, but Scripture reveals the true standard by which our lives are judged. That distinction matters in evangelism. We can appeal to conscience without making human feelings the ultimate authority.

Romans 1 and Romans 2 Belong Together

Romans 1 taught us that humanity knows God and suppresses the truth. Romans 2 adds another dimension. Human beings also live with moral awareness.

- They accuse.
- They defend.
- They judge.
- They excuse themselves.

This helps explain something we have already discussed. An atheist can recognize genuine moral truths without possessing a worldview that adequately accounts for them. He can know that cruelty is wrong because he lives in God’s world and bears God’s image. The problem is not that unbelievers are incapable of recognizing any morality. The deeper problem is that they suppress the God who provides the foundation for the moral judgments they continue to make. This is why the moral argument can become more than an argument for God. It can become a bridge to conscience.

The Moral Standard Turns Back on Us

Imagine someone saying: “Christians are hypocrites.” There are several ways we could respond. We might immediately become defensive and list examples of Christian charity. We might argue that hypocrisy does not prove Christianity false. That argument is valid. But there is another possibility. We can say: “You are right that hypocrisy is wrong.” Then ask: **What makes hypocrisy wrong?** That begins the worldview discussion. But then another question becomes possible: **Have you ever failed to live according to standards you expected other people to follow?** Now something has changed. The moral accusation that was pointed outward has turned inward. This does not excuse Christian hypocrisy. If Christians behave hypocritically, we should call it sin. But it exposes something universal. The same moral standard by which we judge others also judges us.

We Naturally Compare Ourselves With Other People

When people say, “I am a good person,” they usually mean something comparative. They mean:

- “I am better than many other people.”
- “I have never killed anyone.”
- “I provide for my family.”
- “I work hard.”
- “I try not to hurt anybody.”

Those may describe genuinely commendable actions. But none answers the central question. God does not judge us according to whether we were more respectable than the person next door. The standard is not the worst sinner we can imagine. The standard is God.

Romans 3 makes the conclusion universal: all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory. That removes human boasting. The issue is not whether some people are outwardly more destructive than others. Of course they are. The issue is whether anyone can stand before the holy God on the basis of his own righteousness. Scripture says no.

What the Law Does

Romans 3 explains that the law has an important function in exposing guilt. Paul says that the law speaks so that every mouth may be closed and the world may become accountable to God. That language is striking. The law closes the mouth. Why? Because sinners naturally defend themselves.

- “I am not that bad.”
- “Everyone does it.”
- “I had good intentions.”
- “At least I am not like that person.”
- “God knows I tried.”

The law removes those defenses. It does not ask whether our behavior compares favorably with another sinner. It reveals God’s standard. And through that law comes the knowledge of sin.

The Law Is Like a Mirror

A useful illustration is a mirror. A mirror can show you dirt on your face. But the mirror cannot wash your face. Its purpose is revelation. It shows you the problem. The law

functions similarly. It reveals what righteousness requires. Then it exposes our failure. The law can tell us: “You are guilty.” It cannot pronounce: “You have justified yourself.” That distinction is essential for the gospel. If we use the law only to tell people to behave better, we have turned Christianity into moralism. The law reveals the disease. The gospel announces what God has done for those who cannot cure themselves.

The Ten Commandments and the Heart

The Ten Commandments are particularly useful because they show that God’s standard reaches every area of life. The law addresses our relationship with God.

1. We are to have no other gods.
2. We are not to create idols.
3. We are not to misuse God’s name.
4. The law also addresses our relationship with others. Honor father and mother.
5. Do not murder.
6. Do not commit adultery.
7. Do not steal.
8. Do not bear false witness.
9. But the final commandment reaches directly into desire.
10. Do not covet. Coveting is not merely an external action. It occurs within the heart.

This prevents us from reducing obedience to outward respectability. Jesus develops the same point when He shows that anger and lust reveal the moral condition beneath external behavior. God does not merely examine what other people can see. He knows the heart.

“God Knows My Heart”

Sometimes someone says: “God knows my heart.” The statement is usually intended to provide comfort. But biblically, it raises a much more serious issue. Yes, God knows the heart. He knows it perfectly. He knows motives no one else sees. He knows desires we never acted upon. He knows the pride hidden beneath apparently good actions. He knows resentment, envy, lust, self-righteousness, hatred, and selfish ambition. The problem is not that God has misunderstood us. The problem is that He knows us completely. This is why external morality cannot justify us.

The Rich Young Ruler Again

The encounter from Chapter 4 becomes important here. The rich young ruler believed he had kept God’s commandments from his youth. Jesus did not accept his self-assessment. He exposed the idol of his heart. The man loved his possessions. His outwardly moral life had

not removed the deeper problem of allegiance. This is an important principle for evangelism. The law is not simply a checklist of external behavior. Its purpose is not to help people conclude: “I have done reasonably well.” It brings us before the holiness of God. And before that standard, self-righteousness collapses.

Ray Comfort and the “Good Person” Question

Ray Comfort’s evangelistic method has popularized a simple question: **Do you consider yourself a good person?** The question can be useful because many people answer yes. The conversation then turns to God’s commandments.

- Have you lied?
- Have you stolen?
- Have you lusted?
- Have you misused God’s name?

The point is not merely to attach labels to someone. The point is to demonstrate that the person’s definition of goodness is far lower than God’s. This can be very effective with someone who is self-righteous. But the method must remain a tool rather than becoming a ritual.

Do Not Turn the Law Into a Script

There is nothing inspired about asking exactly four commandments in exactly the same order. The biblical principle is larger. **God’s law exposes sin.** That can happen in different ways depending upon the person. Someone may already possess a very sensitive conscience and openly acknowledge his guilt. He may not need a ten-minute “good person test.” Someone else may be extremely self-righteous and need much more careful exposure to God’s standard. The person matters. The conversation matters. The biblical truth remains fixed, but the method can adapt.

Conviction Is Not the Same as Manipulation

Because judgment and guilt are serious subjects, evangelists must distinguish conviction from emotional manipulation.

Conviction says: **You have sinned against a holy God.**

Manipulation says: **I am going to create enough fear or emotional pressure that you will give me the response I want.**

Those are not the same thing. Scripture openly warns about judgment. Jesus warned about judgment. Paul warned about judgment. We should never be ashamed of that. But our purpose is not to terrify someone into repeating words. God does not need our psychological techniques in order to save. We faithfully tell the truth. The Spirit of God applies that truth to the heart.

Fear of Judgment Is Biblical

Some modern evangelistic approaches almost entirely avoid judgment because they fear it sounds negative. That is not the biblical pattern. Romans 2 itself moves toward a day when God will judge. Acts 17 says God has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness. Jesus repeatedly warned His hearers about judgment. The gospel is good news partly because there is genuinely bad news.

- We are guilty.
- Judgment is real.
- Death is real.
- We cannot justify ourselves.

If none of that is true, the cross becomes unnecessary.

But Fear Is Not the Gospel

At the same time, fear of judgment is not itself the gospel. The gospel is not: “Be frightened enough to become religious.” The gospel announces what God has done for guilty sinners. Judgment reveals why salvation is necessary. The cross reveals what God has done. Romans 5 teaches that God demonstrates His own love toward sinners through the death of Christ. The God who judges is also the God who provided the sacrifice. Justice and mercy meet in Christ.

“Everybody Does It”

Suppose someone says: “Yes, I lie sometimes, but everybody lies.” The statement may be true descriptively. Many people lie. But frequency does not determine morality. If everyone stole, theft would not become righteous. If every society approved of injustice, injustice would not become good. The question is not: **How many people commit this sin?** The question is: **Does God call it sin?** This is another place where apologetics and law intersect. The person may be assuming that common behavior determines moral acceptability. A simple question exposes the assumption: **Does everybody doing something make it right?** Usually the answer is obvious.

“Nobody Is Perfect”

Another common response is: “Nobody is perfect.” That statement is true. But it is often used as though universal guilt somehow eliminates accountability. Suppose every defendant in a courtroom were guilty. Would universal guilt make each individual innocent? No. If anything, it would reveal the scope of the problem. Christianity agrees that nobody is perfect. That is precisely why nobody can boast before God. The gospel does not divide humanity into perfect Christians and sinful unbelievers. It divides humanity into sinners who remain in their guilt and sinners who have received grace through Christ.

Evangelism Should Use “We”

This should affect our tone. We do not stand above the unbeliever saying: “You are the sinner. I am here to explain your problems.” We say: **We have sinned.** God’s law condemns me apart from Christ just as surely as it condemns anyone else.

- I have lied.
- I have been selfish.
- I have failed to love God as I should.
- I have violated His standard.

The difference between believer and unbeliever is not that one person was naturally righteous and the other was naturally wicked. The Christian is a sinner who has received mercy. That should destroy arrogance in evangelism.

The Law Reveals More Than Rule-Breaking

Sin is deeper than violating isolated commands. Romans 1 showed us the deeper rebellion. Humanity refuses to honor God as God. We exchange the Creator for created things. We suppress His truth. This means sin is not merely moral imperfection. It is rebellion against rightful authority. The unbeliever’s insistence that he will determine truth independently of God is connected to the same fundamental posture that says: **I will determine my life independently of God.** Autonomy is not merely an intellectual issue. It is a moral issue. The creature wants the place of the Creator.

The Law Closes the Mouth

Romans 3 describes the world becoming accountable to God and every mouth being closed. That is a powerful picture of what happens when self-righteousness is stripped away. There is no more: “But I...” No more: “At least I...” No more: “What about that person?” The comparison ends. We stand before God. That is where grace becomes intelligible. A person

who believes he is healthy has little interest in a cure. A person who believes he is righteous sees little need for justification. The law reveals the truth about our condition.

Then Comes “But Now”

Romans 3 does not end with guilt. After establishing universal sin, Paul turns toward the righteousness God provides apart from human works. That movement is vital. The evangelist must not leave the sinner staring only at his guilt. The law is not the destination. Christ is. The gospel announces that the righteousness we do not possess can be received through faith in Jesus Christ. Grace only makes sense when we understand why we need it. But once guilt is clear, we must bring the person to grace.

The Courtroom Illustration

A courtroom can help illustrate this distinction. Imagine a guilty defendant standing before a good judge. The evidence is clear. The defendant admits guilt. Can a righteous judge simply say: “I am loving, so I will pretend nothing happened”? That would not be justice. A good judge takes guilt seriously. Now imagine that the penalty is legally satisfied on the guilty person’s behalf. Justice is not ignored. The debt is dealt with. The illustration is limited, as all illustrations are, but it helps explain why forgiveness cannot simply mean that God decides sin never mattered. The cross demonstrates both the seriousness of sin and the greatness of grace.

God’s Love Is Seen at the Cross

Romans 5:8 says:

“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Notice who initiates salvation. God does not wait for sinners to become lovable. Christ dies while they are sinners. This prevents us from imagining the Father as reluctant to save while Jesus persuades Him to become merciful. The cross is the demonstration of God’s own love.

1. The Father sends.
2. The Son gives Himself.
3. Salvation is God’s gracious work.

From Morality to Conscience to Christ

Now we can connect the entire movement. Suppose someone says: “I do not believe in God, but child abuse is obviously evil.” We may begin apologetically: **What makes it objectively**

evil? The conversation explores morality. Eventually we explain that objective morality makes sense within Christianity because goodness is grounded in God's holy character. Then comes the crucial transition: **If God's moral standard is real, does it only judge child abusers, or does it also judge you and me?** Now morality has become personal. The conscience becomes involved. The law exposes sin. Then the gospel answers the guilt. Christ died for sinners. This is how apologetics serves evangelism.

When Someone Says, "I'm a Good Person"

A natural conversation might sound like this. "I think I am a good person." **What do you mean by good?** "I treat people well." **Have you always treated everyone the way you believe they should be treated?** "Well, no. Nobody does." **Then even by your own standard, have you always done what you believe is right?** "No." At that point, Scripture takes us further. The problem is not merely that we fail our own standards. We fail God's. The purpose of the conversation is not to trap the person. It is to help him see what Scripture says is already true.

When Someone Says, "God Will Forgive Me"

Another person may acknowledge sin but say: "God is forgiving. He will forgive me." The statement raises an important question: **On what basis?** If God simply ignores guilt, what happens to justice? Would we praise an earthly judge who consistently allowed guilty criminals to go free because he considered himself loving? No. We would call him unjust. So how can God forgive sinners while remaining perfectly righteous? That question takes us directly to the cross. Christian forgiveness is not based upon God pretending sin never mattered. Christ died for sins. Grace is costly.

When Someone Says, "God Knows I Try"

Someone else may say: "I know I make mistakes, but God knows I try." The statement assumes that sincere effort is the standard. Ask: **How much effort would be enough?** Then: **Does trying to obey remove the guilt of sins already committed?** Imagine a guilty defendant saying: "I broke the law, but I tried really hard not to." Effort does not erase guilt. The gospel is not the announcement that God rewards the people who made the strongest attempt. The gospel is the announcement that God saves sinners through Christ.

Do Not Use the Law Cruelly

There is an important pastoral caution. Not everyone who acknowledges sin needs to be pressed harder. Suppose someone says: "I know I am guilty. I have ruined my life. I do not think God could ever forgive me." That person does not need us to spend another twenty

minutes proving that he is guilty. He already knows. Give him Christ. Tell him about grace. Tell him that Christ died for sinners. The law is for exposing guilt. Once the person sees the guilt, the gospel is the answer. Wisdom knows when to change direction.

The Proud and the Humble Need Different Emphases

A person convinced of his own righteousness may need the law. A person crushed by guilt may need to hear grace. The gospel remains the same. But the next truth emphasized may differ. Jesus treated the rich young ruler differently from the broken sinners who came to Him knowing their need. The evangelist should learn the same wisdom. Do not comfort self-righteousness. Do not crush the broken. Tell each person the truth needed to bring him toward Christ.

The Goal Is Not Better Behavior

One final danger must be avoided. After exposing sin, we may accidentally leave the person thinking: “I understand. I need to stop lying, control my lust, be more generous, and live a better life.” If that is the conclusion, we have taught moral reformation rather than the gospel. The law does reveal how we ought to live. But a guilty sinner does not solve his problem merely by sinning less tomorrow. What happens to yesterday’s guilt? What happens to the sinful heart? What happens to our standing before God? We need justification. We need forgiveness. We need reconciliation. We need Christ.

Main Truth to Remember

The moral law does not merely provide material for an argument about the existence of God. It exposes us. The conscience bears witness that we are morally accountable. The law gives that accountability definition and closes the mouth of self-righteousness. We recognize evil in the world. Then the standard turns toward us. We discover that we have violated it too. That is why the gospel is necessary. The law says we are guilty. The gospel announces that Christ died for guilty people. The law removes boasting. Grace gives Christ. We do not use the law to humiliate people. We use it faithfully so that sinners understand why they need the Savior.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. According to Romans 2:12–16, what role does the conscience play in human moral awareness, and what do accusing and defending thoughts reveal about moral accountability?

2. What is the difference between the conscience and God's moral law, and why should Christians avoid treating conscience as an infallible final authority?
3. How do Romans 1 and Romans 2 work together to explain how unbelievers can both suppress the truth about God and still recognize genuine moral obligations?
4. According to Romans 3:19–20, what does God's law accomplish, and why does Paul describe every mouth as being closed before God?
5. Why is comparing ourselves with people who appear morally worse than us an inadequate way to determine whether we are righteous before God?
6. How does the rich young ruler in Mark 10 illustrate the difference between outward morality and the deeper allegiance of the heart?
7. What are the strengths of asking someone, "Do you consider yourself a good person?" and what danger arises if the question becomes part of a mechanical evangelistic script?
8. What is the difference between biblical conviction of sin and emotional manipulation, especially when discussing judgment?
9. How could you move a conversation from the claim "Some things are objectively evil" to the personal question of whether you and the other person have lived according to God's moral standard?
10. Why must an evangelistic conversation move from law to gospel rather than ending with the command to behave better?

Chapter 7 — What Must I Do to Be Saved?

Primary Text: Acts 16:25–34

²⁵ But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶ and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" ²⁹ And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰ and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. ³⁴ And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

Supporting Texts: Romans 3:21–26; Romans 5:8; Romans 6:23; Romans 10:9–13; Ephesians 2:1–10; Mark 1:14–15; John 3:14–18; 1 John 5:11–13

Main Truth: Salvation is entirely the work of God's grace. The sinner is commanded to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, yet even that faith is not an autonomous human contribution that completes God's work. God gives life, brings the sinner to Christ, and receives all the glory for salvation.

The Question Every Evangelistic Conversation Is Moving Toward

For several chapters we have worked through the questions that may arise before someone is ready to hear a clear presentation of the gospel. We have considered worldviews and presuppositions. We have learned to listen, to clarify what a person means, to ask how he reached his conclusions, and to expose contradictions within a worldview. We have examined morality, conscience, guilt, and the purpose of God's law. All of that matters.

But apologetics is not the destination. Eventually the conversation must come to Christ.

Sometimes the person who began by arguing begins to ask. The discussion about morality becomes personal. The person who insisted that he was a good man begins to recognize his

guilt. The person who challenged Christianity begins to realize that his deepest problem is not merely intellectual.

Then the questions change.

- **How can I be forgiven?**
- **How can I be right with God?**
- **What must I do to be saved?**

That is exactly where Acts 16 takes us. The Philippian jailer comes trembling before Paul and Silas and asks:

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” — Acts 16:30

Paul and Silas answer:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” — Acts 16:31

The answer is wonderfully direct. Yet we must understand what it means. Who is this Lord Jesus? What is saving faith? Where does faith come from? What is repentance? Does saying a prayer save? What should we say when someone professes faith? How do we speak about assurance? What evidence should accompany regeneration?

These are not secondary questions. They belong to faithful evangelism.

The Jailer Has Been Brought to the End of Himself

The setting of Acts 16 matters. Paul and Silas have been beaten, imprisoned, and placed in stocks. Yet at midnight they are praying and singing hymns to God. An earthquake suddenly shakes the prison, the doors open, and the prisoners’ chains are loosened. The jailer awakens and assumes everyone has escaped. Believing that disaster has come upon him, he prepares to take his own life. Paul stops him:

“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!” — Acts 16:28

The jailer rushes in trembling and falls before Paul and Silas. His question is not an abstract theological exercise. He has been shaken to the core.

He is no longer asking whether Christianity is intellectually interesting. He asks:

“What must I do to be saved?” — Acts 16:30

This teaches us something important about evangelism: not everyone needs the same next conversation.

- The person who believes all truth is relative may need his assumptions challenged.
- The person who says Scripture has been corrupted may need that objection addressed.
- The person who is self-righteous may need the law.

But when a person has already been brought to the place where he understands his guilt and asks how he can be saved, we should not send him backward through ten apologetic arguments. Give him Christ.

The Answer Is Not “Become Better”

Paul and Silas do not tell the jailer to repair his life before coming to God. They do not tell him to compensate for his sins through good works. They do not tell him to join a church, become more religious, improve his morality, or prove that he is sincere. They say:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus...” — Acts 16:31

The sinner naturally looks inward.

- What can I do?
- How can I repair myself?
- How can I become worthy?
- How much must I change before God will receive me?

The gospel turns the sinner’s eyes away from himself. Christ has done what the sinner cannot do. The question is not how a guilty person can accumulate enough righteousness to stand before God. The gospel announces that righteousness is provided in Christ. That is why Paul describes the gospel in Romans 3 as revealing a righteousness that comes from God. He says:

“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ...” — Romans 3:22

The sinner does not become his own savior. He needs another.

The Command to Believe Is Real

We should never weaken the biblical command to believe because we affirm the sovereignty of God in salvation. Scripture genuinely commands sinners to repent. Jesus proclaimed:

“repent and believe in the gospel.” — Mark 1:15

Paul and Silas genuinely command the jailer to believe. The apostles preach Christ and call people to respond. The sinner is responsible before God. But the fact that the sinner is commanded to believe does not mean fallen man possesses some untouched area of spiritual neutrality from which he can independently manufacture saving faith. Scripture holds together two truths that we must also hold together. The sinner must believe. And when the sinner believes, grace has brought him there. The command reveals our responsibility. It does not establish our spiritual ability apart from grace.

Salvation Is Not a Cooperative Project

One of the easiest errors in evangelism is to describe salvation as though God accomplishes almost everything and then waits for man to contribute the final decisive part.

- God sends His Son.
- Christ dies.
- Christ rises.
- The gospel is preached.
- Grace makes salvation available.

Then, supposedly, spiritually neutral people stand before the offer and determine their own destiny by supplying the one thing God did not supply: the correct decision. But that does not fit Scripture’s description of fallen humanity.

