



SOUTHERN  
EVANGELICAL  
Seminary & Bible College

# WHY TRUST THE GOD OF THE BIBLE?

A SHORT CASE FOR THE  
TRUTHFULNESS OF CHRISTIANITY



# Table of Contents

1. What is Biblical Faith?
2. Can We Know Anything for Sure?
3. Does God Exist?
4. Can We Trust the Bible?
5. What Does All of This Mean?
6. But That's Just Your Interpretation!
7. What Can We Conclude?

Appendix 1. Methodology

Appendix 2. Inerrancy

Appendix 3. Evil & Suffering

Go Deeper

Endnotes

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# 1. What is Biblical Faith?

“There are two ways of looking at the world: through faith and superstition or through the rigors of logic, observation, and evidence—in other words through reason.”<sup>1</sup> So says outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins. This type of thinking regarding faith and reason has become predominant in our culture, though such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “Faith is not emotional; it is rather an act of the will. And again, not because faith contradicts reason, for it doesn’t. Rather, faith in God...is nothing less than the will to follow reason’s lead when emotion might incline us to doubt.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, biblical faith is better understood as an active trust in the authority of what God has said.

It is not unlike what takes place when we visit a doctor. We would not take the medical advice of a random stranger on the street. Rather, we seek out trained and credentialed medical professionals who have proven they are knowledgeable about the workings of the human body. Given their training, they have access to information about our health to which we do not have access. Thus, when they provide a diagnosis we choose to trust them and do what they say or not. The facts that they have been trained by competent schools, have been properly credentialed, and maybe even come highly recommended by others give us reason to confidently place our trust in them.

What are the reasons, the “preambles of faith,” that should lead one to place one’s trust in the God of the Bible? In the pages of this booklet you will get a taste of a complete apologetic for Christianity. *Apologetics* comes from the Greek word *apologia* meaning “to give a defense.” It is simply loving people enough to answer their honest questions. This resource, based on the distinctive philosophical approach and apologetic methodology taught at [Southern Evangelical Seminary](#) (SES), contains the overview of a brief, but complete argument for the truthfulness of Christianity. The views of the seminary have been variously labeled as Classical Realism, Philosophical Realism, Scholastic Realism, Thomistic Realism, and Thomism (named for the thirteenth century Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas). Building upon certain central points from Aristotle, Thomism begins with the common sense experiences of sensible (physical) reality and shows, by a process of philosophical reasonings, that certain things must be metaphysically true of reality as such.

It is our desire that you will study the arguments, investigate the endnotes, and begin your journey of knowing why Christianity is true so that you can either put your trust in Jesus Christ for the first time or be equipped to communicate to others your convictions

in a winsome and respectful way (1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 3). Far from being a blind leap in the dark, *faith*, in the biblical sense, is simply a step of trust in light of the evidence.

For those of you who are ready to go even deeper in your Christian thinking, please consider the many ways SES can help you be equipped. From our free mobile app, to our Lay Institute self-study courses, to certificate programs, to undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees, SES can meet you where you are on your journey. **Visit [www.SES.edu](http://www.SES.edu) to learn more about how you can receive vital training for evangelism and discipleship to reach a post-Christian culture.**

## 2. Can We Know Anything for Sure?

Many today fail to see the importance of grounding their reasoning process in reality in spite of the fact that whatever is not based on reality is un-reality, in other words unreal. The slippery slope of subjectivism and relativism is the result of such “reasoning” manufactured in the imaginations of the mind rather than in reality, on Truth. This distinction is especially important for Christians who desire to share their *reasonable* faith. Sadly, subjectivism has crept its way into the church with the assumption that we do not need to defend our faith with reason; we only need the Bible.