Ephesians 2 does not describe the sinner as basically alive but needing assistance. Paul says we were:

“dead in your trespasses and sins.” — Ephesians 2:1

Then the passage turns with two of the most important words in Scripture:

“But God...” — Ephesians 2:4

- God acts.
- God gives life.
- God does not merely place medicine beside a spiritually dying man and wait to see whether he will take it.

The biblical picture is resurrection.

Dead Men Do Not Resurrect Themselves

The language of spiritual death matters. A dead person cannot cooperate in causing his resurrection. Life must be given. Yet this does not mean the converted sinner never acts. He truly believes. He truly repents. He truly loves Christ. He truly follows Christ.

Grace does not eliminate the human response. Grace produces it. God does not believe in our place. We believe. God does not repent in our place. We repent. But when we ask why a spiritually dead sinner finally turns from rebellion and comes willingly to Christ, the final explanation cannot be that something morally or spiritually superior originated independently inside him. The explanation is grace.

Paul says:

“by grace you have been saved...” — Ephesians 2:5

That truth protects evangelism from both pride and despair. We cannot boast when someone believes. And we do not despair when our arguments cannot create belief. God gives life.

What Is Saving Faith?

Saving faith is more than knowing true facts about Jesus. A person may affirm that Jesus existed, that He was crucified, that Christians proclaim His resurrection, and that salvation is found in Him, yet still remain unconverted. Scripture never presents saving faith as mere intellectual agreement.

The problem is deeper because fallen man is not spiritually neutral. He does not simply lack one final piece of information. Apart from the work of God, he is dead in sin and unable to produce spiritual life from within himself. This is why salvation must be understood from beginning to end as an act of divine grace.

Ephesians 2 describes sinners as dead before declaring that God made them alive with Christ. The movement is not from spiritually neutral man to a better decision. It is from death to life.

Paul says:

“even when we were dead... made us alive together with Christ.” — Ephesians 2:5

Faith therefore must never be treated as the one contribution man supplies so that God can complete salvation. Faith is not a meritorious act that makes the sinner worthy of grace.

Scripture says:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith...” — Ephesians 2:8

The sinner believes because God has acted graciously toward him. The same grace that saves brings the sinner to rest in Christ rather than in himself.

Acts 16 gives us the proper object of that faith:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” — Acts 16:31

The command is real. The sinner is responsible to believe. But the command does not imply that fallen man can generate saving faith independently from the grace of God. The gospel genuinely calls sinners to repent and believe, and when a sinner actually believes, all glory belongs to God.

Saving Faith Has an Object

Saving faith is not faith in faith.

- It is not confidence in sincerity.
- It is not confidence in the strength of a religious experience.
- It is not confidence in a baptism certificate.
- It is not confidence in church membership.
- It is not confidence in a prayer repeated years ago.

Saving faith rests upon **Jesus Christ Himself**. The crucial question is therefore not: **How strong is my faith?** It is: **In whom is my faith resting?**

Weak faith does not make a sufficient Christ insufficient. Strong confidence in the wrong object does not become saving merely because it is sincere.

The saving power is not located in the psychological intensity of faith. It is located in Christ: His righteousness, His atoning death, His resurrection, and His finished work. Saving faith therefore looks away from self and rests upon Christ.

What Are We Trusting Instead of Christ?

Human beings naturally find something in which to place confidence. The self-righteous person trusts morality. The religious person may trust baptism, sacraments, church attendance, family history, or religious activity. Another person trusts sincerity. Another trusts an emotional experience. Someone raised in church may trust the memory of walking

an aisle. Another person may trust a date written inside a Bible. Another may say, “I have always believed in God.” None of these things is Christ.

Saving faith says: **I possess no righteousness of my own that can justify me before God. My only hope is Jesus Christ.** Faith does not present something impressive to God. Faith receives.

What Do You Have That You Did Not Receive?

Paul asks:

“What do you have that you did not receive?” — 1 Corinthians 4:7

That question reaches directly into salvation. If one sinner believes while another rejects Christ, what ultimately explains the difference? Can the believer say that he was naturally wiser? More spiritually sensitive? More willing? Better at using his freedom? If that becomes the ultimate explanation, man has found something in which to distinguish himself. Paul removes that boasting.

Grace made the difference.

- God opened the heart.
- God gave life.
- God brought the sinner to Christ.
- And the sinner truly believed.

That is not a denial of faith. It is an explanation of why faith exists.

Repentance Belongs With Faith

Saving faith cannot be separated from repentance.

Jesus preached:

“repent and believe in the gospel.” — Mark 1:15

Repentance is more than regret. A person can be sorry that sin produced painful consequences without turning from sin itself. Repentance includes a fundamental change concerning God, sin, and self. The sinner stops defending his rebellion. He no longer insists upon his own right to define reality, morality, and life independently from his Creator. He turns toward God. Faith and repentance can be distinguished, but they should not be separated. Repentance emphasizes turning from sin and rebellion. Faith emphasizes resting

upon Christ. They are not two achievements through which a sinner purchases grace. They are the response of the sinner whom grace is bringing to Christ.

Repentance Is Not Self-Reformation

When we tell someone to repent, we are not saying:

- “Clean your life up first.”
- “Defeat your sins and then come to Christ.”
- “Prove that you deserve mercy.”

That would simply create another system of works. The sinner comes to Christ precisely because he cannot cleanse himself. Repentance does not mean achieving sinlessness before approaching the Savior. It means that the sinner no longer wants to defend the rebellion from which he needs to be saved. The person who says, “I will come to Christ once I fix myself,” has not understood grace. Christ receives sinners, not people who have successfully repaired themselves.

The Gospel Must Have Content

Acts 16:31 is brief:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus...”

But Acts does not present those words as a magical sentence detached from explanation. The next verse says:

“they spoke the word of the Lord to him...” — Acts 16:32

The jailer needed to know who this Jesus is and what He had done. The gospel has content.

- God is Creator and Judge.
- Man has sinned against Him.
- Christ came.
- Christ died for sinners.
- Christ rose from the dead.
- Christ is Lord.
- Salvation is by grace.
- Sinners are commanded to repent and believe.

We do not need to transform every evangelistic conversation into an entire seminary course. But a person must understand enough of the gospel to know the Christ in whom he is being called to trust.

The Object of Faith Must Be the Biblical Christ

This becomes especially important when speaking with people from religious backgrounds that use Christian vocabulary.

- A Mormon may say, “I believe in Jesus.”
- A Jehovah’s Witness may say the same.
- A Muslim may honor Jesus as a prophet.
- A religious pluralist may admire Jesus as one spiritual teacher among many.

Even a person who has spent his whole life in church may use the name Jesus while having little understanding of the biblical gospel. So we must sometimes ask:

- **Who is Jesus?**
- **What did He accomplish?**
- **Why did He die?**
- **What does it mean that He is Lord?**

Saving faith does not rest upon a religious figure who happens to be called Jesus. It rests upon the Christ revealed in Scripture.

Grace Is a Gift, Not a Wage

Romans 6:23 gives us a clear contrast:

“the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life...” — Romans 6:23

- A wage is earned.
 - A gift is given.
- Sin earns death.
 - Eternal life is given in Christ.

That destroys the idea that salvation is a payment God owes to morally successful people. It also exposes the contradiction in saying that salvation is a free gift but that a person must first become good enough to qualify for it. Grace means the sinner receives what he could never earn.

Grace Does Not Mean Works Are Unimportant

Ephesians 2 protects us from the opposite mistake. After saying salvation is by grace and not the result of works, Paul immediately says believers are:

“created in Christ Jesus for good works.” — Ephesians 2:10

Works therefore have an essential place, but we must keep the order straight. Works are not the root of justification. They are the fruit of salvation. We do not obey in order to persuade God to save us. God saves, and the salvation He gives produces a changed life. That distinction becomes extremely important when we begin discussing conversion, assurance, and the evidence of regeneration.

The Danger of Decisionism

At this point we need to distinguish a **biblical call for decision** from **decisionism**. There is nothing wrong with telling a person that he must respond to Christ. Scripture does exactly that. Jesus calls men to repent and believe. Paul tells the jailer to believe. The gospel demands a response.

Decisionism is something different. Decisionism reduces conversion to a human act and then treats that act as though it were proof that regeneration has occurred.

- A person raises his hand.
- Walks an aisle.
- Signs a card.
- Repeats a prayer.
- Marks a date in his Bible.

And then someone declares: "You are saved." The danger is not that any of those outward actions are automatically wrong. A genuinely converted person may have done one or several of them.

The danger is making the action itself the basis for declaring that God has regenerated someone.

Decisionism can easily replace regeneration in practice. A person may be taught to look back to the sincerity of a past decision as the proof that he is saved, rather than looking to Christ and considering the continuing evidence of God's saving work in his life. A decision may accompany conversion. But a decision does not cause regeneration. And a decision by itself does not prove regeneration.

Conversion Is More Than Making a Decision

The biblical language of conversion is far greater than the language of deciding.

- Scripture speaks of new birth.
- New creation.

- Resurrection from spiritual death.
- A new heart.
- A new relationship with God.

Paul says:

“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature.” — 2 Corinthians 5:17

That does not mean the new Christian instantly becomes mature. It does not mean he immediately understands every doctrine. It does not mean he never sins again. But it does mean something has happened. Christianity does not teach that regeneration merely adds a religious preference to an unchanged person. God gives life. And life manifests itself.

This is one reason the doctrine of regeneration matters so much in evangelism. If we think salvation is merely the sinner making a sufficiently sincere decision, our evangelistic methods will naturally focus upon producing that decision.

If we understand regeneration as the supernatural work of God, we will proclaim Christ faithfully, call sinners urgently, and refuse to confuse our ability to produce a response with God's ability to give life.

Evangelistic Methods Are Tools, Not Means of Regeneration

- Romans Road can be useful.
- Evangelism Explosion can be useful.
- Diagnostic questions can be useful.
- A short gospel outline can be useful.
- A tract can be useful.
- A testimony can be useful.

But none of them regenerates. They are tools for communicating truth. They are not instruments by which we control the new birth.

Romans Road, for example, can help organize important gospel truths. Romans declares universal sin, the wages of sin, Christ's death for sinners, and the necessity of faith. Used carefully, those verses can help someone understand the gospel. But Paul did not write Romans as an evangelistic formula in which saying one sentence after another automatically produces conversion.

The Word points us to Christ. The Spirit gives life.

Calling on the Name of the Lord

Romans 10 says:

“Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” — Romans 10:13

This is not a magical incantation. Calling upon the Lord expresses dependence upon the Lord. The sinner realizes that he cannot rescue himself and cries out to the One who can. The confidence is not: “I pronounced the right words.” It is: **Christ is my only Savior**. That distinction matters greatly when we discuss what has become known as the sinner’s prayer.

What About the Sinner’s Prayer?

Prayer is not the problem. Someone brought to repentance and faith will naturally call upon God.

- He may confess his sin.
- He may cry out for mercy.
- He may thank God for Christ.
- He may express his trust in Jesus.

All of that is entirely appropriate. The problem begins when we transform the prayer into a conversion mechanism. A person can repeat words without understanding them.

- He can repeat words because someone is pressuring him.
- He can repeat words because everyone else in the room is doing it.
- He can repeat words because he wants the conversation to end.
- He can even repeat words sincerely while still misunderstanding the gospel.

The prayer does not create saving faith. The prayer may **express** saving faith. That is an enormous difference. Scripture says:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” — Acts 16:31

It does not say: “Repeat these sentences correctly and you will be saved.”

Should We Lead Someone in Prayer?

There may be times when someone says: “I believe what you have told me. I know I need Christ, but I do not know what to say.” We do not need to refuse to pray with him. We can pray. We can help. But rather than immediately giving him words to repeat, it can be helpful to first ask questions.

- **Who do you believe Jesus is?**
- **Why did He die?**
- **What are you trusting in to make you right with God?**
- **What do you believe God is calling you to turn from?**

These questions are not another test someone must pass in order to earn salvation. They help us understand whether the person has actually grasped the gospel.

Then we may say: “Talk to God. Confess your sin. Call upon Christ. Tell Him what you have just told me.” If he struggles, we can pray with him. But our goal is not to obtain the correct verbal performance. Our goal is not to get to the end of the conversation and say, “I got another one.” We want Christ to be understood.

We Have Authority to Proclaim the Promise, Not Manufacture the Verdict

This distinction is extremely important. We have authority to tell sinners what God commands. We can say: **Repent and believe the gospel**. We have authority to tell them what God promises. We can say: **The one who believes in Christ will be saved**. We have authority to explain biblical assurance. But we should be very careful about taking upon ourselves the authority to declare a person regenerate merely because he has completed the procedure we gave him.

Suppose someone prays. Then we ask: “Were you sincere?” He says yes. We answer: “Then you are saved. Never doubt it again.” What have we actually established? We have established that the person believes he was sincere. Sincerity is not the Savior. Christ is.

Do Not Give False Assurance

False assurance is one of the most serious dangers in evangelism because a person can become confident that he is saved for the wrong reason.

Suppose someone says: “I know I am saved because when I was seven years old I prayed the sinner’s prayer.” We should not automatically dismiss that experience. The person may truly have been converted at seven years old. But neither should we tell him that the prayer proves he was converted.

A better question is: **What are you trusting in now?** If the answer is: “That prayer,” then his confidence is misplaced. The problem is not that he prayed. The problem is that a past act has become the foundation of present assurance.

- Another person might say: “I walked the aisle.”

- Another: “I was baptized.”
- Another: “I signed a card.”
- Another: “I remember feeling something powerful.”
- Another: “The pastor told me I was saved.”

None of these is Christ. Our assurance cannot ultimately rest upon confidence that we successfully completed an evangelistic procedure.

A Past Profession Is Not the Same as Present Spiritual Life

This is where the doctrine of regeneration protects us. If salvation involves the supernatural giving of spiritual life, then we should expect life to produce evidence.

- Not perfection.
- Not sinlessness.
- Not uninterrupted spiritual progress.

But life.

A profession of faith tells us what a person **said**. The fruit of regeneration gives evidence of what God has **done**.

The distinction matters.

A person may sincerely remember making a profession years ago. Yet if his entire life since that time has been characterized by settled unbelief, indifference toward Christ, unrepentant sin, hostility toward God's Word, and no evidence of spiritual life, it is dangerous to assure him merely by pointing backward to the profession. The loving response is not: “You are definitely a Christian. You just need to act like one.” The loving response is to point him again to Christ and Scripture.

Examine Yourself

Paul says:

“Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” — 2 Corinthians 13:5

That is very different from simply asking: “Can you remember a time when you made a decision?” Biblical self-examination does not mean Christians should live in constant terror, endlessly studying themselves instead of trusting Christ.

Neither does it mean that we judge ourselves by comparing our spiritual maturity with another Christian.

It means that our profession should be examined in the light of Scripture.

- If I claim to have been regenerated, is there evidence of spiritual life?
- If I claim that Christ is my Lord, what is my relationship to His lordship?
- If I claim to have repented, what is my present relationship to sin?
- If I claim to love God, is there any evidence that my affections have been changed?

These questions do not save us. They examine the claim that salvation has occurred.

First John and Biblical Assurance

First John was written in part so believers would have assurance. John says:

“so that you may know that you have eternal life.”— 1 John 5:13

That is important because biblical self-examination is not designed merely to produce doubt. Scripture does not want genuine Christians perpetually wondering whether Christ will receive them.

But John also does not ground assurance in remembering a past prayer. Throughout the letter he describes realities that accompany spiritual life: faith in the true Christ, a changed relationship to sin, obedience to God, and love for God's people. This means assurance is neither careless nor impossible. Scripture gives real grounds for confidence.

The Ground and the Evidence Must Not Be Confused

Here we need an essential distinction.

- **Christ is the ground of our salvation.**
- **The fruit of regeneration is evidence of our salvation.**

Those two truths must never be confused. If we make our works the ground of salvation, we abandon grace. If we deny that salvation produces fruit, we empty the regeneration of its meaning. We are not justified because our sanctification is impressive. We are not accepted because our obedience has reached a certain percentage. We are accepted because of Christ. But the Christ who saves does not leave those whom He saves spiritually dead. The fruit does not make the tree alive. The fruit shows that the tree is alive.

Assurance Looks Outside Us to Christ

The troubled Christian must first be directed outside himself.

- Our righteousness is Christ.
- Our atonement is Christ.
- Our Mediator is Christ.
- Our hope is Christ.

If assurance were based upon reaching a level of personal holiness at which we could finally become confident in ourselves, no serious Christian would ever possess assurance.

The more we grow, the more clearly we often recognize how deeply sin has affected us. So assurance cannot be built upon the claim: "I am now sufficiently good." It rests upon Christ's sufficiency. That is why saving faith continually looks away from self and toward Him.

Assurance Also Recognizes the Work of God Within Us

But looking to Christ does not mean ignoring everything Scripture says about regeneration. God's saving work produces effects.

- The person who was indifferent toward sin begins to hate it.
- The person who once had no concern for God's Word begins to desire it.
- The person who wanted autonomy begins to recognize Christ's lordship.
- The person who could live comfortably in sin begins to experience conviction.
- The person who falls learns to confess.
- The person who once had little concern for God's people begins to love them.

These changes vary greatly in strength and maturity from believer to believer.

But regeneration is not invisible forever.

God gives life, and life bears fruit.

Do Not Judge the Christian Life by a Single Snapshot

A single moment does not necessarily reveal the overall direction of a person's life. A genuine Christian may be seen in a moment of anger, fear, selfishness, impatience, or another serious failure. That sin is real and should never be minimized, but one moment does not tell the whole story. The better question is not simply, "**Has this person ever**

sinned seriously?” Every Christian has. The question is, **“What is the overall direction of the life?”**

A believer may experience seasons of strong growth and seasons of painful weakness. Sanctification does not normally move in a perfectly straight line. There may be progress, setbacks, confession, renewed obedience, and further growth. That is why we must distinguish between **falling into sin** and **settling into sin**.

- A Christian can fall.
- A Christian can struggle.
- A Christian can even fall seriously.

But regeneration creates a new relationship with sin. The believer cannot remain at peace with rebellion indefinitely. God brings conviction. He produces confession. He leads His children back toward repentance and renewed obedience.

The presence of struggle is not evidence that regeneration is absent. In many cases, the struggle itself shows that sin is no longer an uncontested master.

This does not mean we should excuse persistent sin or ignore the warnings of Scripture. It means we should evaluate a profession of faith by the broad course of a life rather than by one isolated moment.

The issue is not perfection. The issue is direction.

The Believer's Relationship With Sin Changes

The evidence of regeneration is not that a Christian never sins. First John says:

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves...” — 1 John 1:8

But the believer's relationship with sin changes. Sin grieves him. He can no longer justify it as comfortably as before.

- He confesses it.
- He returns to Christ.
- He desires to be free from it.

This does not mean every believer experiences conviction with the same emotional intensity. It means that regeneration has created a new direction. The Christian does not merely want forgiveness from the consequences of sin while remaining perfectly content with sin itself. He increasingly wants Christ.

The Difference Between Struggling and Settling

This distinction is pastorally important. Suppose a Christian says: “I hate this sin. I have fought it. I have confessed it. I have failed again, and I am afraid that my failure proves I am not a Christian.” That person may need encouragement, not condemnation. The presence of a battle is not proof that regeneration is absent.

- Christians struggle.
- Christians fall.
- Christians sometimes fall badly.

But suppose another person says: “Yes, Scripture calls this sin. I do not care. I intend to continue, and I have no desire to repent. But I know I am saved because I prayed when I was eight.” That is very different. We should not strengthen his false confidence. A past profession should never be used as protection from the warnings of Scripture.

Regeneration Produces New Affections

Regeneration is more than behavioral adjustment. God does not merely teach the sinner to imitate Christian habits. He changes the heart. This is why a genuine Christian may begin to desire things he once ignored. Christ becomes precious. God's Word becomes desirable. Sin becomes grievous. God's people become meaningful. Holiness becomes something to pursue rather than merely something imposed from outside. None of this is perfect. But the direction changes because the person has been changed. The gospel does not merely create better behavior. God creates a new person.

The Philippian Jailer Shows Immediate Fruit

Acts 16 itself gives us a small but meaningful picture of this. The jailer who had custody of Paul and Silas now cares for them. The text says:

“he... washed their wounds...” — Acts 16:33

Then he brings them into his home and feeds them. Nothing in the passage suggests that these actions earned his salvation. The order is the opposite. He believes. And his life immediately begins displaying fruit. The change does not save him. It accompanies salvation. That is precisely the distinction we need.