Despite the claims of subjectivism and “blind” faith, one of the most fundamental observations anyone can make of physical reality is that it changes, and yet something about it remains the same. This observation is the first step in a complete apologetic for Christianity. What remains the same in this physical piece of reality is its essence. What changes are called accidental properties. We can observe anything in reality, natural or man-made, for example a real tree, and see that it changes over time—grows larger, develops branches, colorful leaves, etc.—and yet it remains the same tree such that it is distinguishable from all the other trees. Its change is accounted for by the principles of *actuality* (act) and *potentiality* (potency) that are present in all created things. Actuality is the existence of some thing. Potentiality accounts for the capacity of some thing to change or become other than what it is. Change could be substantial, in that I could destroy the tree and it could no longer exist. Or it could be accidental, such as cutting off a limb. The change could be internal, such as its growing a new limb, or the change could be external if I cut the tree down.

Everything in the world that we experience is a composition of form (actuality)—or *what* something is—and matter (potentiality to change) that individuates the form to be *this* thing and not *that* thing. For example, a cat is a cat because of its form or catness (*what* it is), and its matter individuates it to be *this* cat as opposed to *that* cat. Matter, as used here, should not be equated with physical matter, and form should not be equated with the shape of something. Instead, these are principles found in things or substances. As already explained, there are things essential and accidental to a nature. Something essential cannot be removed without changing what it is. Something accidental could be otherwise and would not change what something is. For example, it is essential to the nature of a cat that it be an animal nature. If that is changed or removed somehow,

it ceases to be a cat. But it is accidental if the size and color of the cat change. Despite the change, it stays a cat. Such a description is possible for every created thing from the smallest subatomic particle to the largest galaxies.

We come to know reality in an act of existence, in other words by its actual existence. This knowing relates to its form (essence) and its matter (potential to change). The form of something is related to its actuality. Again, form is *what* something is (i.e., an essence). For example, a cat has the form of catness, and a dog has the form of dogness. Matter is related to the individual potentiality (to change). It is that which individuates an essence to be this cat or that cat. The form of a substance is immaterial. The matter of a substance is what individuates the essence to be a particular thing that gives it extension in space, which is limited to its form. We can say a dog is not a cat because of their different form or essence. We can say *this* cat is not *that* cat because of their different matter or individuation of matter.

## The Process of Knowing

The soul is the substantial form of the human body. The way in which we know something is by its form, which is united to matter. We know things via our five senses. Since the form of a substance is immaterial, it is able to enter our mind, and we are able to know the thing, know the form extracted (in our mind) from its matter, as it is in itself. Contrary to what some philosophers have proposed throughout history, the form that enters the mind is not a different substance or copy of the substance that comes to exist in the mind of the knower. Rather, the same form that is united with matter unites with the mind of the knower; in a sense the knower and the thing known become one.

Once the form enters our minds, in an act of existence, our internal senses combine all the available external sensitive input. Our intellect is able to extract the universal from the particular, *catness* for example. We are able to form mental images (phantasms) of particulars by using the internal senses combined with other intellective powers such as remembrance and the abstracted universal. We are able to make judgments and form concepts and ideas about the known thing. All of this and much more happens effortlessly, almost without awareness.

This process of knowing can be applied to sensible reality and to the interpretation of any text or spoken word. We come to know a written or spoken word the same way we come to know any other thing in sensible reality. First, the author or speaker has an idea. Meaning exists as form (immaterially) in the mind of the author/speaker. The author/speaker causes a text to exist by imposing form (meaning) upon language (combining it with matter) to create a text or spoken word in sensible reality. The speaker expresses

his thought, then the mind of the reader or hearer extracts the form (meaning) from the text or spoken word in reality through the senses, and then the meaning is processed by the intellect. In this way a reader or hearer is able to know the meaning that is in the text or spoken words.<sup>1</sup>

## Why is This Important?

All humans have the same nature/essence; therefore, all human intellects have the same basic capacities. Since the forms in reality are the same as what comes to exist in the human mind, what something *is* is determined by reality and not the knower. This is what we mean by truth. Truth is that which corresponds to its object, or, more specifically, truth is the conforming of the intellect to reality. Knowledge, meaning, and the intended purpose of all things are grounded in reality and are objectively verifiable. This explanation supports all human endeavors in the sciences and humanities and particularly makes Christian apologetics, theology, and ethics worthy endeavors.