Works Are Evidence, Not Merit

Good works must never become a second gospel. We should not tell the Christian: “You were initially justified by faith, but now you remain accepted by God because your

sanctification is good enough.” No. Christ remains our righteousness. But Scripture also refuses the idea that saving grace leaves a person fundamentally unchanged. Good works do not purchase salvation. They do not supplement Christ. They do not earn God's love. They are evidence of the life God has given.

We should therefore avoid two opposite errors. The first says: **“My works save me.”** The second says: **“Because works do not save me, their complete absence has no significance.”** Both misunderstand grace.

Perseverance Is Also Grace

If we stop here, another error can appear. We may say that God sovereignly regenerates the sinner but then speak as though the continuation of the Christian life depends entirely upon man's independent ability to keep himself saved. Scripture gives us a greater hope. Paul says:

“He who began a good work in you will perfect it...” — Philippians 1:6

The God who begins the work continues the work. Christian perseverance does not mean the believer possesses independent spiritual strength. It means God preserves His people in such a way that they continue in faith. The believer perseveres because God preserves. That does not make warnings, discipline, obedience, prayer, Scripture, or the church unnecessary. Those are among the means God uses to keep His people. Grace does not merely begin salvation. Grace carries the Christian through it.

God's Preservation Does Not Produce Carelessness

Someone might respond: “If God preserves believers, why examine ourselves? Why pursue holiness? Why warn anyone?” Because Scripture does all three. The promises of preservation do not cancel the commands of perseverance. God's sovereignty does not make obedience meaningless. Rather, the continued work of God appears in the believer's continued faith, repentance, growth, and return to Christ. The person who says: “Because salvation is secure, I can reject Christ, live indefinitely in rebellion, refuse repentance, and remain completely unconcerned,” has misunderstood preservation. Security in Christ is not permission to abandon Christ. The One who saves His people also keeps His people.

Christian Assurance Is Neither Presumption Nor Despair

We therefore need a balanced biblical assurance. Presumption says: “I once prayed, so nothing about my present life matters.” Despair says: “I sinned again, therefore Christ cannot possibly save me.” Biblical assurance says something different.

My hope is Christ alone.

And:

The God who has saved me is at work in me.

The true Christian can see sin more clearly and still possess stronger assurance because his confidence is increasingly removed from his own righteousness and placed upon Christ. At the same time, he can recognize real evidence that God has changed him. He does not boast in that evidence. He thanks God for it.

Conversion Begins Discipleship

Evangelism should never treat conversion as the finish line. Christ does not merely command us to collect professions of faith. He commands us to make disciples.

The new believer needs:

- **Scripture** — learning to know and obey God's Word.
- **Prayer** — growing in dependence upon God.
- **Baptism** — publicly identifying with Christ in obedience to His command.
- **The local church** — becoming part of the life, worship, and care of Christ's people.
- **Teaching** — growing in the truth of the faith.
- **Correction** — being willing to receive biblical instruction when wrong.
- **Encouragement** — being strengthened to continue in faith and obedience.
- **Fellowship** — sharing life with other believers.
- **Accountability** — living openly enough for other Christians to help, warn, and strengthen us.
- **Obedience** — learning to submit every area of life to Christ.
- **Understanding** — growing in knowledge of the faith now professed.

Discipleship does not transform an unregenerate person into a regenerate person through enough instruction. God regenerates. But the person whom God regenerates needs to be taught how to live as a disciple of Christ. That is why evangelism and discipleship belong together.

A Profession Should Be Taken Seriously Without Being Treated as Infallible

Suppose someone hears the gospel and makes a credible profession of faith.

- We should rejoice.

- We should encourage him.
- We should pray with him.
- We should begin teaching him.

But we do not need to pretend that we possess infallible knowledge of another person's heart. There is a difference between saying: **“You have professed faith in Christ, and I want to help you follow Him.”** and saying: **“I know with absolute certainty that you are regenerate because you repeated the words I gave you.”** The first respects both the profession and the limits of our knowledge. The second can create false assurance. Time and fruit help reveal what God has done.

We Must Not Manipulate a Decision

Because we desperately want people to be saved, we can become tempted to force a moment of visible response.

- We repeat the question.
- We increase the emotional pressure.
- We make silence uncomfortable.
- We tell the person what to say.
- We treat hesitation as personal resistance to us.

Eventually the person gives the answer we want. But what have we accomplished? We may have produced a response. We have not produced regeneration. No amount of pressure can create spiritual life. This is where confidence in God's sovereignty should make us better evangelists. We can preach urgently without panic. We can plead sincerely without manipulation. We can call the sinner to Christ without pretending that his eternal destiny finally rests upon our ability to close the conversation correctly.

Persuasion Is Not Manipulation

We should also avoid the opposite mistake. Because manipulation is wrong, some Christians become afraid of persuasion.

- But Paul reasoned.
- Paul persuaded.
- Jesus called.
- The apostles warned.
- The gospel is urgent.

There is nothing unbiblical about pleading with someone to come to Christ. Manipulation attempts to manufacture a response through pressure. Persuasion presents truth clearly, reasons faithfully, appeals earnestly, and calls the sinner to respond.

We can say:

- **You need Christ.**
- **Do not continue trusting yourself.**
- **Repent and believe.**
- **Come to Him.**

Urgency is not manipulation. The difference lies in whether we trust the truth and the work of God or attempt to control the result ourselves.

We Must Still Call for a Response

The gospel is not merely information to consider. It comes with a summons. Jesus says:

“repent and believe in the gospel.” — Mark 1:15

Paul says:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus...” — Acts 16:31

Therefore it is entirely appropriate to ask:

- **Do you believe what we have discussed?**
- **What are you trusting in?**
- **Is something keeping you from Christ?**
- **Are you willing to turn from your rebellion and trust Him?**

These questions do not regenerate the sinner. They express the biblical call.

What If Someone Says, “I Am Not Ready”?

Suppose the person understands the gospel and says: “I am not ready.” Do not immediately pressure him. Ask: **What do you mean?**

- Perhaps he still does not understand something.
- Perhaps another objection remains.
- Perhaps he is afraid of what his family will think.
- Perhaps he thinks he must improve himself first.

Those issues can be addressed.

But perhaps he says: "I understand. I just do not want anyone ruling my life." Now the issue has become much clearer. It is not merely intellectual. It is allegiance.

We can say: "Then you understand that your difficulty is not simply that Christianity lacks evidence. You do not want Christ as Lord."

At that point, another argument about archaeology may not solve the problem. The sinner needs repentance. We leave the truth before him. We pray. We trust God.

Do Not Tell the Unconverted Person to Act More Like a Christian

This becomes especially important when someone made a profession years ago but now shows no evidence of faith. Suppose a teenager professed Christ as a child but eventually rejects the faith, embraces open rebellion, and shows no desire for repentance. It may be tempting to say: "You are a Christian. You need to start acting like one." But how do we know that? If there is little evidence of spiritual life, a more biblical response may be: "You made a profession of faith. But Scripture tells us to examine ourselves. I am concerned because your present life gives serious reason to question that profession. I want to point you again to Christ."

That is not denying perseverance. It is taking perseverance seriously. We do not know the heart infallibly. We therefore do not use a childhood decision to silence every biblical warning.

Rededication Is Not a Substitute for Conversion

Another danger follows from false assurance. A person makes a profession as a child. He later lives for years with no evidence of faith. Eventually he returns to church. Instead of asking whether the original profession was genuine, everyone assumes that it must have been and says: "He is rededicating his life." There may certainly be genuine Christians who wander seriously and later return in repentance. But we should not use the category of rededication to avoid asking the more fundamental question: **Was there regeneration?** The answer is not to force doubt upon everyone. The answer is to take both profession and fruit seriously.

Only God Gives Life

This entire chapter returns us to one central reality. Apologetics cannot regenerate. We can expose every contradiction in someone's worldview and he may remain in unbelief.

A perfect argument does not give spiritual life. Evangelistic methods cannot regenerate. A perfect gospel outline does not give spiritual life.

- A tract cannot regenerate.
- A sinner's prayer cannot regenerate.
- An altar call cannot regenerate.
- A moving song cannot regenerate.
- A skilled evangelist cannot regenerate.

Only God gives life. But God uses means.

- He uses Scripture.
- He uses preaching.
- He uses conversations.
- He uses Christians.
- He uses questions.
- He uses gospel proclamation.

So our inability to regenerate sinners does not make evangelism less important. It makes us dependent.

Our Confidence Is in the Word and Spirit of God

If conversion finally depended upon our technique, evangelism would become unbearable.

- Did I explain it perfectly?
- Did I choose the correct illustration?
- Did I answer every objection?
- Did I say enough?
- Did I push too little?
- Did I push too much?

But our confidence rests somewhere else. We prepare carefully because truth matters. We learn because people deserve thoughtful answers. We speak clearly because the gospel should not be confused by our carelessness. But ultimately, God saves through His Word by His Spirit. That truth gives us courage.

The Complete Movement

At this point the pieces of the book begin fitting together. A person speaks, and we listen. We clarify what he means. We ask how he reached his conclusion. We identify the

worldview. We expose the false foundation when necessary. We present the Christian worldview positively. We move toward conscience. God's law exposes guilt.

Then we present Christ.

- Christ died for sinners.
- Christ rose.
- Salvation is by grace.
- We call the sinner to repentance and faith.

If he professes faith, we do not worship the method. We do not manufacture assurance. We point him to Christ. We teach him the biblical grounds of assurance. We look for the fruit of regeneration. We encourage him into the life of discipleship. And through all of it we remember: **God saves.**

Main Truth to Remember

When the Philippian jailer asks:

"What must I do to be saved?"

Paul does not direct him toward moral improvement, religious achievement, or an evangelistic procedure. He directs him toward Christ:

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..." — Acts 16:31

The command is genuine. The sinner must believe. The sinner must repent. But saving faith is not the independent contribution of a spiritually neutral person. God gives life. The sinner truly believes. God grants new affections. The sinner truly repents. God begins the work. The believer truly perseveres. God preserves His people.

Therefore, we preach Christ urgently without manipulating people. We call sinners to repent without turning repentance into a work. We call them to believe without making faith the one autonomous contribution that distinguishes man from man. We may pray with people without trusting the prayer. We receive professions seriously without pretending that we can infallibly see the heart. And we do not give assurance merely by pointing backward to a decision.

Christ is the ground of salvation. The fruit of regeneration is evidence of salvation.

- The Christian's hope is Christ.
- The Christian's changed life is the work of Christ.
- The Christian's perseverance is sustained by Christ.

From beginning to end, salvation is of grace.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. According to Acts 16:25–34, what brought the Philippian jailer to ask, “**What must I do to be saved?**” and why is Paul and Silas's answer centered upon Christ rather than upon moral improvement?
2. Ephesians 2 describes sinners as spiritually dead before God makes them alive. How does this affect the way we understand regeneration, faith, and the idea that salvation is a cooperative project between God and spiritually neutral man?
3. What is saving faith? Why is knowing true facts about Jesus different from resting upon Jesus Christ Himself, and why does the object of faith matter more than the emotional strength of faith?
4. How are repentance and faith related? Why is repentance more than regret, and why must repentance not be turned into an attempt to reform ourselves before coming to Christ?
5. What is **decisionism**, and how does it differ from the biblical command to make a real response to the gospel? Why is it important to say that a decision may accompany conversion but does not cause or prove regeneration?
6. What is the proper role of the sinner's prayer? How can prayer genuinely express repentance and faith while becoming dangerous when the prayer itself becomes the basis of someone's assurance?
7. According to 2 Corinthians 13:5 and 1 John, why is biblical self-examination different from simply asking whether we can remember a past profession of faith?

What kinds of present evidence should accompany the claim that God has given spiritual life?

8. Explain the statement: **“Christ is the ground of our salvation; the fruit of regeneration is evidence of our salvation.”** How does this protect us both from works-righteousness and from giving careless assurance to an unchanged profession?
9. What is the difference between a Christian struggling with sin and a person settling comfortably into unrepentant sin? Why should we avoid both falsely condemning the struggling believer and falsely assuring someone whose profession is contradicted by a settled life of unbelief?
10. How should the truth that God regenerates and preserves His people affect the way we evangelize? Consider gospel proclamation, persuasion, the call to repent and believe, prayer, assurance, discipleship, and our refusal to manipulate a visible decision.

Chapter 8 — Bringing the Conversation to Christ

Primary Text: 1 Peter 3:13–16

¹³ Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, ¹⁵ but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; ¹⁶ and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

Supporting Texts: Colossians 4:2–6; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Romans 1:18–25; Acts 17:16–34; Romans 3:19–26; Acts 16:25–34; 1 Corinthians 3:5–7; 2 Timothy 2:24–26

Main Truth: Evangelism and apologetics belong together under the lordship of Jesus Christ. We listen carefully, uncover the worldview beneath a person's words, ask questions that bring assumptions into the open, test those assumptions, present the Christian worldview positively, move toward conscience and guilt, proclaim Christ clearly, call sinners to repentance and faith, and trust God alone to give life and growth.

Christ Is Lord Before We Ever Give an Answer

First Peter 3:15 is one of the most important apologetic passages in Scripture, but it is often remembered only for the command to be ready to give a defense. Peter begins somewhere deeper. He begins with Christ. He tells believers to:

“sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts...” — 1 Peter 3:15

That is the foundation of everything we have studied.

- Christ is Lord when we open the Bible.
- Christ is Lord when we speak to the atheist.
- Christ is Lord when we answer the Mormon missionary.
- Christ is Lord when someone questions the reliability of Scripture.
- Christ is Lord when someone says morality is relative.
- Christ is Lord when a self-righteous person believes his goodness will save him.
- Christ is Lord when someone is angry, grieving, confused, curious, resistant, or already under conviction.

This means there is no moment in evangelism when the Christian becomes intellectually neutral in order to reach the unbeliever. But it also means there is no moment when an apologetic method becomes our master.

By this point, we have gathered a number of tools. We have learned to recognize worldviews, expose assumptions, ask questions, test beliefs from the inside, discuss morality and conscience, use the law, explain the gospel, call sinners to repent and believe, and avoid manipulating a profession of faith.

The final challenge is not learning another tool. It is learning how to use the tools we already have with wisdom.

A carpenter does not use a hammer because he happens to be holding one. He uses the tool required by the work in front of him. In the same way, mature evangelism does not force every person through the same argument simply because that is the argument we know best.

The question becomes: **What does this person need next?** That is the central concern of this chapter.

The Goal Was Never the Method

- Methods can be useful.
- Questions can be useful.
- Arguments can be useful.
- Evidence can be useful.
- The law can be useful.
- A memorized gospel presentation can be useful.

But none of them is the goal. The goal is not to successfully complete a sequence. The goal is not to make sure every conversation contains every apologetic concept we have learned. The goal is not to demonstrate that we know how to use internal critique. The goal is not to expose every contradiction in another worldview. The goal is not even to answer every possible objection. The goal is faithfulness to Christ and His gospel.

Apologetics serves that goal by confronting false beliefs, clarifying confusion, exposing inconsistencies, and showing the truthfulness of the Christian worldview. Evangelism serves that goal by proclaiming what God has done in Christ and calling sinners to repent and believe. The two belong together. But neither should become a performance.

The Message Remains Fixed

One of the most important distinctions in evangelism is the difference between the message and the conversation. The conversation changes. The gospel does not.

- One person may begin with atheism.
- Another may begin with religion.
- Another may begin with morality.
- Another may begin with suffering.
- Another may already be under conviction.
- Another may misunderstand who Christ is.
- Another may have sincere questions about Scripture.
- Another may simply want an excuse to avoid God's authority.

The starting point changes. The gospel remains the same.

- Christ died for sins.
- He was buried.
- He rose from the dead.
- Sinners cannot justify themselves before God.
- Salvation is by grace.
- The sinner is commanded to repent and believe.

That message does not need to be redesigned for each person. What changes is the route by which the conversation arrives there.

The Most Important Practical Question

After studying all of the material in this book, the practical question becomes: **What does this person need next?**

- Not: **What method do I know best?**
- Not: **What argument do I want to practice?**
- Not: **What sequence did I memorize?**

But: **What does this person need next?** That question requires listening. A person may need clarification. He may need an assumption exposed. He may need an objection answered. He may need his confidence in his own goodness challenged. He may need his view of Christ corrected. He may need the law. He may need grace. He may simply need someone to stop arguing with him and listen carefully.

The gospel does not change, but wisdom recognizes that not everyone needs the same next sentence.

Read the Person, Not Merely the Argument

It is possible to become so interested in apologetics that we stop listening to people. We hear a statement and immediately classify it.

- Relativism.
- Materialism.
- Skepticism.
- Mormonism.
- Roman Catholicism.
- Atheism.
- Pluralism.

Then we begin delivering the answer associated with the category. But people are not categories.

- A person may repeat a skeptical argument because he has thought deeply about it.
- Another may repeat the exact same argument because someone on social media said it.
- Another may use the argument because he is angry.
- Another may use it because he does not want Christianity to be true.
- Another may genuinely want an answer.

The words can be identical while the person behind the words is very different. That is why good apologetics begins with listening. Greg Koukl's emphasis on questions is useful here. His familiar questions such as **"What do you mean?"** and **"How did you come to that conclusion?"** are not merely techniques for winning arguments. Properly used, they help us understand what the person actually believes before we attempt to answer.

Randy Newman similarly emphasized the importance of engaging the person behind the objection. Questions invite someone to think with us rather than merely receiving a speech.

The method is simple.

1. Ask.
2. Listen.
3. Then respond to what was actually said.

Clarification Comes Before Correction

One of the easiest mistakes in evangelism is correcting something the person did not actually mean. Someone says: “I do not believe in religion.” What does that mean?

- Perhaps he means he rejects organized religion.
- Perhaps he means he rejects hypocrisy.
- Perhaps he means he believes all spiritual beliefs are equally valid.
- Perhaps he means he does not believe God exists.
- Perhaps he means he believes in God but distrusts churches.

Until we know what he means, we do not yet know what we are answering. The same is true when someone says:

- “I believe in science.”
- “I believe in Jesus.”
- “I am spiritual.”
- “I am a good person.”
- “I do not trust the Bible.”
- “Everyone has his own truth.”
- “All religions are basically the same.”

Each statement requires clarification. A good question may do more than a long response.

The Worldview Still Matters

Although Chapter 8 should not reteach worldview apologetics, we must not forget what the earlier chapters established. People do not interpret facts in isolation. They interpret them through a network of beliefs about reality, knowledge, morality, God, humanity, and authority. That worldview affects how they understand every Christian claim.

- If someone believes matter is all that exists, resurrection will immediately appear impossible.
- If someone believes truth is created by the individual, exclusive claims about Christ will appear arrogant.
- If someone believes man is basically good, the cross may seem unnecessary.
- If someone believes spiritual experience determines truth, biblical authority may appear secondary.
- If someone believes God exists only to improve human happiness, judgment will appear incompatible with divine love.

This is why we must learn to hear the worldview beneath the sentence. But once we identify the worldview, we do not need to lecture the person on metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. We use what we have learned to understand the conversation. The categories help us think. They should not make us sound mechanical.

Ask Where the Claim Comes From

Once a claim is clear, the next question is often: **How do you know?** This is where assumptions begin to surface.

- Someone says: "There is no evidence for God." How does he define evidence?
- Someone says: "Science explains everything." How does he know that everything that exists can be investigated scientifically?
- Someone says: "Morality is subjective." Does he live consistently with that belief when confronted with cruelty or injustice?
- Someone says: "All religions lead to God." How does he know that?
- Someone says: "The Bible is unreliable." What makes him believe that?
- Someone says: "Jesus was only a good teacher." What evidence supports that conclusion?

The purpose is not to place the unbeliever on trial while the Christian escapes all questioning. Both sides make claims. Both sides should be willing to give reasons. The Christian should be prepared to explain why he believes what he believes.

Test the Foundation When Necessary

Chapter 5 established the importance of examining a worldview from the inside. We do not need to repeat that entire argument here. The practical issue is knowing when to use it. If a person makes a claim that depends upon assumptions his own worldview cannot support, we can help him see the tension. That is especially useful in discussions involving truth, morality, logic, reason, science, human dignity, and knowledge. But the purpose of internal critique is not humiliation.

We do not want the person merely to say: "Fine. You caught me."

We want him to recognize that the problem may lie deeper than one bad argument. A worldview can use concepts that it cannot consistently explain. When that becomes visible, Christianity should not merely stand nearby criticizing. We must also present the positive account.

Christianity Must Explain, Not Merely Criticize

A purely negative apologetic is incomplete.