This unity of existence between intellect and reality is the basis for the two extremely important great apologetic goals: to demonstrate the existence of God and to demonstrate the historical truth that God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.

# 3. Does God Exist?

Since humans know truths about the world, we are able to conclude that knowledge can be reduced to undeniable facts or principles. In philosophy these are expressed as first principles. For example, “something exists” is an undeniable statement about our act of knowing sensible reality. It is on this undeniable knowledge that we can reason from effect to cause and see that even the most mundane object we encounter can lead us to truth about the existence and nature of God. As SES professor Richard Howe says, “There is nowhere the unbeliever can hide in all reality where he is not standing on some ground that can be shown to point to its Creator.”<sup>1</sup>

There are many popular lines of thinking, both scientific and philosophical, showing that theism is true; that is, there exists a God who is separate from, yet active in, His creation. To once again take a cue from Howe, note that there are several arguments for God based on the *coming to be* of the universe at some time in the finite past and several arguments for God based on the *current existing* of the universe here and now. First, there are the Kalam-type cosmological arguments that go something like this:

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

Premise one is taken as self-evident since nothing can create itself. Premise two is supported by various lines of evidence from standard big bang cosmology showing the universe exploded into existence a finite time ago. It is also supported by the argument that since it is impossible to traverse an infinite number of anything, we would never have arrived at today if a prior infinite number of moments must have been traversed in order for today to occur. Therefore, it is concluded that if all time, space, matter, and energy began to exist, then the ultimate cause must be beyond time, outside of space, immaterial, and incredibly powerful. This sounds a lot like what we mean by God.

Similarly, another coming-to-be type argument is based on the apparent design found throughout the universe. The argument goes like this:

1. Every design has a designer.
2. The universe and biological life itself appear to be designed.
3. Therefore, the universe and biological life itself must have a designer.

Once again, the first premise seems self-evident. In addition, it is difficult to argue with the fact that nature certainly displays various levels of complexity that seem to indicate the need for a designer. From the various cosmological constants that make our universe

possible—known as the anthropic principle—to the information encoded on DNA and the amazing molecular “machines” found in microscopic organisms, our observations of this world seem to reveal to us the products of a master designer. Combined with other arguments, this thinking also points to God as the mind behind it all. The reader can refer to other resources, such as Norman Geisler and Frank Turek’s *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, for the specifics.

There are, however, potential shortcomings to arguments based solely on the coming to be of the universe. Such arguments tend to be based on current, though often disputable, scientific findings from which one must extrapolate philosophical conclusions about their cause. What happens if the scientific consensus changes, and how does one know that the cause to which these arguments point is still existing and active in the world today? Is the cause actually God or just a really powerful finitely existing thing of some sort? Is there only one cause or are multiple causes responsible for the universe? As philosopher Joseph Owens observes,

Other arguments [such as the ones given above] may vividly suggest the existence of God, press it home eloquently to human consideration, and for most people provide much greater spiritual and religious aid than difficult metaphysical [i.e., the branch of philosophy that studies being/existence] demonstration. But on the philosophical level these arguments are open to rebuttal and refutation, for they are not philosophically cogent. Remaining on the side of the nature of any observable object or event, one reaches cogently no further than a finite nature or agent. Only from the starting point of its existence, which is not a nature in the finite thing, does the human mind encounter...a path for cogent reasoning to existence as a nature, that is, to the existence of God.<sup>2</sup>

Following the thought of Thomas Aquinas, a more insightful and robust argument can be constructed based upon the *current existing* of any aspect of physical reality. Consider the following syllogism:

1. Whatever is composed requires a composer.
2. Every aspect of physical reality is composed.
3. Therefore, every aspect of physical reality must have a composer.