- It is not enough to show that relativism contradicts itself.
- It is not enough to show that materialism has difficulty accounting for rational thought.
- It is not enough to show that atheism has difficulty grounding objective morality.
- It is not enough to expose an inconsistency in another religion.

The Christian must eventually explain why his own worldview makes sense of the world. Truth exists because reality comes from God. Logic is not an accidental human invention. The universe is orderly because it is God's creation. Human beings are capable of knowing because they are creatures made in the image of a rational Creator. Human dignity is not based on intelligence, usefulness, race, wealth, health, or power. Human beings possess dignity because God made them in His image.

Objective morality reflects the character and authority of God. This positive account matters. Otherwise apologetics becomes demolition without construction. But even the positive worldview is not the final destination. The God who makes knowledge and morality possible is also the God before whom we are accountable.

The Conversation Must Become Personal

At some point, an apologetic conversation often moves from abstract questions to personal accountability. A person may agree that objective morality requires something greater than human preference. That is significant. But the conversation cannot end there.

The question becomes: **How have we lived before the God whose moral order we acknowledge?** This is where morality moves toward conscience. The law then becomes useful. Not because the law is a trick. Not because we want to embarrass the sinner. But because sinners regularly compare themselves with other sinners instead of comparing themselves with God's holiness. The law closes the mouth. It exposes guilt. It shows why grace is necessary. But the law is not the destination either.

Know When the Law Has Done Its Work

A common mistake is continuing to press guilt after guilt is already obvious. If the person is self-righteous, the law may need to confront him. If he thinks sin is insignificant, the law may need to expose its seriousness. If he thinks he can earn God's favor, the law may show the impossibility of self-justification. But if the person is already broken and asking: "How

can God forgive me?” do not keep proving he is guilty. Give him Christ. The law serves the gospel. Once it has exposed the need, move to the Savior.

Christ Must Become the Center

Eventually the conversation must come to Jesus Christ. This is where apologetics can fail even when it succeeds intellectually. A Christian may answer every objection.

- He may expose contradictions.
- He may defend the resurrection.
- He may demonstrate the weakness of another worldview.
- He may explain objective morality.
- He may defend biblical authority.

And still never proclaim the gospel. That is not enough.

The person does not merely need a better worldview. He needs reconciliation with God. The central questions become:

- Who is Jesus?
- What did He accomplish?
- Why did He die?
- Did He rise?
- What does His death mean for sinners?
- How can a guilty person be reconciled to God?

This is where the gospel must become clear.

The Gospel Does Not Need Improvement

Once the conversation reaches Christ, resist the temptation to make the message more acceptable by removing its difficult elements.

- Do not remove sin.
- Do not remove judgment.
- Do not remove repentance.
- Do not remove the lordship of Christ.
- Do not replace salvation with self-improvement.
- Do not reduce faith to agreement with facts.
- Do not redefine Jesus according to what the listener already wants Him to be.

The gospel is good news precisely because our condition is serious. We are not offering Christ as an accessory to an otherwise successful life. We are proclaiming the Savior to sinners who cannot save themselves.

Call for a Response

Evangelism does not merely provide information. Jesus commands:

“repent and believe in the gospel.” — Mark 1:15

Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailer:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” — Acts 16:31

Therefore, we should not be afraid to call sinners to respond.

- Repent.
- Believe.
- Come to Christ.
- Trust Him.

But the command to respond does not mean we possess the power to produce conversion. That distinction must remain clear.

Do Not Manipulate What Only God Can Produce

Chapter 7 established that regeneration belongs to God. The evangelist does not make spiritually dead people alive.

- We proclaim.
- We reason.
- We plead.
- We answer.
- We call.
- We pray.
- God saves.

That truth gives both confidence and humility. It gives confidence because the effectiveness of the gospel does not ultimately depend upon our personality. It gives humility because we cannot take credit when someone believes. It also protects us from manipulation.

- We do not need emotional pressure to create a decision.
- We do not need to hurry someone into repeating words.

- We do not need to manufacture certainty.
- We do not need to tell someone that a momentary response proves regeneration.
- We can proclaim the promise of God confidently while leaving the work of regeneration to God.

Not Every Conversation Ends With Conversion

This is one of the most important lessons to learn.

- Some conversations end with belief.
- Some end with more questions.
- Some end with resistance.
- Some end with anger.
- Some end with: "I need to think about this."
- Some end with the person changing the subject.
- Some end unexpectedly and never resume.

Faithfulness cannot be measured only by immediate visible results. Paul wrote:

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." — 1 Corinthians 3:6

The distinction is important.

- Paul planted.
- Apollos watered.
- Those actions mattered.
- God used them.

But God gave the growth. This means we should work diligently while refusing to behave as though the outcome ultimately depends upon us.

One Conversation May Only Move One Step

Sometimes the most faithful conversation simply moves the person one step.

- A person may begin convinced that Christianity is intellectually ridiculous and leave recognizing that he has never actually examined it carefully.
- Another may begin convinced that all religions teach the same thing and leave realizing that they make contradictory claims.
- Another may begin trusting his morality and leave realizing that God's standard is higher than comparison with other people.

- Another may begin believing the Bible has no historical basis and leave realizing that his objection was based on inaccurate information.
- Another may hear the gospel clearly for the first time but not yet believe.

That conversation may still have been important. We do not know how God will use what was said. The responsibility of the Christian is to be faithful with the opportunity God provides.

Sometimes the Best Answer Is Another Conversation

The desire to finish everything in one encounter can make evangelism unnatural. A person raises a difficult issue. You may not know the answer. There is nothing wrong with saying: **“I do not know enough about that to answer you well. Let me study it.”** That is better than pretending. It may create another conversation.

Sometimes that is exactly what is needed. Apologetics is not weakened by intellectual honesty. The Christian faith does not depend upon one Christian knowing everything.

Gentleness Is Not Optional

Peter does not merely say to give a defense. He says to do it with gentleness and reverence. That matters because truth can be communicated sinfully.

- A correct answer can be delivered arrogantly.
- A contradiction can be exposed cruelly.
- A question can be used to embarrass rather than clarify.
- An argument can become a way of demonstrating superiority.

That is not Christian apologetics. Second Timothy 2 says:

“The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome...” — 2 Timothy 2:24

The same passage speaks about correcting those who oppose. Therefore correction and gentleness are not enemies. The Christian does not compromise truth. But neither does he need hostility to defend it.

The Person Is More Important Than Showing What You Know

There will always be a temptation to use what we have learned simply because we have learned it. After studying worldviews, we may want every conversation to become worldview analysis. After studying the law, we may want to use the Ten Commandments with everyone. After studying arguments for the resurrection, we may want every

discussion to become historical apologetics. After studying other religions, we may want to correct every theological error immediately.

Wisdom asks: **Does this person need that right now?**

Knowledge gives us options. Wisdom helps us choose.

Evidence Still Has a Place

A presuppositional approach does not require rejecting evidence. Christianity makes historical claims.

- Jesus lived.
- He was crucified.
- The tomb was empty.

The disciples claimed to see the risen Christ. Scripture has a textual history. Christian claims can be examined. Evidence matters. But evidence is never interpreted from nowhere.

The unbeliever and Christian both approach evidence with assumptions about what is possible, what counts as knowledge, and what authority should govern interpretation.

Therefore we use evidence without pretending that facts interpret themselves. We do not fear evidence. We place it within the worldview in which it properly belongs.

Scripture Remains the Primary Weapon

Apologetics can become so focused on philosophy that Scripture begins to disappear. That is a serious mistake. We are not merely defending a philosophical system called Christianity. We are proclaiming what God has revealed.

- Scripture defines God.
- Scripture defines man.
- Scripture defines sin.
- Scripture defines Christ.
- Scripture defines salvation.
- Scripture corrects our apologetic method.
- Scripture judges our assumptions.
- Scripture provides the message we proclaim.

This does not mean every conversation must become a string of isolated proof texts. It means Scripture remains the final authority controlling what we believe and what we say.

Prayer Belongs to Apologetics

Prayer is sometimes treated as something that happens before apologetics rather than something belonging to it. But if conversion belongs to God, prayer becomes essential.

- We pray before conversations.
- We pray while listening.
- We ask God for wisdom.
- We pray for clarity.
- We pray for courage.
- We pray that the person will understand.
- We pray that God will expose false confidence.
- We pray that Christ will be seen clearly.
- We pray after the conversation ends.

Our reasoning does not make prayer unnecessary. Our dependence upon God makes prayer unavoidable.

We Must Know When to Stop Talking

Another mark of maturity is recognizing when more words are not helping.

- Sometimes the person has heard enough.
- Sometimes the same argument is repeating.
- Sometimes emotions have risen so far that nothing productive is happening.
- Sometimes the person is clearly mocking rather than asking.
- Sometimes the conversation needs time.
- Sometimes the best thing we can say is:

“Think about what we have discussed, and I would be glad to continue another time.”

Ending a conversation is not always failure. Wisdom includes knowing when to continue and when to stop.

We Must Also Know When to Speak Plainly

Gentleness does not mean endless hesitation. Sometimes the person understands. The issue is clear. The gospel has been explained. The question becomes whether he will submit to Christ. At that point, more apologetic circling may actually avoid the real issue. There are moments when we should say plainly: “You understand what Christ is calling you to do. You need to repent and believe.” Christian evangelism includes invitation.

- It includes pleading.

- It includes warning.
- It includes the seriousness of judgment.

But it does so without manipulation.

From Apologetics to Evangelism

The relationship between apologetics and evangelism can now be stated simply. Apologetics often asks:

- What do you believe?
- Why do you believe it?
- Can your worldview support that claim?
- What assumptions are controlling your interpretation?
- How does Christianity account for this more consistently?

Evangelism asks:

- Who is God?
- What has gone wrong between man and God?
- Who is Jesus Christ?
- What did He accomplish?
- What must the sinner do?

These are not two unrelated ministries. The apologetic questions often clear the way for the evangelistic answers. But the clearing of the road is not the destination. Christ is.

From Evangelism to Discipleship

The work does not end when someone professes faith. If a person comes to Christ, evangelism begins to give way to discipleship.

- The new believer needs Scripture.
- He needs prayer.
- He needs baptism.
- He needs to be a member of the local church.
- He needs sound teaching.
- He needs correction.
- He needs encouragement.
- He needs fellowship.
- He needs accountability.
- He needs to learn obedience.

- He needs to understand the faith he now professes.

The Great Commission does not merely command us to seek decisions. It commands the church to make disciples. That means the person who professes Christ should not simply be congratulated and abandoned. He should be taught to follow the Lord he now professes.

The Entire Course Comes Together Here

The movement of the book can now be seen clearly. We began with the gospel because the gospel determines where evangelism is going. We then considered presuppositions and worldviews because people do not approach Christianity neutrally. Acts 17 showed us how Paul entered a culture filled with competing beliefs while refusing to surrender the biblical worldview. We learned to ask better questions so that we could understand what people actually mean. We learned to test worldviews from the inside rather than merely throwing isolated facts at them. We learned how morality and conscience move the conversation from abstract questions toward personal guilt. We then came to the question: **“What must I do to be saved?”** And the answer brought us directly to Christ. Now all those pieces belong together. Not as a rigid formula. Not as a script. Not as seven techniques that must appear in every conversation. They belong together as tools under the lordship of Christ.

A Mature Evangelist Becomes More Flexible, Not Less Biblical

This is an important outcome of the course. Biblical conviction should make us more stable in our message while making us more flexible in conversation. The immature evangelist may depend heavily upon a script because he does not yet know what to do when the conversation changes.

The mature evangelist knows the gospel well enough to recognize multiple roads toward it. He knows the worldview categories well enough to recognize assumptions without announcing: “Now I am going to analyze your epistemology.” He knows the law well enough to use it when needed without mechanically walking everyone through the same commandments. He knows apologetic arguments well enough to select one rather than unloading ten. He knows Scripture well enough to bring the right truth into the right moment. The message becomes more stable. The conversation becomes more natural. That is maturity.

Success Is Faithfulness

At the end of the course, we must define success correctly.

- If success means winning arguments, apologetics will eventually produce pride.

- If success means obtaining decisions, evangelism may eventually become manipulative.
- If success means never being unable to answer, fear will eventually control us.
- If success means that every person believes immediately, discouragement will eventually overwhelm us.

Biblical success is faithfulness.

- Did we represent Christ truthfully?
- Did we listen carefully?
- Did we answer honestly?
- Did we use Scripture faithfully?
- Did we refuse to compromise the gospel?
- Did we treat the person with gentleness?
- Did we proclaim Christ when the opportunity opened?
- Did we call for repentance and faith?
- Did we refuse to manipulate?
- Did we trust God?

Those are questions we can answer. The final outcome belongs to God.

God Gives the Growth

Paul's words provide an appropriate conclusion to everything we have studied:

"I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." — 1 Corinthians 3:6

Then:

"neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth." — **1 Corinthians 3:7**

This does not make our work unimportant.

- Paul planted.
- Apollos watered.

God chose to work through human proclamation.

- We therefore study.
- We prepare.
- We speak.

- We reason.
- We answer.
- We preach.
- We plead.
- We disciple.

But God gives life.

- God opens hearts.
- God brings sinners to Christ.
- God preserves His people.

Therefore the evangelist can work diligently without believing everything depends upon him. And he can remain humble when God grants visible fruit.

Main Truth to Remember

Evangelism and apologetics are not competing ministries. They belong together.

- The Christian listens because the person matters.
- He asks questions because assumptions matter.
- He examines worldviews because foundations matter.
- He uses evidence because historical truth matters.
- He uses the law because guilt matters.
- He proclaims Christ because the gospel matters.
- He calls sinners to repent and believe because God commands a response.
- He refuses manipulation because regeneration belongs to God.
- He discipless those who profess Christ because the Great Commission does not end with a decision.

And through all of it, Christ remains Lord. The goal is not to turn every Christian into a professional philosopher. The goal is to prepare Christians to think biblically, listen carefully, answer wisely, proclaim Christ clearly, and trust God completely.

Apologetics serves the gospel.

Evangelism proclaims Christ.

God gives the growth.

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. According to 1 Peter 3:15, why must recognizing Christ as Lord come before giving a defense of the Christian hope?
2. What is the difference between keeping the gospel message fixed and allowing the course of an evangelistic conversation to change according to the person?
3. Why is the question **“What does this person need next?”** an important part of putting the material from this book into practice?
4. How can asking for clarification prevent us from answering an argument or objection that the person did not actually make?
5. Why must internal critique be followed by a positive presentation of the Christian worldview rather than merely exposing problems in unbelieving thought?
6. How can a conversation move from questions about worldview and morality toward personal accountability before God without forcing the transition?
7. Why is it important to recognize when the law has already accomplished its purpose and the person needs to hear about Christ and grace?
8. What is the proper relationship between evidence, worldview, Scripture, and the gospel in Christian apologetics?
9. According to 1 Corinthians 3:5–7, how should the distinction between planting, watering, and God giving the growth affect the way Christians measure success in evangelism?

10. Looking back over the entire book, explain how worldview, questions, internal critique, conscience, the law, the gospel, repentance and faith, and dependence upon God can function together without becoming a rigid evangelistic formula.

Practical Guide

“I Think I’m a Good Person”

When someone says, **“I think I’m a good person,”** do not assume you already know what they mean. Listen first. They may mean that they treat people well, provide for their family, avoid serious crimes, give to others, or simply believe they are better than most people. Before correcting them, find out where their confidence rests.

Instead of immediately telling them, **“You are not a good person,”** help them examine what they mean by good. A simple question such as **“What do you mean by good?”** often opens the conversation naturally. If they explain that they try to treat people well or that they have never done anything terribly wrong, ask, **“Compared with whom?”**

That question often reveals the standard they are using. Most people can find someone worse than themselves, but God does not judge us by comparing us with the worst person we know. You can then ask, **“Do you think God has a standard of goodness?”** If they say yes, continue with something like, **“Would you be willing to see how you and I compare with His standard?”**

Romans 3:23 says:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The conversation can then continue by allowing God's law to address the conscience rather than simply arguing about whether they are good.

You: “Have you ever lied?”

They say: “Sure. Everybody has.”

You: “So have I. Have you ever taken something that was not yours, even something small?”

They say: “Probably.”

You: “Jesus also teaches that sin reaches the heart. Have you ever had thoughts, hatred, lust, or desires that you knew were wrong?”

The point is not simply to accumulate violations. God's law reveals that sin involves more than dramatic outward crimes. It reaches our words, actions, thoughts, motives, and desires. Jesus takes the matter even deeper when He identifies loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength as the greatest commandment. No one can honestly claim to have fulfilled that perfectly.

You can then ask: “If God judged us by His standard rather than by comparing us with people worse than us, would either of us be innocent?”

Common Responses and Objections

The response should usually lead to another question rather than immediately becoming a lecture. Questions keep them thinking about their own position and help reveal what they are actually trusting in.

They say: “Nobody is perfect.”

You: “That is true. But does everyone being guilty make everyone innocent?”

They say: “I know I have done some wrong things, but I have done more good than bad.”

You: “If someone committed a crime, would doing good things afterward erase their guilt before a good judge?”

They say: “But I’m better than a lot of people.”

You: “Do you think God will judge you according to what other people have done, or according to His own standard?”

They say: “God knows my heart.”

You: “If God knows everything in our hearts—our motives, thoughts, desires, anger, pride, and secret sins—does that make the situation better or more serious?”

They say: “I try my best.”

You: “Is doing our best the same thing as meeting God's standard?”

These questions are not a script that must be used in order. Listen to the response and choose the question that addresses what they actually said.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once they begin to recognize that their goodness cannot make them righteous before God, do not continue pressing the law simply because there are more commandments you could discuss. The purpose is to expose the need for a Savior, not to leave them buried under a list of failures.

This is the transition:

You: “This is why Jesus matters. Christianity does not say good people earn heaven. It says guilty sinners need a Savior. Christ died for sinners and rose from the dead. Our hope is not that we have done enough good. Our hope is Christ.”

Romans 5:8 says:

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

You can then ask: “What are you trusting in to make you right with God—your goodness, or Christ?”

That question brings the conversation back to the central issue. They began by placing confidence in themselves. The gospel calls them away from confidence in their own moral record and toward Jesus Christ.

What to Listen For

When they say, “**I am a good person,**” listen for where their confidence rests. They may be trusting in morality, good intentions, family responsibility, charitable actions, religious activity, or simply the fact that other people appear worse. The deeper issue is usually self-righteousness.

Useful questions include “**What do you mean by good?**”, “**Compared with whom?**”, “**Do you think God has a standard of goodness?**”, and “**What are you trusting in to make you right with God?**” These questions are not a required script. They help reveal where they are placing their confidence.

The Goal

The goal is not merely to move them from “**I am a good person**” to “**I am a bad person.**” It is to help them understand that they are guilty before God and need Jesus Christ.

The law exposes the need. The gospel gives the answer. Once they understand their guilt, do not leave them with the law.

Bring them to Christ.

“I Don’t Believe God Exists”

When someone says, **“I don’t believe God exists,”** do not assume you know why. One person may mean they have never seen evidence they find convincing. Another may believe science has eliminated the need for God. Someone else may be reacting to suffering, a bad church experience, or the hypocrisy of Christians. Before presenting an argument, find out what they actually mean.

Begin with a simple question:

You: “When you say you don’t believe God exists, what led you to that conclusion?”

Their answer tells you where to go next.

They say: “There just isn’t any evidence.”

You: “What would you consider evidence for God?”

Or: **They say:** “Everything can be explained naturally.”

You: “Do you believe the physical universe is all that exists?”

If they say yes, you now know that the issue is larger than a lack of evidence. They are viewing reality through a materialistic worldview.

Examine the Foundation

Do not unload every argument you know. Choose something connected to what they are already claiming.

If they believe human beings are entirely the result of unguided physical processes, you can ask how that worldview accounts for the things they are using in the conversation itself: reason, logic, truth, morality, and knowledge.

A conversation might continue:

They say: “We’re basically highly evolved animals. Our brains developed through evolution.”

You: “Do you believe our thoughts are ultimately produced by physical processes in the brain?”

They say: “Yes.”

You: “Then how do you distinguish between a thought being physically produced and a thought actually being true?”

The point is not that unbelievers cannot reason. They obviously can. The question is whether their worldview can account for the rational tools they are already using.

You might also ask: “Why should an accidental universe be governed by consistent laws that human minds are capable of understanding?”

Or, if morality becomes the issue:

You: “Do you believe some things are really wrong regardless of what society thinks?”

Again, stay with the direction of the conversation rather than firing several arguments at once.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “Science explains how the universe works. We don’t need God.”