As with the other arguments above, the first premise is self-evident. Whatever exists as a composition of parts must be composed by something else since nothing can create itself. Consider an inflated balloon that provides great fun for children. There is nothing about the balloon in itself that constitutes its being an *inflated* balloon. It has the poten-

tial to be inflated, but something else must provide the air to cause the actual inflation. In other words, something outside the balloon, a composer so to speak, must combine the air with the balloon. Perhaps the balloon is inflated by a man using an air pump. Not only must the composer put air in the balloon, but he must also keep the air in the balloon. Again, of itself, there is nothing about the balloon that will keep it inflated. If the composer lets go of the balloon, prior to tying it, of course, the balloon would fly around the room as the air escapes resulting in a deflated balloon, which is no fun at all.

This air/balloon composition of actuality and potentiality is analogous to the composition of every aspect of physical reality and offers support for premise two of the argument. In this analogy, the air—which is unconfined for the sake of this example—represents the unlimited perfection of act or being. The act of being is something all existing things have in common, but not all existing things are the same being. The balloon, therefore, represents the potency to which an act of existing is conjoined that limits the act and forms an actually existing composed thing. As philosopher Henri Grenier puts it,

Finite being [i.e., physical reality] is limited, and therefore has two intrinsic constituents: the perfection of being and the limitation of this perfection. But the limitation of the perfection of being does not derive from this perfection, because it is its negation; and it cannot come from non-being, because non-being is nothing. Consequently the limitation of the perfection of being must derive from some positive limiting principle which is really distinct from act, i.e., from perfection, that is to say, it must derive from potency.<sup>3</sup>

Everything that exists is either Pure Act—pure and unlimited being itself—or it is necessarily a composite of actuality and potentiality. Every aspect of physical reality, whether we are talking about a man, a tree, a shoe, or a dog, is limited in being. That is, it exists as *this* thing (not another), at *this* time (not another), in *this* location (not another), with *these* traits (not others) and has the potential to change in a variety of ways. It is not pure and unlimited being itself. Hence, every aspect of physical reality is necessarily a combination of act and potency. One should be careful not to consider actuality and potentiality as really existing independent things, but rather as the two principles by which limited beings actually exist. Regarding the relation between act and potency, Feser says,

A potential is always a potential for a certain kind of actuality; for example, potential gooeyness is just the potential to be actually gooey. Furthermore, potency cannot exist on its own, but only in combination with act; hence there is no such thing as poten-

tial gooeyness existing all by itself, but only in something like an actual rubber ball. It is incoherent to speak of something as both existing and being purely potential, with no actuality whatsoever. But it is not incoherent to speak of something as being purely actual, with no potentiality at all [emphasis in original].<sup>4</sup>

The terms *existence* and *essence* are also used to refer to the specific act/potency composition of things. The essence, or *what* a thing is, is the limiting potency with which an act of existence is combined to form an actually existing thing. We can know *what* something is (its essence) without knowing *whether* it is (its existence). Just think about a Tyrannosaurs Rex or a unicorn. You can know what those things are (their essences) without knowing anything about their actual extra-mental existence. Therefore, existence and essence (as well as act and potency as we have seen) are really distinct principles in limited beings. Anything with existence as its essence would be Pure Act and not a limited composite being.

As such, we know that the act of existing cannot be *part of the essence* of a limited thing since the two are really distinct principles. Like a heart and its beating, act/existence is *distinct* from potency/essence though the two are not *separate*. Philosopher Gaven Kerr notes, “In such a case there is a distinction between the two realities; such a distinction entails that neither reality is to be identified with the other, but also that the one cannot be separated from the other in the way that the heart is separate from the liver or the moon from the earth.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, we know the act of existing cannot be a *property* of a limited thing since properties are the consequences of an actually existing thing, and a thing’s properties cannot exist prior to the thing itself. Therefore, the act of existing can be neither an essential part of a thing nor a property since, if either were the case, a thing would have to exist prior to its act of existing which is a contradiction.<sup>6</sup> It follows that every composition of act and potency, and thus every aspect of physical reality, must have a cause, a composer, outside itself. Professor James Dolezal puts it like this,