You: “Does explaining how something works answer why there is an orderly universe there to study in the first place?”

They say: “I only believe what I can see.”

You: “Can you see logic, truth, or the laws of mathematics themselves, or do you know them in another way?”

They say: “There is no proof of God.”

You: “What kind of proof would you accept, and why should that be the standard?”

They say: “If God existed, everyone would know it.”

You: “What if the problem is not that God has failed to reveal Himself, but that people do not want to acknowledge what He has revealed?”

That last question gives you a natural opening to Romans 1. Scripture describes humanity not as neutral people waiting helplessly for God to provide enough evidence, but as people living in God’s world while suppressing the truth He has made known.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not be satisfied if they eventually admit, **“Maybe there is some kind of Creator.”** Christianity is not merely defending generic theism. The Creator is the God to whom we are accountable, and He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

You can transition by saying:

You: “Christianity is claiming more than that something must have caused the universe. It says the God who created us has spoken, that we are accountable to Him, and that He has acted in history through Jesus Christ.”

From there the conversation can move toward sin, Christ's death, the resurrection, repentance, and faith.

What to Listen For

Listen for the reason behind **“I don’t believe God exists.”** Is the real issue evidence, science, suffering, morality, materialism, anger with God, or simply unwillingness to acknowledge divine authority? Do not answer atheism as a category. Answer the argument they are actually making.

Useful questions include **“What led you to that conclusion?”**, **“What would count as evidence?”**, **“How does your worldview account for that?”**, and **“If Christianity were true, would you want to know?”**

The Goal

The goal is not merely to move someone from **“There is no God”** to **“Maybe a God exists.”** Bring them toward the God who has revealed Himself and ultimately toward Jesus Christ.

“Science Explains Everything”

When someone says, “**I believe in science,**” or “**Science explains everything,**” do not respond as though Christianity and science are natural enemies. Science is enormously useful for investigating the created world. The real question is what they mean by saying science explains *everything*.

Begin by clarifying the claim.

You: “When you say science explains everything, do you mean science is very successful at explaining the physical world, or that nothing exists unless science can investigate it?”

Those are very different claims.

If they mean the second, ask how they know it. The statement “**Only scientifically testable things are real**” is not itself something established by a scientific experiment. It is a philosophical claim about what counts as knowledge.

Ask About What Science Assumes

Scientific investigation works because certain things are already true. The universe behaves with remarkable regularity. Human reasoning can discover patterns. Mathematics corresponds to the physical world. Experiments performed under the same conditions can be repeated with meaningful expectations.

Instead of giving a lecture, use one of those facts as a question.

They say: “Science is all we need.”

You: “Why is science possible in the first place? Why should the universe be orderly enough for our minds to understand it?”

They say: “That is just how the universe works.”

You: “I agree that it works that way. I’m asking what explains why we should expect that kind of order.”

Christianity has a positive answer. The universe is not an accident governed by inexplicable regularities. It is creation. A rational God made an ordered world and created human beings capable of studying it.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “We don’t need God because science explains how things happen.”

You: “If I explain how an engine works, have I explained why the engine exists or who made it?”

They say: “I only believe things that can be scientifically proven.”

You: “Can that rule itself be scientifically proven?”

They say: “Religion is faith, but science is facts.”

You: “Do scientists interpret facts without any assumptions about reason, evidence, or what kinds of explanations are possible?”

They say: “Evolution proves there is no God.”

You: “Even if we discussed every scientific question about origins, how would a biological process prove that God does not exist?”

The goal is not to attack science. It is to expose the philosophical conclusions that are sometimes smuggled in under the name of science.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once they recognize that science cannot answer every kind of question, do not stop with **“Christianity explains the universe better.”** Move toward the God who created that universe.

You might say: “Christianity gives us a reason to expect an orderly creation that rational minds can investigate. But the Bible says something more important. The God whose world we study is also the God who made us, and we are accountable to Him.”

Then move toward Christ. Christianity makes claims that enter history: Jesus lived, was crucified, and rose from the dead. The resurrection is not a rejection of history or evidence. It is a claim that God acted in history.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether **“science”** actually means science or whether it is being used to express materialism: the belief that physical matter is all that exists. Those are not the same thing.

Useful questions include **“What do you mean by science?”**, **“Can science answer every kind of question?”**, **“Why should nature be orderly?”**, and **“Can the claim that only science gives knowledge itself be scientifically demonstrated?”**

The Goal

Do not try to make them suspicious of science. Help them distinguish **science** from a worldview that claims science is the only possible source of truth. Then bring the conversation beyond creation to the Creator, and from the Creator to Christ.

“Everyone Has Their Own Truth”

When someone says, **“Everyone has their own truth,”** first determine what they mean. They may simply mean that people have different opinions and experiences. That is obviously true. But they may mean that contradictory beliefs can both be true simply because different people believe them.

Do not begin with a lecture on relativism. Clarify the statement.

You: “When you say everyone has their own truth, do you mean people have different opinions, or that something can actually be true for you and false for me at the same time?”

That distinction usually moves the conversation forward quickly.

Test the Claim With a Question

If they mean truth itself is relative to each person, ask whether that statement also applies to itself.

They say: “There is no absolute truth.”

You: “Is that absolutely true?”

Or: **They say:** “Everyone decides what is true for themselves.”

You: “Is that something everyone has to accept, or is that only true for you?”

The purpose is not to be clever. The question reveals that a universal denial of objective truth usually depends upon an objective truth claim.

You can also make the issue practical.

You: “If I sincerely believe something that contradicts what you believe, does sincerity make both of us correct?”

They will usually recognize that sincerity cannot determine reality.

Opinion Is Not the Same as Truth

Some things really are personal.

- One person prefers coffee.

- Another prefers tea.
- One person enjoys country music.
- Another cannot stand it.

Those are preferences.

But whether Jesus rose from the dead is not a preference. Either the resurrection occurred or it did not. Our feelings cannot change the event.

You can say: “Christianity isn't saying, ‘Jesus works for me.’ It is making a claim about what actually happened. If Christ rose from the dead, that is true whether either of us likes it or not.”

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “What is true for you may not be true for me.”

You: “Could the statement ‘what is true for you may not be true for me’ itself be false for me?”

They say: “Nobody can really know the truth.”

You: “How do you know that nobody can know?”

They say: “It is arrogant to say your religion is true.”

You: “Is believing something is true automatically arrogant, or does it depend on whether we have good reasons for believing it?”

They say: “All religions contain some truth.”

You: “Could they contain some true things and still contradict each other about the most important things?”

The questions force no conclusion by themselves. They simply expose the difficulty of denying objective truth while continuing to make objective claims.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once the person recognizes that truth cannot simply be created by preference, Christianity must be presented positively.

You can say: “Christianity says truth does not originate in us. God created reality, and He has revealed Himself. That means the question isn't what truth we prefer. The question is what is actually true.”

Then bring the issue to Jesus.

You: “So the most important question isn't whether Christianity is true for me. It is whether Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be and whether He really rose from the dead.”

That brings an abstract discussion about truth toward the central claim of the gospel.

What to Listen For

Listen carefully for the difference between “**people disagree**” and “**there is no objective truth.**” Do not argue against relativism if the person is merely acknowledging that people have different perspectives.

Useful questions include “**What do you mean by your own truth?**”, “**Is that statement true for everyone?**”, “**Can contradictory claims both describe reality correctly?**”, and “**Does believing something sincerely make it true?**”

The Goal

The goal is not merely to make them admit that relativism contradicts itself. The goal is to establish that truth is discovered rather than created by personal preference and then move toward the central truth claim Christianity makes:

Who is Jesus Christ, and what does His death and resurrection mean for us?

“All Religions Lead to God”

When someone says, **“All religions lead to God,”** do not immediately begin listing the differences between Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Mormonism, or other religions. First find out what they mean. They may simply mean that all religions encourage people to live morally, or they may believe that God accepts sincere people regardless of what they believe. The claim sounds tolerant, but it usually assumes that contradictory beliefs can somehow all lead to the same destination.

Begin by clarifying the claim.

You: “When you say all religions lead to God, what do you mean?”

They say: “They all basically teach the same thing.”

You: “What would you say that same thing is?”

If they say that all religions teach people to be good, you now know where the conversation needs to go. Christianity does not teach that sinners reach God by becoming sufficiently good. The gospel teaches that our goodness cannot reconcile us to God and that this is precisely why Christ came.

You can then ask: “If one religion says Jesus is God and another says He is not, can both claims be true in the same sense?”

That question exposes the deeper problem. Religions do not merely offer different cultural expressions of the same message. They make contradictory claims about God, Jesus Christ, sin, salvation, revelation, judgment, and what happens after death.

Christianity proclaims that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He died for sins, that He rose bodily from the dead, and that sinners are reconciled to God through Him. Islam denies crucial parts of those claims. Mormonism uses Christian terminology while teaching a very different doctrine of God and Christ. Jehovah’s Witnesses deny the full deity of Christ. Other religious systems may reject the biblical understanding of sin and salvation altogether.

They cannot all be describing reality correctly at the same time.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “But all religions teach love.”

You: “Even if several religions teach people to love others, does agreeing on one moral principle mean they agree about who God is or how we are reconciled to Him?”

They say: “God would not reject someone who sincerely follows another religion.”

You: “Does sincerity make a belief true?”

They say: “They are just different paths up the same mountain.”

You: “What if the religions themselves disagree about whether there is a mountain, what is at the top, and how anyone gets there?”

They say: “It seems arrogant for Christianity to say it is the only way.”

You: “Would a claim become arrogant simply because it is exclusive, or would the real question be whether it is true?”

These questions move the conversation away from whether exclusivity feels uncomfortable and toward whether the claims themselves are true.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not leave the conversation at, “**Religions contradict each other.**” The goal is not merely to prove religious pluralism impossible. Move toward the person of Christ.

You can say: “Christianity is not claiming that our religion is better because Christians are better people. The central claim is that God acted to save sinners through Jesus Christ. If Christ really died for sins and rose from the dead, then we cannot simply treat Him as one spiritual option among many.”

Then ask - **You:** “Who do you believe Jesus Christ is?”

That question takes the conversation from religion in general to the central issue.

What to Listen For

Listen for what “**all religions lead to God**” actually means to them. They may be defending sincerity, morality, tolerance, or the idea that doctrine does not matter. Do not answer all of those possibilities at once.

Useful questions include **“In what sense are all religions the same?”**, **“Can contradictory claims both be true?”**, **“Does sincerity determine truth?”**, and **“Who do you believe Jesus is?”**

The Goal

The goal is not merely to convince them that religions disagree. Help them see that the differences concern the most important questions imaginable: who God is, who Jesus is, what our problem is, and how sinners can be reconciled to God. Then bring the conversation to Christ.

“I Believe in God”

When someone says, **“I believe in God,”** do not assume that you now share the same understanding of God. The word *God* can mean very different things to different people. They may believe in the God of Scripture, a vague higher power, an impersonal spiritual force, a God who never judges, or simply someone they pray to when life becomes difficult.

Rather than assuming, ask them to explain.

You: “What do you believe God is like?”

Their answer can tell you much more than the original statement.

You can then ask: “What do you believe God expects from us?”

And eventually -**You:** “Who do you believe Jesus is?”

The goal is not to conduct a theological examination. These questions help determine whether the person knows the God revealed in Scripture or has constructed a god according to personal preference.

Believing That God Exists Is Not the Same as Trusting Him

A person can believe God exists while remaining far from Him. James reminds us that even demons believe that God is one. Mere acknowledgment of God's existence is not saving faith.

The important question is not simply, **“Do you believe there is a God?”** It is what they believe about Him and where their confidence rests before Him.

A conversation might sound like this:

They say: “I’ve always believed in God.”

You: “What do you believe makes you right with Him?”

They say: “I just try to live a decent life.”

You: “Do you think living a decent life removes the guilt of the times we have sinned against Him?”

Now you have discovered that the issue may not be belief in God's existence at all. It may be self-righteousness.

Or:

They say: “I believe God loves everyone and would never judge anyone.”

You: “Do you think a loving God also cares about justice?”

Now the issue is their understanding of God's character.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “I believe in God, so I think I’m okay.”

You: “Do you think simply believing God exists is the same thing as being reconciled to Him?”

They say: “I pray all the time.”

You: “When you pray, who do you believe you are praying to, and what are you trusting Him for?”

They say: “God knows I’m a good person.”

You: “If God knows us completely, what does He know about the sins and motives nobody else sees?”

They say: “My relationship with God is personal.”

You: “Does a personal relationship with God mean we can decide for ourselves what He is like, or does God have the right to reveal Himself to us?”

These questions move the conversation beyond vague belief toward revelation and accountability.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once you understand what they mean by God, move toward Jesus.

You can say: “The Bible does not only tell us that God exists. It tells us who He is, what has gone wrong between us and Him, and what He has done through Jesus Christ to reconcile sinners to Himself.”

Then **You** ask: “What do you believe Jesus accomplished when He died?”

Their answer may reveal whether they understand the gospel at all.

What to Listen For

Listen for the god they actually describe. Is God merely loving but never just? Is He distant? Is He an impersonal force? Is He someone who rewards decent people? Do they speak about Jesus at all?

Useful questions include **“What is God like?”**, **“What does God require?”**, **“What are you trusting in to be right with Him?”**, and **“Who is Jesus?”**

The Goal

Do not stop at agreement that God exists. Bring them from a vague belief in God to the God who has revealed Himself in Scripture, and ultimately to Jesus Christ.

“I Believe in Jesus Too”

When someone says, **“I believe in Jesus too,”** do not assume that you are talking about the same Jesus. Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness theology, Islam, liberal Christianity, and other systems can all speak positively about Jesus while defining Him very differently. Shared vocabulary does not necessarily mean shared faith.

Start by clarifying the identity of Christ.

You: “Who do you believe Jesus is?”

Their answer should determine what comes next.

They say: “He was a great teacher and prophet.”

You: “Do you believe He is eternally God?”

Or:

They say: “Of course He is the Son of God.”

You: “What do you mean by ‘Son of God’?”

That question matters because different religions use the same phrase in very different ways.

The issue is not whether they admire Jesus or speak respectfully about Him. The issue is whether they are trusting in the biblical Christ.

John 1:1–3 places Christ on the Creator side of the Creator-creature distinction. He is not presented as a being who came into existence later. He was with God, He was God, and all things came into being through Him.

So when someone says, **“I believe in Jesus too,”** the conversation should move toward His identity, His work, and what they believe salvation through Him means.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “I believe Jesus is the Son of God.”

You: “Do you believe He has eternally been God, or did He have a beginning?”

They say: “Jesus was created by God.”

You: “If all things came into being through Him, where would a created Jesus fit in that statement?”

They say: “Jesus is divine, but He is not the same as God.”

You: “What do you mean by divine, and how do you understand John 1 when it says the Word was God?”

They say: “It does not matter exactly who Jesus is as long as we follow His teachings.”

You: “If Jesus made claims about who He is, can we really separate His teaching from His identity?”

They say: “We both believe in Jesus, so our differences are small.”

You: “If we disagree about who Jesus actually is and what He accomplished, are we really trusting in the same Christ?”

The purpose is not to overwhelm them with verses. Use enough Scripture to clarify the real difference.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once the identity question is open, move toward what Christ accomplished.

You: “What do you believe Jesus accomplished on the cross?”

Then:

You: “How is a sinner made right with God?”

Those questions often reveal whether the difference is only vocabulary or whether the gospel itself has been changed.

First Corinthians 15 centers the gospel on Christ dying for sins, being buried, and rising again. Acts 16:31 directs the sinner to believe in the Lord Jesus. Saving faith is not faith in a name detached from the person behind it. It is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture.

What to Listen For

Listen carefully to how they describe Jesus. Words such as **Son of God, Savior, prophet, created, divine, spirit being, teacher, Messiah, or brother** may sound familiar while carrying very different meanings.

Useful questions include **“Who is Jesus?”**, **“Has He eternally been God?”**, **“Was He created?”**, **“What did His death accomplish?”**, and **“How is a sinner made right with God?”**

The Goal

The goal is not merely to get agreement that Jesus is important. Bring them to the biblical Christ. If the identity of Christ changes, the gospel changes with it.

The Mormon

When speaking with a Mormon, familiar Christian language can hide major differences. They may speak about God, Jesus, Scripture, salvation, grace, prophets, and testimony, but those terms do not always mean what they mean in biblical Christianity. Listen first and clarify what they actually believe.

A common starting point is their personal testimony about the Book of Mormon.

They say: “I prayed about the Book of Mormon, and God confirmed to me that it is true.”

You: “How do you know that confirmation came from God?”

They may refer to a strong inner feeling or a confirmation in the heart.

They say: “I felt the Spirit confirm it.”

You: “Could a Muslim or someone in another religion pray and feel equally certain that God confirmed their religion?”

That question matters because people in contradictory religions can report powerful spiritual experiences. A feeling by itself cannot determine truth.

The deeper question is:

Does God's revelation judge our experience, or does our experience judge God's revelation?

First Timothy 4:1 warns that not every spiritual influence is from God. Spiritual experiences must therefore be tested rather than automatically trusted.

A Few Important Facts to Know

Mormonism teaches a **restoration**, not merely another Christian denomination. Joseph Smith claimed that the true church had fallen into apostasy and had to be restored through new revelation, new prophets, and additional scripture.

Mormonism recognizes additional authoritative writings such as the **Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price**. That immediately raises the question of authority.

You: “If a later revelation contradicts what God has already revealed, which one should have final authority?”

Galatians 1:8–9 is especially important here because Paul warns that even if **an angel from heaven** proclaims a different gospel, that message must be rejected.

That becomes especially significant when a religious system's founding story includes an angelic messenger.

Eternal Progression

One of the most important doctrinal differences concerns the nature of God. Traditional Mormon teaching includes the idea of **eternal progression**, in which God the Father was once as man is and progressed to godhood, while faithful humans may also progress toward exaltation.

That is not a small difference. The Bible presents God as eternally God, not as a being who became God. If this issue comes up, ask:

They say: “We believe in the same God.”

You: “Do you believe God the Father was once a man who progressed to become God?” If they say yes:

You: “Then are we describing the same God if Scripture presents God as eternally God and unchanging?”

Do not unload every Mormon doctrine at once. Use the fact when it becomes relevant.

Who Is Jesus?

Mormonism also uses the name Jesus while understanding His identity differently from historic biblical Christianity.

You ask: “Who do you believe Jesus was before He came into the world?”

Then **You** ask: “Has He eternally been God, or did He have a beginning?”

John 1:1–3 is a useful place to go because it presents Christ as eternally existing and as the One through whom all things came into being. The question is not whether Mormons speak highly of Jesus. They do. The question is whether the Jesus being described is the same Jesus revealed in Scripture.

Salvation: Grace or Grace Plus Works?

This is another important area from the Mormon system. Mormon teaching can speak strongly about grace while also making exaltation and the highest blessings conditional upon obedience, ordinances, temple requirements, and continued faithfulness. That gives you a very practical question:

You: “What makes a sinner right with God?” Or,

You: “Is salvation entirely received by grace through faith, or does our obedience complete what Christ began?”

Ephesians 2:8–9 says salvation is by grace through faith and excludes works as the basis for boasting.

The contrast to listen for is between **unconditional salvation received through Christ** and a system in which the highest salvation becomes **conditional upon additional works and ordinances**.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “The Bible has been corrupted, so God gave us additional revelation.”

You: “What evidence shows that the Bible was corrupted in a way that required restoration?”

They say: “I know the Book of Mormon is true because I prayed about it.”

You: “How would you distinguish a true spiritual confirmation from a false one?”

They say: “God still speaks through prophets.”

You: “How should a prophet be tested?”

They say: “The Bible and the Book of Mormon agree.”

You: “If a later Mormon teaching conflicts with Scripture, which authority should decide the issue?”

They say: “We believe salvation is by grace.”

You: “Then what role do ordinances, temple requirements, obedience, and exaltation play in whether someone receives the highest salvation?”

They say: “We believe in the same Jesus.”

You: “Has Jesus eternally been God, or is He a being who came into existence within a larger progression?”

These questions are meant to expose the foundation without turning the conversation into an attack.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not make the goal simply, “**Convince them Joseph Smith was wrong.**” A person can lose confidence in Mormonism and still remain without Christ.

Bring the discussion back to the gospel.

You: “The reason these questions matter is that Scripture gives us a specific God, a specific Christ, and a specific gospel. If we change who God is, who Jesus is, or how salvation works, we change the gospel itself.”

Then move to the biblical message: Christ died for sins, was buried, rose again, and sinners are called to believe in the Lord Jesus.

First Corinthians 15 gives the content of the gospel. Acts 16:31 gives the direct call to believe. Ephesians 2:8–9 guards salvation as the gift of grace rather than human achievement.

What to Listen For

Listen for **personal testimony, continuing revelation, restoration, additional scripture, prophets, eternal progression, the identity of Christ, ordinances, exaltation, and the relationship between grace and works.** Those areas usually reveal the deepest differences.

Useful questions include “**How do you know that revelation came from God?**”, “**How should a prophet be tested?**”, “**What has final authority?**”, “**Has God always been God?**”, “**Who is Jesus?**”, and “**What makes a sinner right with God?**”

The Goal

The goal is not merely to destroy Mormon arguments. The goal is to expose false confidence lovingly, test their claims by Scripture, and bring them to the biblical God, the biblical

Christ, and the biblical gospel. Do not leave them only with reasons to doubt Mormonism. Bring them to Christ.

The Jehovah's Witness

When speaking with a Jehovah's Witness, do not assume that familiar words such as *God*, *Jesus*, *Bible*, and *salvation* mean the same thing they mean in historic Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses are usually well trained and often prepared for common Christian responses, so the goal is not to overwhelm them with information. Listen carefully, ask questions, and use their own Bible when possible.

The most important issue is usually the identity of Jesus Christ.

They say: "Jesus is the Son of God, but He is not Jehovah."

You: "Who do you believe Jesus was before He came to earth?"

Jehovah's Witness teaching identifies Jesus with Michael the Archangel and regards Michael as Jehovah's first direct creation, through whom the rest of creation came into existence.

That gives you a very useful line of questioning.

You: "If Jesus is a created being, how can Scripture say that all things came into existence through Him?"

First Corinthians 8:6 is especially useful here. If **all things** came through Jesus, then ask whether Jesus can belong to the category of the things that were created through Him.

Do not try to use fifteen passages at once. Let one question develop.

A Few Important Facts to Know

Jehovah's Witnesses deny the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity and reject the full deity of Christ.

One useful line of discussion concerns Jesus as Judge. John 5:22 says judgment has been given to the Son. Matthew 16:27 presents Jesus returning to judge, while Revelation 22:12–13 connects the coming Judge with the titles **Alpha and Omega**. Isaiah 40:10 uses similar language for the coming of Jehovah. Together, these passages raise the question of why Jesus performs roles and bears titles belonging to Jehovah.

Another strong connection is Psalm 102 with Hebrews 1:8–12. Psalm 102 speaks of Jehovah as the unchanging Creator, while Hebrews applies that language to the Son. John 12:41 can also be compared with Isaiah 6: Isaiah saw Jehovah's glory, while John identifies that vision with Jesus.

Again, do not use every passage at once. Pick one issue and stay with it.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “Jesus is Michael the Archangel.”

You: “Where does Scripture directly say that Jesus is Michael?”

Then:

You: “If all creation came through Christ, how can Christ Himself belong to the created order?”

They say: “Jesus is not Jehovah.”

You: “Why does Hebrews 1 apply to Jesus a Psalm that speaks about Jehovah as the eternal Creator?”

They say: “Jesus should not be worshiped as God.”

You: “How do you understand John 20:28, where Thomas addresses Jesus as ‘My Lord and my God,’ and Hebrews 1:6, where the angels are commanded to worship Him?”

They say: “Only Jehovah can judge.”

You: “Then why does Jesus say that all judgment has been entrusted to the Son?”

These questions force the person to deal with the biblical text rather than merely repeating the Watchtower explanation.

The Watchtower Authority Question

Another major issue is authority. Jehovah’s Witness teaching places enormous weight on the Watchtower organization and its Governing Body, which claims a unique role as Jehovah’s earthly organization and connects its authority with the “faithful slave” of Matthew 24:45.

That gives you an important question:

You: “If Scripture and the Watchtower appear to disagree, which one has final authority?”

Then:

You: “How would you know if the Governing Body interpreted Scripture incorrectly?”

Let them answer before introducing historical problems.

Failed Prophecy

Jehovah’s Witness history also includes repeated prophetic expectations connected with dates such as **1914, 1915, 1918, 1925, 1943, and 1975**, followed by reinterpretations or changes when those expectations were not fulfilled.

The date **607 B.C.** is especially important because it is foundational to the Watchtower calculation connected with 1914.

Do not begin by shouting, “**False prophets.**” Ask-

You: “How should we test someone or an organization that claims to speak for God?” Then-

You: “What should we conclude when prophetic expectations repeatedly fail?”

Deuteronomy 18:22 is useful here because Scripture itself gives a standard for testing prophetic claims.

The 144,000 and the Great Crowd

Jehovah’s Witness theology divides believers into different groups. The **144,000 anointed class** are understood to belong to the New Covenant and have a heavenly hope, while the **great crowd** expects everlasting life on a paradise earth. Only those claiming to belong to the anointed class partake of the Memorial elements.

If this issue comes up, ask:

You: “Where does Scripture teach that Christians are divided into two classes with different covenant relationships and different eternal hopes?”

Let them show you the biblical basis.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not make the goal simply proving the Watchtower wrong.

You can say: “The reason these questions matter is that if Jesus is not who Scripture says He is, then we have changed the One we are being asked to trust for salvation.”

Then return to the central questions:

You: “Is Jesus Creator or creature?”

You: “Who is He according to Scripture?”

You: “What did He accomplish for sinners?”

You: “What are you trusting in to make you right with God?”

What to Listen For

Listen for **Michael the Archangel, created Jesus, Watchtower authority, the Governing Body, 1914, 607 B.C., the 144,000, the great crowd, and the denial of Christ’s full deity.**

Useful questions include **“Where does Scripture say Jesus is Michael?”, “If all things were created through Christ, how can Christ be part of creation?”, “Who has final authority?”, “How should a prophet be tested?”, and “Who is Jesus according to Scripture?”**

The Goal

Do not try to win a contest with someone who has been trained to defend a system. Use Scripture carefully. Ask questions. Expose contradictions when necessary. Keep returning to the identity of Jesus Christ.

The purpose is not simply to dismantle the Watchtower. Bring them to the biblical Christ.

The Roman Catholic

When speaking with a Roman Catholic, do not assume that every Catholic understands or personally believes every official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Some may know Catholic theology deeply. Others may identify as Catholic primarily because of family, culture, baptism, or childhood practice.

Begin with what they personally believe.

You: “What do you believe makes someone right with God?”

That question often reveals whether the real issue is justification, works, sacraments, church authority, or something else.

They say: “You have to have faith, live a good life, and follow the Church.”

You: “What role do those works play in making someone righteous before God?”

Now the real disagreement begins to come into focus.

The Central Issue: Justification

Roman Catholic theology understands justification as involving an ongoing process in which grace, faith, works, and sacraments cooperate as the believer becomes righteous. Protestant theology understands justification as God’s forensic declaration that the believer is righteous because of Christ’s righteousness, received through faith rather than human merit.

Do not immediately accuse the Catholic person of believing in “works salvation.” Ask what they mean.

They say: “We are saved by grace too.”

You: “When you say salvation is by grace, do our works contribute to our justification, or are good works the result of already having been justified?”

That distinction gets directly to the issue.

Grace and the Sacraments

Roman Catholic theology understands sanctifying grace as being conferred through the sacramental system, with faith, good works, and participation in the sacraments involved in

the believer's ongoing spiritual life. The Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments: baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony.

A useful question is: **You:** "Is the grace that justifies us received through Christ by faith, or must sacramental participation contribute to our justification?"

If they appeal to baptism, penance, the Eucharist, or another sacrament, stay with that specific issue rather than trying to discuss all seven.

Faith and Works

James says faith without works is dead. A Catholic may rightly bring that passage into the conversation. Do not deny it. Ask the more important question:

You: "Are works the cause of our justification or the evidence of genuine faith?"

That distinction matters greatly. Ephesians 2:8–10 provides a helpful framework. Salvation is by grace through faith, not as a result of works, but the believer is then created in Christ Jesus for good works.

Works matter. But the question is **where they belong**.

Do they contribute to the basis of justification, or do they flow from salvation already received in Christ?

Authority: Who Has the Final Word?

Roman Catholic authority rests in Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Magisterium, the Church's official teaching authority. The Pope is regarded as having a special teaching role, including infallibility under specific conditions when speaking *ex cathedra*. Protestant theology holds Scripture as the sufficient final authority for doctrine. That creates an important question:

You: "If Scripture and a later church tradition appear to conflict, which one has final authority? Then-

You: "How do we know that a later tradition genuinely came from the apostles?"

That question becomes especially important when dealing with doctrines formally defined long after the apostolic period.

Mary and the Saints

Catholic theology distinguishes **veneration** from worship and permits asking Mary and the saints for intercession. It also includes practices involving relics and sacred images.

Do not say: **“Catholics worship Mary.”**

That ignores the distinction Catholics themselves make and can derail the conversation before the real question is addressed.

Instead ask: **You:** “What biblical basis do you see for addressing prayers to Mary or the saints?” Then -

You: “If Christ is our mediator, what need is there for another heavenly intercessor?”

If Marian dogmas arise, the Immaculate Conception was formally defined in 1854, while the Assumption of Mary was formally defined in 1950.

That raises an authority question:

You: “How can we demonstrate from apostolic revelation that a doctrine defined as dogma many centuries later was part of the faith delivered by the apostles?”

The Papacy

Roman Catholicism regards the Pope as the successor of Peter and the supreme earthly head of the Church. Papal infallibility was formally defined at the First Vatican Council in 1870.

If this comes up, ask:

You: “How do we move from Peter’s role in the New Testament to universal papal jurisdiction over the entire Church?” Then -

You: “Where does Scripture establish that Peter’s authority would pass to a succession of bishops of Rome?”

Again, let them make the case.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “Catholics believe in grace too.”

You: “Does grace alone provide the basis of justification, or must our cooperation, works, and sacramental participation contribute to it?”

They say: “Faith without works is dead.”

You: “Are works the cause of justification or the evidence that faith is living?”

They say: “The Church gave us the Bible.”

You: “Does recognizing which writings are Scripture give the Church authority over Scripture, or does the Church recognize an authority those writings already possess?”

They say: “We do not worship Mary.”

You: “Then what biblical basis do you see for praying to Mary or asking her for heavenly intercession?”

They say: “Jesus gave Peter authority.”

You: “Where does Scripture establish that Peter’s role becomes a permanent universal office passed to the bishops of Rome?”

These questions move the conversation toward the actual foundations rather than caricatures.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not let the discussion become merely Protestant versus Catholic. Bring it back to justification.

You: “What are you trusting in to stand righteous before God?” Then -

You: “Is Christ’s righteousness sufficient for the sinner who trusts Him, or must something be added to His finished work in order for us to be justified?”

Romans 3–4 and Ephesians 2 are useful places to go.

The central issue is not whether Catholics use the words *grace*, *faith*, and *Jesus*. The issue is what those words mean within the system of salvation.

What to Listen For

Listen for **justification, grace, merit, works, baptism, Eucharist, penance, sacraments, Scripture, tradition, the Magisterium, papal authority, Mary, saints, and intercession.**

Do not try to discuss them all. Follow the issue they actually raise. The most useful questions are often:

“What makes a sinner right with God?”

“Are works the basis or the fruit of justification?”

“What has final authority?”

The Goal

The goal is not to make someone anti-Catholic. The goal is to bring the conversation to the sufficiency of Jesus Christ, the authority of God’s Word, and justification by grace through faith.

Keep returning to the central question: **What are you trusting in to make you right with God?**

Eastern Religions and Spirituality

When speaking with someone influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age spirituality, or other Eastern traditions, do not assume they all believe the same thing. These traditions are extremely diverse. Some believe in many gods, some speak of an ultimate impersonal reality, some focus on reincarnation and karma, some emphasize meditation and enlightenment, and some combine several beliefs together.

Begin by asking what they personally believe.

You: “When you talk about spirituality, what do you believe is ultimately real?”

Then listen carefully. The answer may reveal whether they believe in a personal God, an impersonal force, many gods, reincarnation, karma, enlightenment, or simply a general spiritual energy.

Clarify the View of God

The first major difference is often the nature of ultimate reality.

Biblical Christianity teaches that God is personal, eternal, Creator, distinct from His creation, and worthy of worship.

Some forms of Hindu thought understand ultimate reality as Brahman, with individual existence ultimately connected to or identified with that ultimate reality. Other Hindu traditions are strongly devotional and worship particular deities. Buddhism generally does not begin with a Creator God at all and focuses instead on suffering, desire, karma, rebirth, and liberation.

So ask rather than assume.

They say: “God is in everything.”

You: “Do you mean that God created everything, or that everything is actually part of God?”

If they say everything is part of God:

You: “If good and evil are both ultimately part of the same divine reality, what makes one truly good and the other truly evil?”

That question can expose the difficulty of collapsing the distinction between Creator and creation.

The Problem of the Self

Some Eastern systems teach that our deepest problem involves ignorance, attachment, desire, or misunderstanding the nature of the self. Christianity identifies a different fundamental problem.

- Our problem is not merely that we do not understand ourselves.
- Our problem is sin and rebellion against the God who created us.

If **They say**: “The goal is to realize that the separate self is an illusion.”

You: “If the individual self is ultimately an illusion, who is responsible for moral choices?”
Or -

You: “Who is seeking enlightenment if there is ultimately no enduring self?”

The purpose is not to mock Buddhist ideas. It is to ask whether the worldview can consistently account for personal identity, moral responsibility, love, guilt, and justice.

Karma

Karma is often discussed casually in Western culture as though it simply means, “What goes around comes around.” In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, it is much more closely connected with moral action and the cycle of rebirth.

If **They say**: “I believe karma eventually balances everything.”

You: “What determines whether an action creates good or bad karma?” Then:

You: “Where does that moral standard come from?”

If karma is an impersonal moral law, another useful question is:

You: “How does an impersonal universe create a morally binding law that says what anyone deserves?”

Christianity gives a different account. Morality is grounded in the character of a personal, holy God, and judgment is carried out by a personal Judge.

Reincarnation

Reincarnation is another important area to clarify.

They say: “I believe we keep returning until we learn what we need to learn.”

You: “What evidence leads you to believe we have lived previous lives?” Then:

You: “If you cannot normally remember the actions of a previous life, how can suffering in this life function as meaningful moral correction for those actions?”

That question can be especially important when karma and reincarnation are used to explain suffering.

Christianity presents a very different picture. Human beings live once, die, and face judgment. Salvation is not an endless process of self-purification through repeated lives. It is reconciliation with God through Christ.

Hebrews 9:27 says:

“it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.” — Hebrews 9:27

Suffering and Buddhism

Buddhism begins with a serious recognition of suffering. That gives Christians genuine common ground for conversation. Buddhism does not pretend suffering is imaginary. It seeks to explain why suffering occurs and how liberation from it can be reached.

A common Buddhist framework connects suffering with craving or attachment and seeks liberation through the cessation of craving.

A useful question is:

You: “Do you believe suffering is mainly caused by attachment and desire?”

If they say yes:

You: “Are all desires bad, or can some desires be genuinely good?”

For example, the desire for justice, the desire to protect a child, or the desire to love another person cannot easily be dismissed as merely harmful attachment.

You can then ask: “Is the goal to escape desire, or to have our desires made right?”

Christianity does not teach that salvation comes by extinguishing personhood or desire. It teaches that our loves and desires have been corrupted by sin and need redemption.

Good and Evil

Eastern spiritual ideas sometimes describe good and evil as complementary opposites or as part of a deeper unity. If someone expresses that idea, clarify what they mean.

They say: “Good and evil are really two sides of the same reality.”

You: “Then is cruelty actually wrong, or is it ultimately just another expression of the same reality?”

If they say cruelty is genuinely wrong:

You: “What makes it wrong rather than simply different?”

This moves the conversation toward objective morality. Christianity maintains a real distinction between good and evil because goodness reflects God's character and evil is rebellion against Him.

“All Paths Lead to the Same Ultimate Reality”

Someone influenced by Eastern spirituality may say:

They say: “Different religions are just different paths to the same truth.”

You: “What happens when the paths contradict each other about what ultimate reality actually is?”

Christianity says God is personal and distinct from creation. Some Hindu philosophies speak of ultimate reality in impersonal terms. Buddhism may deny that a Creator God is necessary.

Christianity says we live once and face judgment.

Reincarnation teaches repeated lives.

Christianity says salvation comes through Christ.

Other systems describe liberation through enlightenment, karma, meditation, devotion, or escape from rebirth.

You Ask: “If two paths disagree about who God is, what a human being is, what happens after death, and how salvation happens, in what sense are they the same path?”

The goal is not merely to prove that religions differ. It is to bring the conversation toward truth.

Meditation and Spiritual Experience

They say: “I know this is true because I experienced it through meditation.”

Do not dismiss the experience.

You Ask: “How do you know the experience revealed something objectively true about reality?” Then:

You: “Could people from contradictory religions have equally powerful spiritual experiences?”

This is similar to the authority problem we saw with Mormon testimony. Experience can be real without being an infallible guide to truth. The question is what standard judges the experience.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “All things are one.”

You: “If everything is ultimately one, what makes the distinction between truth and falsehood ultimately real?”

They say: “The divine is inside all of us.”

You: “If humans are divine at the deepest level, how do you explain genuine moral evil?”

They say: “We create our own reality.”

You: “Can two people create contradictory realities and both be correct?”

They say: “Karma makes sure everyone eventually gets what they deserve.”

You: “What gives karma moral authority, and who determines what anyone deserves?”

They say: “Reincarnation gives us many chances to grow.”

You: “If we usually cannot remember previous lives, how do those lives teach us what we are supposed to correct?”

They say: “Jesus was an enlightened teacher.”

You: “Who do you believe Jesus claimed to be?”

That last question is usually the most important transition.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not leave the conversation at philosophical differences between East and West. Bring it to Jesus.

You can say: “Christianity teaches something very different from escaping individuality, balancing karma, or progressing through repeated lives. It says we are creatures made by a personal God, that our deepest problem is sin, and that God acted in history to reconcile sinners to Himself through Jesus Christ.” Then ask -

You: “Who do you believe Jesus is?”

If they describe Him as an enlightened teacher, guru, prophet, or spiritual master, continue:

You: “If Jesus is only one enlightened teacher among many, what do you do with His claims to unique authority and with the Christian claim that He rose bodily from the dead?”

Christianity does not offer Jesus merely as another path toward spiritual awareness. It proclaims Him as Lord and Savior.

What to Listen For

Listen for **karma, reincarnation, enlightenment, meditation, impersonal divinity, many gods, “all is one,” spiritual energy, escaping desire, escaping the cycle of rebirth, or Jesus as merely an enlightened teacher.**

Do not assume all of these belong to the person you are speaking with. Ask what they actually believe.

Useful questions include **“What is ultimately real?”, “Is God personal?”, “What makes something morally wrong?”, “What determines karma?”, “What evidence do you have for reincarnation?”, “How do you know a spiritual experience is true?”, and “Who is Jesus?”**

The Goal

The goal is not to make someone abandon Eastern spirituality merely for Western religion.

Bring them to the biblical distinction between Creator and creation, to the reality of personal guilt and accountability, and ultimately to Jesus Christ.

Christianity does not say we need to discover that we are divine. It says we need to be reconciled to the God who made us. It does not promise escape through repeated lives. It proclaims a Savior who entered history, died for sinners, rose from the dead, and calls us to repent and believe.

“I Don’t Trust the Bible”

When someone says, **“I don’t trust the Bible,”** do not assume the problem is textual reliability. That statement can mean several very different things. They may believe the Bible has been changed, that it contradicts itself, that science disproves it, that people wrote it, or that they simply reject what Scripture teaches about morality. The first step is to find out what they actually mean.

You: “What is it about the Bible that you don’t trust?”

Their answer tells you where to go next.

They say: “It has been translated so many times.”

You: “What do you mean by that? Do you think modern Bibles are translations of translations, or translations from the ancient manuscripts?”

If they are simply repeating something they heard, this may be an opportunity to explain that modern translations are produced from Hebrew and Greek manuscript evidence rather than through an endless chain of translations.

They say: “The Bible contradicts itself.”

You: “Which contradiction concerns you most?”

Do not try to answer every alleged contradiction at once. Ask for one. Then deal with the actual text.

They say: “People wrote the Bible.”

You: “Does the fact that human authors wrote something mean God could not speak through them?”

The Christian claim has never been that Scripture dropped from heaven without human authors. The question is whether God revealed truth through those authors.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “The Bible has been changed.”