Expressed negatively, composition entails that the composite thing be a dependent effect that is in some sense in the process of becoming and is not wholly self-identifying. In short, a composite being is a creature.... No potency perfects itself or gives itself actuality; this comes to potency from a corresponding principle of act. Indeed, potency is only properly understood when conceived in composition with act... [emphasis in original].<sup>7</sup>

To see why this ultimate composer, this ultimate “corresponding principle of act,” must be the theistic God, consider once again the example of the balloon where the air represents an act of existing. There must be a man with an air pump, someone with the ability to provide the air (i.e., the existence in this case), in order for the balloon to be inflated and stay inflated here and now. This is just an analogy of course. In reality, the man in this example can only blow up the balloon because he actually exists. Why does he, as a limited being himself, exist here and now? It cannot be because of his parents since his parents could long be dead but he still exist. Neither can it be because of his essence as a human being. As we have seen, existence is not a part or property of the essence of a limited being. Nor can it be because of any more basic constituents of physical reality (i.e., atoms, quarks, strings, etc.) since such particles would themselves be limited compositions of act and potency in need of a composer. When considering the current existing of any part of physical reality in this way, we are examining an *essentially* ordered causal series. That is, unlike the *accidental* causal relationship between a father who begets a son, who begets a son, and so on where the *current* existing of any son is not dependent on the current existing of the father, an essentially ordered causal series stands or falls with a primary and simultaneous cause of the entire series here and now. In an essentially ordered series there cannot be an infinite chain or loop of composed causes, each requiring its own composer *ad infinitum*, or the effect in question would never exist here and now. Such an absurd scenario would be like seeing train cars, which cannot move themselves, rushing down the track and not expecting to see an engine.

Hence, the air pump can only blow up the balloon because the man is pumping it. The man can only use the pump because of the firing of certain motor neurons causing his muscles to move. The firing of certain motor neurons causing his muscles to move only occurs because of the man’s will to move his arm. He can only use his will “by the soul, [and] the soul by that being from which it has received its [essence], and which is keeping that [essence] in existence.”<sup>8</sup> If any link in the series is removed there would be no inflated balloon nor any person to inflate it at this moment. Therefore, in order for the person, or any physical thing, to exist here and now there must be something that just *is* Pure Act (i.e., it has being of itself as an Uncomposed Composer with no potentiality), something whose essence just *is* existence itself, composing an act of existing with its limiting potency to create and sustain a really existing thing. Just like the untied inflated balloon would lose its air if someone let it go, since existence is really distinct from our essence, we would cease to be if this Uncomposed Composer were not keeping us in existence every moment we exist. It follows also that there could only possibly be one such Pure Act since there is no limiting potency by which to differentiate another purely

actual being.

The advantage of using this kind of argument based on the current existing of the universe is that it is immune to many of the criticisms of the arguments mentioned before, and its conclusion provides a more robust view of the theistic God as Pure Act or Being itself (see Exod. 3:14; Acts 17:26-28; Col. 1:15-17) from which we can derive all the classical attributes of God. As Feser concludes, “To show that an Unmoved Mover [i.e., Uncomposed Composer] exists, then, is just to show that there is a single being who is the cause of all change, Himself unchangeable [and uncomposed], immaterial, eternal, personal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. It is, in short, to show that there is a God.”<sup>9</sup>

Note that this type of argument is not predicated on the beginning of the universe. Hence, one could grant for the sake of argument an eternally existing universe, a multiverse, or even Darwinian evolution (not that any of these ideas are necessarily true) and still be able to argue to the theistic God based on any mundane part of physical reality. Moreover, the thrust of this argument is based on the simple fact that we can know that some aspect of physical reality actually exists. Such a starting point is something so fundamental that all empirical science must take it for granted before any scientific process can actually begin. Thus, it is immune to any new scientific discoveries or paradigms.

The question of God is ultimately a philosophical question. As Owens implies, while other more well known arguments may give someone good reason to infer God as the most *probable* explanation for the evidence in question, with a little work and some good philosophy it is actually possible to have metaphysical *certainty* of God’s existence. We do ourselves a disservice (both apologetically and devotionally) by oversimplifying the existence of God and ignoring the amazing truths we can learn about His “invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature” by thinking well about the composition of physical reality (Rom. 1:20, NET).

## Is Reason Inherently Atheistic?

While it is true that many Christians have become anti-intellectual and have even spurned reason, as we have seen, such a view is not biblical. Nevertheless, this false piety of anti-intellectual Christianity has spurned many atheists and skeptics to view reason as solely their domain. David Silverman, President of the American Atheists, writes, “*God is a myth and reason is inherently atheistic*” [emphasis in original].<sup>10</sup>

Aside from the facts that most Western universities were started by Christians, many prominent scientists and philosophers through the centuries were Christians (or at least believers in God), most of the founding fathers of the United States of America believed

in God, etc., in an ironic twist, the very fact that human beings reason in the first place actually serves to demonstrate the existence of the very God the atheistic/humanistic “champions of reason” refuse to acknowledge. Using the basis of the argument above, we can see how human reasoning can demonstrate God’s existence.

Please understand, this is not an argument about the complexity of the brain, how much complexity there must be for consciousness, or any other such biological or neurological issues. Rather, the argument here rests on the fact that man has an intellect that is directed towards pursuing truth.<sup>11</sup> That man has an intellect should not need elucidating. The very fact that this debate about reason is taking place is illustrative of man’s intellectual powers. Likewise, upon a moment’s reflection, one can see that his intellect is directed towards attaining truth. Philosophers George Klubertanz and Maurice Holloway say,

...our own human intellect is itself a natural power that is ordered to its proper end. For man does not order his intellect to the truth; he finds that of its very nature it is already ordered to the truth....While man can order himself in many of his actions for ends that he sets up for himself, he nevertheless finds his powers initially finalized [i.e. directed] toward ends that he has not established, but toward which these powers tend of their very nature.<sup>12</sup>

To deny this fact is actually in practice to confirm it. In other words, if one disagrees with the fact that his intellect is directed towards truth, he would essentially be saying, “Wait a minute. That’s not true!” But if his intellect is not directed towards truth, then who cares if it is not true? What he is communicating by such a statement is that he only wants to believe what is true (i.e., what corresponds to reality), which is precisely the point!

How does this point to God? Man’s intellect and its directedness towards truth is part of the nature of man as a rational animal. Feser says, “. . . for a thing to have a certain final cause [i.e., goal directedness] entails that it also has a certain formal and material cause and thus a certain nature or essence; otherwise its final cause would not be inherent in it, nor would it be capable of realizing it.”<sup>13</sup> David Oderberg observes, “...*what* a thing is does determine *how* it is — in the traditional terminology, function follows essence. Essence just is the principle from which flows the characteristic behaviour [sic] of a thing” [emphasis in original].<sup>14</sup> Again Feser notes, “But the essences that determine the ends of things—our ends, and for that matter the end of reason too as inherently directed toward the true and the good—do not exist independently of God...they pre-exist in the divine intellect as the ideas or archetypes by reference to which God creates.”<sup>15</sup>

Why must that be the case? Man's reasoning ability is proof that man changes because he forms arguments, makes judgments, and learns. Thus, man is a limited, contingent, and changeable kind of being. As we have seen, any limited or changing being, as a combination of potency and act, cannot account for its own existence, but has an essence that must be joined to an act of existence. Feser continues, "It follows that whatever orders things to their ends must also be the cause of those things and thus (given what was said earlier) Pure Act or Being Itself."<sup>16</sup> As Klubertanz and Holloway put it, "A natural being is ordered to its proper end both by its nature [essence] and by an intellect. Immediately and intrinsically, it is ordered by its nature, but ultimately and extrinsically, it is so ordered by the divine intellect who has established the end and created the nature."<sup>17</sup>