You: “What evidence led you to that conclusion?”

They say: “There are too many contradictions.”

You: “Can we look at one together and see whether it is actually a contradiction?”

They say: “I trust science more than the Bible.”

You: “What specific biblical claim do you believe science has disproved?”

They say: “I cannot believe a book that teaches things I disagree with morally.”

You: “If God has spoken, should His Word conform to our moral opinions, or should our moral opinions be corrected by His Word?”

That last response may reveal that the issue is not manuscript reliability at all. It may be authority.

The Authority Question

Sometimes the deeper issue is not, “**Can I trust this book?**” but, “**Why should this book have authority over me?**”

That is a different question.

You can ask: “If God really has spoken, would He have the right to tell us things we do not naturally want to hear?”

The person may be treating himself as the final judge of revelation. At that point the issue is no longer only evidence. It is whether God or the individual has final authority.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not let the conversation remain only about manuscripts, translations, or contradictions. Scripture reveals Christ.

You can say: “The reason the Bible matters is not merely because it is an ancient book. It is where God tells us who He is, who we are, and what He has done through Jesus Christ.”
Then ask-

You: “What do you believe about Jesus?”

That can move the conversation from biblical reliability toward the gospel.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether the objection is really about **translation, contradictions, science, authorship, morality, or authority**. Do not answer the wrong objection.

Useful questions include **“What do you mean by changed?”**, **“Which contradiction?”**, **“What evidence led you to that conclusion?”**, and **“If God has spoken, who should have final authority?”**

The Goal

The goal is not merely to convince them that the Bible is an interesting historical document. Help them see that Scripture is God's revelation and then bring them to the Christ Scripture proclaims.

“Christians Are Hypocrites”

When someone says, **“Christians are hypocrites,”** do not immediately defend Christians. Sometimes hypocrisy is being used as an excuse to avoid Christianity, but sometimes the person has been genuinely hurt by someone who claimed to follow Christ.

The first question should often be:

You: “What happened?”

Listen before answering. If they describe serious wrongdoing, do not minimize it.

They say: “A Christian treated me terribly.”

You: “Was what they did consistent with what Christ taught, or was it a violation of what Christ taught?”

That distinction matters. A Christian's failure does not prove Christ is false. In many cases, the person's hypocrisy actually shows that they violated the standard they claimed to follow.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “Christians are no better than anyone else.”

You: “Does Christianity teach that Christians are saved because they are better than everyone else?”

They say: “Churches are full of hypocrites.”

You: “If someone fails to live according to Christ’s teaching, does that show Christ’s teaching is false, or that the person failed to obey it?”

They say: “I was hurt by people in church.”

You: “What happened?”

That may be the most important question of the entire conversation. Do not rush to an argument if they are describing abuse, betrayal, or serious spiritual harm.

Do Not Defend Sin

Christianity does not require us to defend sinful Christians.

- If a pastor committed abuse, call it evil.
- If church leaders lied, say it was wrong.
- If Christians acted cruelly, do not pretend otherwise.

The gospel already teaches that Christians are sinners who need grace. Hypocrisy is not an argument against the existence of sin. It is evidence of it.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once the person has been heard, bring the distinction back to Christ.

You: “I’m not asking you to trust every person who calls himself a Christian. I’m asking you to consider Jesus Christ Himself.” Then ask -

You: “Do you think what happened to you accurately represents Christ?”

This moves the conversation from the failures of Christians toward the One Christians claim to follow.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether this is a philosophical objection or a personal wound. If there is pain behind the statement, do not use the person as an opportunity to practice apologetics.

Useful questions include **“What happened?”**, **“Was that consistent with Christ’s teaching?”**, and **“Does the failure of a follower determine whether the teacher is true?”**

The Goal

Do not try to prove that Christians are better people. Acknowledge real sin where it exists, distinguish Christ from those who disobey Him, and bring the conversation back to Jesus.

“God Knows My Heart”

When someone says, **“God knows my heart,”** they usually intend it as reassurance. They may mean that God knows they are sincere, that they have good intentions, or that outward religious activity is not important because God knows who they really are.

Agree with the first part. God does know the heart. Then ask whether that is automatically good news.

They say: “God knows my heart.”

You: “If God knows everything in our hearts, does that make our situation better or more serious?”

That question often changes the direction of the conversation. God knows our kindness and good intentions, but He also knows our pride, anger, envy, lust, selfishness, hidden motives, and secret sins.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “I may not go to church, but God knows I’m a good person.”

You: “If God knows your heart perfectly, does He only see the good intentions, or does He also see every sinful thought and motive?”

They say: “I have a good heart.”

You: “What standard are you using to decide that?”

They say: “God knows I mean well.”

You: “Do good intentions erase the times we knowingly disobey Him?”

The goal is not to argue that every motive is always evil. It is to expose the idea that God's complete knowledge of us automatically justifies us.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once the person recognizes that God's knowledge of the heart does not remove guilt, move toward Christ.

You: “That is why we need something more than good intentions. We need forgiveness and righteousness that come from Christ.” Then ask-

You: “What are you trusting in to make you right with God?”

The conversation can move naturally toward the gospel.

What to Listen For

Listen for confidence in **sincerity, intentions, inner goodness, or the belief that God overlooks sin because He knows the person means well.**

Useful questions include **“What does God see when He knows your heart?”**, **“What standard tells us our heart is good?”**, and **“Do good intentions erase guilt?”**

The Goal

The goal is to help them see that God's knowledge of the heart is not a substitute for the gospel.

God knows us completely.

That is exactly why we need Christ.

“I’m Not That Bad”

When someone says, **“I’m not that bad,”** they are usually admitting sin while minimizing its seriousness. This differs slightly from **“I’m a good person.”** They know they have done wrong. Their confidence rests in the idea that their sins are not serious enough to require judgment.

Begin by clarifying the standard.

You: “Not that bad compared with whom?”

They say: “I mean, I’ve made mistakes, but I’m not a murderer or anything.”

You: “Do you think God only judges the worst sins, or all sin?”

This moves the conversation from degree of comparison to accountability.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “Everybody makes mistakes.”

You: “Does everyone doing something wrong make it right?”

They say: “My sins aren’t serious.”

You: “Who determines how serious sin against God is?”

They say: “There are much worse people.”

You: “Will God judge you according to their lives or yours?”

They say: “I have never done anything terrible.”

You: “Does God’s standard only deal with dramatic outward actions, or does it also judge the heart?”

The purpose is not to convince them that every sin has identical earthly consequences. Scripture recognizes different kinds and consequences of sin. The issue is that no sin is morally neutral before a holy God.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Once they understand that minimizing sin does not remove guilt, move toward Christ.

You: “The gospel is not only for the worst person you can imagine. It is for sinners. The question is not whether someone else has sinned more than you. The question is whether you need forgiveness.”

Then explain Christ's death and resurrection.

What to Listen For

Listen for **comparison, minimization, excuses, and the language of mistakes rather than sin.**

Useful questions include **“Compared with whom?”**, **“Who determines how serious sin is?”**, and **“Will God judge you by someone else’s life?”**

The Goal

Do not try to convince them they are the worst person alive. Help them understand that they are guilty before God and need the same Savior every sinner needs. Bring them to Christ.

“I Understand, but I’m Not Ready”

When someone says, **“I understand, but I’m not ready,”** do not immediately pressure them into making a decision. The statement can mean several different things. They may misunderstand grace and think they need to improve first. They may fear what following Christ will cost them. They may still have intellectual doubts. Or they may understand the gospel clearly but simply do not want to surrender their life to Christ.

Begin by finding out what **“not ready”** means.

You: “What do you feel you are not ready for?”

Their answer determines the direction of the conversation.

They say: “I need to clean up my life first.”

You: “If you could make yourself right with God first, why would you need a Savior?”

That helps expose a misunderstanding of grace.

Or:

They say: “I know what you’re saying. I just don’t want to change my life.”

You: “Then would you say the issue is that you do not believe the gospel, or that you do not want Christ to have authority over your life?”

That is a very different issue.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “I want to enjoy life first.”

You: “What do you believe following Christ would take away from you?”

They say: “Maybe later.”

You: “What makes you think you will be more willing to repent later than you are now?”

They say: “I’m afraid my family will reject me.”

You: “If Jesus truly is Lord, would your family’s reaction change whether He is worthy of following?”

They say: “I still have questions.”

You: “Which question is actually keeping you from trusting Christ?”

That last question is important. If there is a genuine unresolved objection, deal with it. Do not treat every hesitation as rebellion.

When the Real Issue Is Allegiance

Sometimes the person understands enough.

- They understand sin.
- They understand Christ.
- They understand repentance and faith.
- They simply do not want to give up control.

At that point, more apologetic arguments may not solve the problem.

You can ask: “If you became convinced Christianity is true, is there anything you already know you would not want to surrender?”

That question can expose the heart of the resistance. The issue may no longer be evidence. It may be lordship.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not offer them a reduced version of Christianity to make the decision easier.

You can say: “Christ does not call us to make ourselves worthy before coming to Him. He calls sinners to repent and believe. But He also does not invite us to add Him to a life we intend to keep ruling ourselves.” Then ask -

You: “What is keeping you from trusting Him now?”

What to Listen For

Listen for **fear, misunderstanding grace, family pressure, intellectual doubt, love of sin, unwillingness to surrender control, or simple procrastination.**

Useful questions include **“What do you mean by not ready?”**, **“What are you waiting to change?”**, **“What question is still unresolved?”**, and **“What are you afraid following Christ will cost you?”**

The Goal

Do not manipulate them into a prayer simply because the conversation has reached an emotional moment.

Find out what stands between them and Christ.

1. Answer genuine questions.
2. Correct misunderstandings.
3. Call them to repent and believe.
4. Then trust God to do what only God can do.

“Why Would Jesus Be the Only Way?”

When someone asks, **“Why would Jesus be the only way?”** do not treat the objection as though exclusivity itself proves Christianity false. Every truth claim excludes its contradiction. The real question is whether Jesus is actually who Christianity says He is and whether He accomplished what Christianity says He accomplished.

Begin by clarifying the objection.

You: “Do you think it is wrong for any religious claim to be exclusive, or specifically wrong for Christianity to say Jesus is the only way?”

That can reveal whether the issue is logic, fairness, religious pluralism, or discomfort with Christ’s authority.

Exclusivity Is Not Automatically Arrogance

They say: “It is arrogant to say your religion is the only true one.”

You: “Does believing something is true make a person arrogant, or does arrogance depend on how they hold and communicate that belief?” Then -

You: “If two religions make contradictory claims about Jesus, can both be true?”

The issue is truth, not tone.

The Real Question Is the Human Problem

Christianity does not say Jesus is the only way because Christians happen to prefer Him.

It says He is the only Savior because the human problem is sin and guilt before God, and Christ uniquely dealt with that problem.

You Ask: “What do you think the deepest human problem is?”

If they say ignorance, lack of education, bad environment, or failure to be spiritual enough, the conversation may need to go back to sin.

Christianity says our deepest problem is not merely lack of knowledge. It is guilt and alienation from God. Then ask -

You: “If our problem is guilt before God, what other religious teacher actually bears that guilt for us?”

That moves the issue away from comparing moral teachers and toward the work of Christ.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “There are many good religions.”

You: “Which of those religions provides a Savior who bears the sinner’s guilt before a holy God?”

They say: “God would never limit salvation to one person.”

You: “If God Himself provided the way of salvation, would He be obligated to provide several different ways?”

They say: “A sincere Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist can be just as devoted as a Christian.”

You: “Does sincerity determine whether the object of our faith is true?”

They say: “Jesus was just one great spiritual teacher.”

You: “If Jesus rose from the dead, would that make Him merely one teacher among many?”

The resurrection is crucial here. Christianity rests its claim of Christ’s uniqueness on who He is and what God did through Him in history.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

You can say: “Christianity is not saying Jesus is one religious option that happens to work better than the others. It says the eternal Son of God entered history, died for sinners, rose from the dead, and reconciles us to God. If that is true, then His uniqueness is not arbitrary.” Then ask -

You: “Who do you believe Jesus is?”

That brings the conversation back to the central issue.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether the objection concerns **fairness, pluralism, sincerity, arrogance, or the identity of Christ**.

Useful questions include **“Why should there have to be several ways?”**, **“Can contradictory religious claims all be true?”**, **“Does sincerity make a belief true?”**, and **“Who is Jesus?”**

The Goal

Do not defend exclusivity as an abstract principle. Show why Christ is unique. The issue is not that Christianity happens to have one path. The issue is that there is one Savior.

“How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?”

When someone asks, **“How can a loving God send people to hell?”** they are often assuming that love and judgment are opposites. Your original material correctly identifies this as a question about justice as much as love. Begin by asking them to define the terms.

You: “What do you mean by loving?” Then-

You: “Do you believe a loving God should also be just?”

If they say yes, the conversation has already changed.

Love and Justice Are Not Opposites

Suppose a judge releases a murderer because he wants to be loving.

- Would that be love?
- Would that be justice?

You Ask: “Would a judge be good if he refused to punish serious evil?”

Most people will say no. Then ask -

You: “If justice is good when we apply it to someone who has hurt others, why would justice become evil when God applies it perfectly?”

Your original material emphasizes that justice must be grounded somewhere. Without an objective moral standard, justice becomes merely social preference. Christianity grounds justice in the character of God.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “Hell is too severe.”

You: “By what standard are you deciding what punishment sin against God deserves?”

They say: “A loving God would forgive everyone.”

You: “Would forgiveness still be just if evil were never dealt with?”

They say: “People are basically good.”

You: “If people are basically good, how are you defining good?”

That may lead naturally back to the law and conscience.

They say: “Nobody deserves eternal punishment.”

You: “How do you know what anyone deserves before an eternal and perfectly holy God?”

The question does not prove the doctrine by itself. It exposes the assumption that human beings are naturally qualified to determine the appropriate judgment for sin against God.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not speak about judgment without speaking about the cross.

You can say: “The gospel does not present God as choosing between love and justice. At the cross, His justice against sin and His love toward sinners meet.”

Then explain that Christ bears judgment for sinners and calls them to repent and believe.

The question is not only: “**Why does God judge?**”

It is also: “**Why would God provide salvation for guilty people at all?**”

That changes the perspective.

What to Listen For

Listen for assumptions about **love, justice, innocence, the seriousness of sin, and what people deserve.**

Useful questions include “**What do you mean by loving?**”, “**Should a good God judge evil?**”, “**How are you defining justice?**”, and “**By what standard do you determine what sin deserves?**”

The Goal

Do not make hell sound trivial. Show that God's love does not cancel His justice. Then show that the same God who judges sin has provided a Savior. Bring them to the cross.

“If God Is Real, Why Doesn’t He Reveal Himself Clearly?”

When someone asks, “If God is real, why doesn’t He reveal Himself clearly?” first determine what they mean by *clearly*. They may be asking a sincere question about evidence. Or they may be assuming that God has an obligation to reveal Himself in whatever way they personally demand.

Begin with a question.

You: “What would God have to do for you to consider His revelation clear?”

Their answer may tell you whether any evidence would actually satisfy them.

Your original material identifies the hidden assumption here: the person often places himself in the position of deciding what kind of revelation God must provide before God can reasonably expect belief.

What Would Count as Enough?

They say: “God should just appear in the sky.”

You: “If God did that, would you worship and obey Him, or would you only admit that He exists?”

That distinction matters.

Romans 1 describes humanity’s problem not simply as lack of information but as suppression of the truth God has revealed.

The issue is therefore deeper than whether enough evidence exists.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “If God wanted me to believe, He would give me more evidence.”

You: “How did you determine that God has not already given sufficient revelation?”

They say: “I would believe if I saw a miracle.”

You: “Would seeing a miracle necessarily make you willing to submit to God?”

They say: “God is hidden.”

You: “What evidence for God have you already considered?”

They say: “Why doesn’t God make everyone believe?”

You: “Do you mean make everyone know He exists, or make everyone love and obey Him?”

Those are not the same thing.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Do not leave the issue at general revelation. Christianity claims that God has entered history.

You can say: “Christianity says God has not remained silent. He created the world, has spoken through His Word, and has revealed Himself decisively through Jesus Christ.” Then ask -

You: “What have you concluded about Jesus?”

That moves the conversation from what God hypothetically *should* do to what Christianity says God has actually done.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether the person genuinely wants evidence or is setting conditions God must satisfy.

Useful questions include **“What would count as clear revelation?”**, **“Would evidence make you willing to obey?”**, **“What evidence have you already considered?”**, and **“What do you believe about Jesus?”**

The Goal

Do not allow the conversation to remain centered on what we think God should do. Ask what God has actually revealed. Then bring them to Christ.

The Endless Debater

Some people ask question after question because they are genuinely searching. Others ask endlessly because every answer simply becomes the doorway to another objection. The difficulty is knowing which person you are speaking with.

Do not assume bad motives too quickly. Listen to the questions and answer sincere objections patiently. But at some point it can be helpful to test whether the issue is really intellectual.

You: “If all of these questions were answered to your satisfaction, would you be willing to follow Christ?”

Their response may reveal the deeper issue.

They say: “I don’t know. I would probably still have more questions.”

You: “Then do you think the questions are really the main thing keeping you from Christ?”

That question can move the conversation from endless objections to the actual issue.

When Questions Become a Shield

Apologetics is not meant to create an infinite debate. Questions should help uncover assumptions, clarify objections, and move the conversation toward truth. If someone continually changes subjects, they may be avoiding the implications of what has already been established.

You can say: “We have talked about several different objections. Which one do you think is the strongest reason you reject Christianity?”

Then stay with that one. If they answer it and immediately jump elsewhere, you can ask:

You: “Before we move to another subject, do you think we actually resolved the question we were discussing?”

This keeps the conversation from becoming a moving target.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “I just have too many questions.”

You: “Which question would you say matters most?”

They say: “There are problems everywhere in Christianity.”

You: “Can we choose the strongest one and examine it carefully?”

They say: “You Christians always have an answer.”

You: “Would having an answer make the answer false, or should we examine whether it is actually true?”

They say: “I need every question answered before I believe.”

You: “Do you require complete knowledge before accepting anything else you believe?”

That question can expose an unreasonable standard.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Eventually ask directly:

You: “What do you believe about Jesus Christ?”

If the person immediately produces another unrelated objection, gently bring them back.

You: “We can come back to that, but I want to understand something first. Who do you believe Jesus is?”

The point is not to shut down questions. It is to prevent questions from becoming a permanent escape from the gospel.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether the person is **searching or evading**. Genuine seekers may have many questions, but they usually engage with answers. The endless debater often abandons one objection as soon as it is answered and replaces it with another.

Useful questions include “**Which objection is strongest?**”, “**Did we resolve the previous question?**”, and “**If your objections were answered, would you follow Christ?**”

The Goal

The goal is not to win every possible debate. Answer honest questions. Expose evasions when necessary. Then bring the conversation back to Christ.

The Comfortable Churchgoer

Someone may tell you, **“I’ve always been a Christian,”** because they grew up in church, were baptized as a child, attend regularly, belong to a Christian family, or simply cannot remember a time when Christianity was not part of their life.

Do not immediately tell them they are not saved. Find out what they mean.

You: “When you say you have always been a Christian, what do you mean?”

They might say: “My family has always gone to church.”

You: “What are you personally trusting in to make you right with God?”

That question moves the conversation from heritage to faith.

Religious Activity Is Not the Gospel

Church attendance, baptism, Christian parents, Bible knowledge, ministry involvement, and good behavior can all be good things. None of them is the ground of justification.

A conversation might continue:

They say: “I was baptized when I was young.”

You: “Are you trusting in your baptism, or in Christ Himself?”

Or:

They say: “I’ve been in church my whole life.”

You: “What do you believe Jesus has saved you from?”

Their answer can reveal whether they understand sin, grace, Christ, and faith or are simply identifying with Christianity culturally.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “I’ve always believed in God.”

You: “What do you believe makes you right with Him?”

They say: “I’m a member of the church.”

You: “Does church membership reconcile someone to God, or does Christ?”

They say: “I was baptized.”

You: “What are you trusting in now—your baptism or Jesus Christ?”

They say: “I try to live like a Christian.”

You: “Is living a Christian life what saves us, or is it the fruit of salvation?”

These questions are not meant to create unnecessary doubt. They help distinguish religious familiarity from saving faith.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

You can say: “Growing up around Christianity is a great privilege, but no one is reconciled to God simply because Christianity has always been around them.” Then ask -

You: “If God asked why you should be accepted before Him, what would your answer be?”

Listen carefully. The answer should ultimately rest in Christ rather than family, church, baptism, morality, or religious experience.

What to Listen For

Listen for confidence in **family background, baptism, membership, church attendance, religious activity, morality, or a vague lifelong belief in God.**

Useful questions include “**What are you trusting in?**”, “**What did Christ save you from?**”, and “**Why should God accept you?**”

The Goal

Do not assume church involvement proves either salvation or unbelief. Clarify the person's faith. Then bring them to Christ Himself rather than to their Christian background.

“I Prayed a Prayer Years Ago”

When someone says, **“I prayed a prayer years ago,”** do not automatically tell them the prayer was meaningless. They may have genuinely been converted at that time. But neither should a past prayer become the entire basis of their assurance. The important question is what they are trusting in now.

You: “When you think about being right with God, are you trusting in what Jesus did, or in the fact that you prayed that prayer?”

That distinction matters. A prayer can accompany genuine repentance and faith. But repeating words does not regenerate anyone.

Do Not Manufacture Assurance

They may say: “I know I’m saved because I prayed the sinner’s prayer when I was eight.”

You: “What do you believe about Christ now?” Then -

You: “Do you currently trust Him as your Savior and Lord?”

Do not immediately respond by giving them false assurance based on an event in the past. At the same time, do not tell a struggling believer that one serious failure proves they were never converted. The issue is not perfection. It is the direction of the life produced by regeneration.

Fruit and the Direction of Life

A genuine believer still sins. The difference is not that Christians never fall into sin.

The question is whether the person has settled comfortably into sin without repentance or whether there is an ongoing relationship with Christ marked by faith, repentance, and the fruit of regeneration. A single snapshot does not tell the whole story.

You: “How would you describe your relationship with Christ now?”

Or:

You: “When you sin, do you find yourself defending it and settling into it, or grieving it and turning back to Christ?”

These questions are not a works test for earning salvation. Fruit is evidence, not the ground. Christ is the ground of salvation. The fruit of regeneration is evidence of salvation.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “But I remember exactly when I prayed.”

You: “Is your confidence in remembering the prayer, or in Christ?”

They say: “I haven’t really lived for God, but I know I prayed.”

You: “What evidence do you see now that your heart has been changed toward Christ?”

They say: “Are you saying I have to be perfect?”

You: “Is perfection the issue, or is the issue whether there is a new direction toward Christ?”

They say: “I keep failing.”

You: “When you fail, where do you go with your sin?”

That last question can help distinguish struggling faith from indifference.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

If they are trusting in the prayer itself, redirect them.

You: “The prayer did not die for you. Christ did. The prayer did not rise from the dead. Christ did. Your assurance must ultimately rest in Him.”

If they seem genuinely converted but struggling, point them to Christ rather than making them obsess over whether they used the right words years ago. If they show no present faith and no concern for Christ, do not manufacture assurance. Call them to repent and believe now.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether their confidence rests in **Christ or a past religious event**. Also listen for the overall direction of their life rather than one failure.

Useful questions include **“What are you trusting in now?”**, **“Who is Christ to you now?”**, and **“What evidence is there of a changed relationship to sin and to Christ?”**

The Goal

Do not replace assurance in Christ with assurance in a prayer. And do not replace grace with perfectionism. Point them to Christ and let Scripture address both faith and fruit.

“What Must I Do to Be Saved?” / “I Want to Pray”

Sometimes the person is no longer arguing. They understand their guilt. They understand that Christ died and rose.

They ask: **“What must I do to be saved?”**

Do not take them backward through every apologetic argument you know. Give them Christ.

Acts 16 gives the direct answer:

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” — Acts 16:31

Explain enough so that the object of their faith is clear.

- Jesus Christ is Lord.
- He died for sinners.
- He rose from the dead.
- Salvation is by grace.
- The sinner is called to repent and believe.

When They Want to Pray

If **they** say: “I want to pray.”

Do not stop them because you are afraid of decisionism. Prayer is not the problem.

The problem is treating a prayer as the mechanism that causes regeneration or as automatic proof that conversion occurred.

You can first ask: “Before we pray, what are you trusting Jesus to do for you?”

Let them put the gospel into their own words if they can.

They say: “I know I’m a sinner, and I’m trusting Jesus to forgive me because He died and rose again.”

Then pray with them. There is nothing wrong with helping someone call upon the Lord.

Do Not Turn the Prayer Into a Formula

You do not need to insist that they repeat an exact sentence.

You can say: “Talk to God. Confess your sin, tell Him you are trusting Christ, and ask Him for mercy.”

If they want help, you can guide them.

But afterward, do not say: “**You prayed the prayer, so now you are definitely saved.**”

Instead, point them to Christ.

You: “Your hope is not that you said the right words. Your hope is Jesus Christ.”

Common Questions

They say: “Do I have to say a special prayer?”

You: “Do you think God saves because of particular words, or because you are trusting Christ?”

They say: “What if I don’t feel different?”

You: “Is salvation based on the strength of your feelings or on the promise and work of Christ?”

They say: “What should I do now?”

You: “If Christ has saved you, how do you think a new believer should begin following Him?”

That opens the door to discipleship.

After the Conversation

A new believer needs more than congratulations.

1. Help them begin in Scripture.
2. Teach them to pray.
3. Explain baptism.
4. Help them become part of a faithful local church.
5. Give them teaching, correction, encouragement, fellowship, accountability, and opportunities to obey what Christ commands.

Conversion is the beginning of discipleship, not the end of the evangelistic process.

What to Listen For

Listen for whether they understand **sin, Christ, His death and resurrection, grace, repentance, and faith**. Do not require theological vocabulary they have never learned. But make sure they are not simply asking Jesus to improve their life while still trusting themselves.

The Goal

Do not manufacture conversion. Do not make prayer the Savior. Proclaim Christ, call sinners to repent and believe, and when they call upon the Lord, encourage them to trust Him. Then begin discipleship.

The Person Who Is Angry With God

When someone says, “**I’m angry with God,**” do not immediately point out that their anger assumes God exists. That may be logically interesting, but it may be pastorally foolish. Ask what happened.

You: “What happened that made you feel this way toward God?”

Then listen.

They may have lost someone they loved. They may have suffered abuse. They may have prayed for something desperately and believe God ignored them. They may have experienced betrayal in a church and associated that betrayal with God.

Understand the wound before addressing the argument.

Do Not Defend an Imaginary God

Sometimes a person is angry because they assumed God promised something He never promised.

They may believe:

- “If God loves me, nothing terrible should happen.”
- “If I pray sincerely, God must give me what I ask.”
- “If I follow God, my family should be protected from suffering.”

Christianity promises none of those things. After listening, you may eventually ask:

You: “Do you think God promised that His people would never suffer?”

Or:

You: “What did you believe God was obligated to do?”

Those questions can reveal the expectation behind the anger.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “God took someone I loved.”

You: “What happened?”

They say: “I prayed and God did nothing.”

You: “What were you asking Him to do?”

They say: “If God loved me, He would never have allowed this.”

You: “Where did you get the idea that God’s love means He will prevent every painful thing?”

They say: “I want nothing to do with God anymore.”

You: “Are you rejecting God as He has actually revealed Himself, or the God you believed should have prevented this?”

The last question may need to come much later, after genuine listening.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Christianity does not offer a Savior who avoided suffering. Christ was rejected, betrayed, beaten, crucified, and killed. He also rose.

You can say: “I cannot tell you every reason God allowed what happened to you. But Christianity does tell us that God is not distant from suffering. Christ entered it.”

Then move carefully toward the cross and resurrection. The Christian hope is not that terrible things never happen. It is that sin, suffering, injustice, and death will not have the final word.

What to Listen For

Listen for **loss, betrayal, unanswered prayer, false expectations about God, church hurt, and grief.**

Do not rush toward philosophical arguments if the person first needs to be heard.

Useful questions include “**What happened?**”, “**What did you believe God should have done?**”, and “**What do you believe God promised you?**”

The Goal

Do not merely defeat the logic of anger with God. Help the person distinguish God from false expectations about Him. Then bring them to the suffering, crucified, and risen Christ.

“I Just Follow My Heart”

When someone says, **“I just follow my heart,”** they usually mean they trust their internal feelings, desires, or intuition to guide important decisions. Do not immediately tell them their heart is wicked.

Begin with a question.

You: “Has your heart ever wanted something that you later realized was wrong?”

Most people will say yes. Then ask -

You: “If our hearts can lead us in opposite directions at different times, should our hearts be the final authority?”

That gets directly to the issue.

The Heart Needs a Standard

Feelings are real, but feelings do not determine truth.

- Two people can sincerely desire contradictory things.
- Two people can both “follow their hearts” and hurt each other.

So **You** ask: “If two people follow their hearts and their desires conflict, how do we know which one is right?”

If the answer is simply, **“Whatever feels right to each person,”** then morality has become subjective.

But people rarely live consistently that way. They still believe some actions are genuinely wrong even when the person committing them sincerely desires them.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “I have to be true to myself.”

You: “How do you know everything your inner self desires is good?”

They say: “My heart tells me what is right.”

You: “Has your heart ever been wrong?”

They say: “Nobody else can tell me what is right for me.”

You: “If God created you, would He have the right to tell you what is right?”

They say: “I just want to be happy.”

You: “Is everything that makes us happy necessarily good?”

The deeper issue is authority. Who gets to define good?

Moving the Conversation to Christ

You can say: “Christianity does not teach us to discover truth by looking deeper inside ourselves. It teaches that God has spoken and that our hearts need His truth.” Then ask -

You: “What do you think Jesus has the right to tell us about how we should live?”

That moves the issue from self-expression to lordship.

What to Listen For

Listen for **feelings as authority, personal authenticity, happiness, self-expression, and subjective morality.**

Useful questions include “**Has your heart ever been wrong?**”, “**What happens when two hearts disagree?**”, and “**Who determines what is actually good?**”

The Goal

Do not teach people to distrust every emotion. Teach them that emotions are not the final authority. Bring them from the authority of the heart to the authority of God and ultimately to Christ.

“Nobody Can Tell Me How to Live”

When someone says, **“Nobody can tell me how to live,”** the issue is usually deeper than a particular moral rule.

The issue is autonomy. They are claiming the right to govern themselves without an authority above them. Begin by clarifying the statement.

You: “Do you mean no other human being has the right to control you, or do you mean even God has no authority over you?”

That distinction matters.

They may reasonably be objecting to another person trying to control them. But if they mean God Himself has no authority, the conversation has reached the question of lordship.

The Question of Ownership

Christianity begins with God as Creator. If God made us, we are not independent beings who happen to live in His universe. We belong to Him.

You can ask: “If God created you and gave you life, would He have any rightful authority over how you live?”

If they answer no:

You: “What would God have to be in order to have legitimate authority over His creation?”

That forces the person to examine the assumption of absolute personal autonomy.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “It’s my life.”

You: “Did you give yourself life?”

They say: “As long as I don’t hurt anyone, I can do whatever I want.”

You: “Why is hurting another person the boundary, and where does that moral rule come from?”

They say: “Nobody has authority over me.”

You: “Does that include the God who created you?”

They say: “Religion is just about controlling people.”

You: “Would human beings misusing authority prove that God has no rightful authority?”

These questions move the discussion beneath individual moral controversies.

The Deeper Problem

Sometimes people ask for evidence when their deeper objection is not lack of evidence. They may understand what Christianity claims and simply reject the idea of submission. At that point, endless arguments about archaeology or science may miss the real issue.

You Ask: “If you knew with certainty that Jesus is Lord, would you want to submit to Him?”

That question can be revealing.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Christianity does not merely offer Jesus as a helpful addition to an autonomous life. It proclaims Him as Lord.

You can say: “The gospel is not an invitation to keep complete control of our lives and add Jesus for help. Christ calls us to repent, believe, and follow Him. Then ask -

You: “If Jesus really is Lord, what would keep you from following Him?”

What to Listen For

Listen for **autonomy, control, resistance to authority, self-ownership, and unwillingness to submit.**

Useful questions include “**Does God have authority over you?**”, “**Did you give yourself life?**”, “**Where does your moral boundary come from?**”, and “**If Jesus is Lord, would you follow Him?**”

The Goal

Do not get trapped arguing over one rule after another when the deeper issue is whether God has the right to rule at all. Expose the question of authority. Then bring the person to Christ as Lord.

“Why Does God Allow This Kind of Suffering?”

When someone asks, **“If God is loving and all-powerful, why does He allow so much suffering?”** do not assume that every person asking the question is asking the same thing.

One person may be raising the problem of evil as an intellectual objection to Christianity. Another may be standing in the middle of grief and asking, **“Why did God let this happen to me?”**

Those require different first responses. If the question is personal, begin with the person.

You: “What happened?”

Or:

You: “Is there something that happened that makes this question especially important to you?”

Then listen.

A spouse may have died. A child may be seriously ill. Someone may have suffered abuse. A marriage may have collapsed. A terrible accident may have happened. They may need to tell the story before they are ready to discuss theology.

If the person is making a philosophical argument against God, then begin examining the assumptions behind that argument.

Know Which Conversation You Are Having

Do not treat grief as though it were merely an argument to defeat. If someone says

They say: “Why did God let my child die?”

This is probably not the moment to begin with:

You: “What do you mean by innocent?”

A wiser response may be:

You: “I don’t know why God allowed this particular thing to happen. Can you tell me about your child?”

That is not theological weakness. It is honesty. But if someone says:

They say: “The existence of suffering proves that a good God cannot exist.”

Now you are dealing with a worldview claim, and questions about evil, morality, justice, and God’s character become appropriate.

The same subject requires wisdom about the person in front of you.

Do Not Pretend to Know God’s Secret Purpose

Christians sometimes feel pressure to explain why a particular tragedy occurred.

Do not say:

- “God did this because He wanted to teach you something.”
- “Everything happens for a reason,” as though you know the particular reason.
- “God needed another angel.”

Do not invent explanations Scripture has not given. You can affirm God’s sovereignty without pretending to know His secret purposes.

There is an important difference between saying:

“God may have morally sufficient reasons that I do not know.”

and:

“I know exactly why God allowed this to happen to you.”

Sometimes the faithful answer is simply:

You: “I do not know why God allowed this particular thing.”

That leaves room for biblical confidence without pretending to possess knowledge God has not revealed.

When the Question Becomes Theological

A grieving person may eventually ask:

They say: “How can I believe God is good after this?”

Now the conversation can begin moving more directly into theology.

You: “Do you think our inability to see a good reason means God could have no good reason?”

Or:

You: “What would it mean for God to remain good even when we do not understand what He allows?”

Do not rush this transition. The person may need time before they are ready to examine the question intellectually.

What Do They Mean by Evil?

If the person is arguing that suffering disproves God, ask them to explain the moral judgment underneath the argument.

They say: “A good God would never allow this much evil.”

You: “When you call something evil, what makes it objectively evil rather than something you personally dislike?”

That question does not deny that evil is real.

Christianity can call evil truly evil.

The question is whether the worldview being used to reject God can account for an objective standard of good and evil.

If morality is ultimately the product of personal preference, social convention, biological instinct, or evolutionary development, then the person must explain why suffering is **objectively wrong** rather than simply something human beings strongly dislike.

Christianity has a foundation for objective morality because goodness is grounded in the character of God. The point is not that unbelievers cannot recognize evil. They can. The question is whether their worldview can account for the moral judgment they are already making.

The Question of Innocence

Another common objection is:

They say: “Why does God allow innocent people to suffer?”

In an intellectual discussion, you can ask:

You: “What do you mean by innocent?”

Scripture teaches that humanity is fallen and that all have sinned. But this does **not** mean that every person suffers because of some particular personal sin.

Jesus Himself rejected that simplistic connection between individual suffering and individual guilt.

So do not say: **“They suffered because they were sinners.”**

The broader biblical picture is that we live in a fallen creation where sin, suffering, disease, injustice, and death are realities.

The Christian does not have to claim that every tragedy is direct punishment for a particular sin in order to affirm that suffering exists within a world corrupted by the Fall.

Where Does the Moral Standard Come From?

Sometimes the objection becomes even more explicit.

They say: “God is wrong for allowing suffering.”

You Ask: “What standard are you using to judge God as morally wrong?”

If they reject God while appealing to objective morality, ask how their worldview accounts for that moral standard.

You: “If morality is only the result of human preference, culture, or evolution, what makes suffering objectively wrong rather than merely unpleasant?”

This question turns the objection back upon the worldview making it. If God does not exist, what ultimately makes cruelty evil? If humans are only the result of impersonal material processes, why is there an objective moral obligation to treat one another in any particular way? Again, the argument is not that atheists cannot behave morally or recognize injustice.

The question is what makes their moral judgments objectively binding.

Common Responses and Objections

They say: “If God could stop suffering and doesn’t, He must not be loving.”

You: “What do you mean by loving? Does love always require preventing every painful experience?”

Pain by itself does not prove the absence of a good purpose. A dentist may intentionally cause temporary pain while treating the cause of a greater problem. That illustration does not explain every tragedy, but it demonstrates that **allowing pain and being good are not logically contradictory**.

They say: “A good God would stop all evil.”

You: “Would you want God to stop every evil act, thought, motive, and desire immediately—including ours?”

That brings the issue closer to home. People often think of evil only as the things other people do.

They say: “There is too much suffering for God to exist.”

You: “How much suffering would be compatible with God’s existence, and how did you determine that amount?”

They say: “Children suffer. That proves God cannot be good.”

You: “Does the fact that something is genuinely tragic prove that God could have no morally sufficient reason for allowing it?”

They say: “If God is sovereign, then He could have prevented it.”

You: “Does having the power to prevent something mean there could never be a morally sufficient reason for allowing it?”

They say: “God abandoned me.”

You: “What makes you feel most abandoned?”

They say: “I prayed and nothing changed.”

You: “What were you hoping God would do?”

They say: “I cannot understand why He allowed this.”

You: “Do you think trusting God requires us to understand every reason He has?”

They say: “I don’t know if I can believe anymore.”

You: “What about what happened has made it hardest for you to trust Him?”

Notice that the questions change depending upon the person. The grieving person needs to be heard. The philosophical objector needs their assumptions examined.

God’s Love Does Not Mean a Life Without Pain

Sometimes the person is operating with an assumption Christianity never promised: “If God loves me, nothing terrible should happen to me.” But Scripture never promises believers a life without suffering.

- The prophets suffered.
- The apostles suffered.
- The early church suffered.
- And above all, Christ suffered.

So you may eventually ask:

You: “Do you think God ever promised that those He loves would never experience suffering?”

The biblical promise is not that God will prevent every painful event.

It is that suffering will not ultimately separate His people from Him and that death itself will not have the final word.

Moving the Conversation to Christ

Christianity does not answer suffering only with an abstract philosophical explanation. It gives us the cross.

You can say: “Christianity does not teach that God watches suffering from a safe distance. The Son of God entered this world, suffered, was rejected, was crucified, and rose from the dead.”

Jesus stood at Lazarus's tomb and wept. He knew resurrection was coming, yet He did not treat grief as meaningless.

- Christ experienced betrayal.
- Christ experienced injustice.
- Christ experienced physical suffering.
- Christ died.
- And Christ rose.

The resurrection changes the Christian understanding of suffering because death is no longer ultimate.

Christianity does not promise that we will understand every reason God permits every tragedy.

It promises something greater: God has acted in Christ, death will be defeated, evil will be judged, and those who belong to Christ will be raised.

What to Listen For

First determine whether the question is primarily **personal or intellectual**.

If it is personal, listen for **grief, anger, guilt, confusion, unanswered prayer, fear, loss, and disappointment with God**. Questions such as “**What happened?**”, “**Tell me about them,**”, “**What makes this hardest?**”, and “**What has this made you believe about God?**” may be more appropriate than immediate philosophical arguments.

If the objection is intellectual, listen for assumptions about **evil, innocence, morality, justice, love, sovereignty, and what God would be obligated to do**. Useful questions include “**What do you mean by evil?**”, “**What makes something objectively wrong?**”, “**What do you mean by innocent?**”, “**What does love require?**”, and “**Does allowing suffering prove there can be no good reason for allowing it?**”

The Goal

Do not make suffering sound small. Do not pretend to know why God permitted every particular tragedy. Do not use apologetics as an excuse to avoid compassion.

At the same time, do not allow the existence of suffering to be used as an argument against God without examining the moral assumptions underneath that argument.

When the person is hurting, listen and grieve with them. When they are arguing, help them examine their worldview.

And in both conversations, eventually bring them to the same place: the crucified and risen Christ. Christianity does not give us an explanation for every individual tragedy.

It gives us a Savior who entered suffering, conquered death, and promises that suffering, evil, and the grave will not have the final word.