This is why the philosophical theology of Aquinas laid out above is so brilliant and deceptively simple. By reasoning well about the most mundane and uncontroversial, dare one say undeniable, aspects of reality, one can reach the conclusion that the God of classical theism exists, and from there one can further investigate the truth claims of Christianity and see that trusting in Jesus as Savior is the most reasonable thing one can do. As G. K. Chesterton says,

But the mind is active, and its activity consists in following, so far as the will chooses to follow, the light outside that does really shine upon real landscapes....In other words, the essence of the Thomist common sense is that two agencies are at work; reality and the recognition of reality; and their meeting is a sort of marriage. Indeed it is very truly a marriage, because it is fruitful; the only philosophy now in the world that really is fruitful. It produces practical results, precisely because it is the combination of an adventurous mind and a strange fact....God made Man so that he was capable of coming in contact with reality; and those whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder.<sup>18</sup>

Trusting in reason or in God is not an either/or proposition. We can reason to the fact that God exists (Romans 1). Reason concludes that the Bible is reliable and that Jesus is therefore God in human flesh who is the only way to salvation (the evidence for these claims is forthcoming). The Holy Spirit can then use man's reasoning as the occasion upon which He provides the faith that enables the will to trust in Christ as Savior (true biblical faith) and to have conviction that God is trustworthy even when reason does not understand (Hebrews 11). That trust leads to obedience, and that obedience leads to prayer and other spiritual virtues. Would that those spurning God in the name of reason, as well as those spurning reason in the name of God, see the beauty of the marriage God

has made between faith and reason.

# 4. Can We Trust the Bible?

Now that we have metaphysical certainty that the theistic God exists, it necessarily follows that any non-theistic view of reality, or world view, must be false. Atheism, agnosticism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Wicca, and any other non-theistic world view must be false regarding their views of God. This conclusion means an incredible amount of work has already been done in showing that Christianity is true as we are left with only Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and any other unnamed theistic world view as possible contenders for the one true view of reality.

How can we adjudicate between these views? If one of the above belief systems were confirmed by miracles, then we would have reason to believe its truth claims. We can know that miracles are at least *possible* because we know an all-powerful God exists who is currently sustaining in existence the whole of physical reality in which He can act. Thus, the miracles recorded in the Bible, specifically the resurrection of Jesus, will distinguish between our remaining world views of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or any other theistic belief system.

But can we trust what the Bible says? For our purposes we will focus on the New Testament (NT). Why? Because Jesus, whom the NT shows is God, says the Old Testament (OT) is the Word of God. Thus, while there is independent evidence for the reliability of the OT, by confirming the NT we get the OT as well.

Two questions must be asked regarding the NT's reliability. One, do we have an accurate copy of the original writings, and two, did the NT writers tell the truth? Accurate copies of fairy tales would do little to help in our search for truth.

Ranging from fragments with a few verses, to pages, to whole books and collections of books, the manuscript evidence for the text of the NT far outweighs any other ancient literary work. There are currently around 5,500 NT manuscripts in the original Greek, most of which date from AD 1,000 and later, though many date well before that (at least six from the second century AD).<sup>1</sup>

Our earliest known copy of any portion of the NT is around 25-40 years removed from the original.<sup>2</sup> In second place is Homer's *Iliad* with 1,757 manuscripts, our earliest copy of which is 400 years removed from the original.<sup>3</sup> Support for other ancient documents drops significantly from there. When you add in the tens of thousands of copies of early translations of the NT and over a million quotations from the church fathers (ranging from the first century AD to the middle ages), the text of the NT is incredibly well attested.<sup>4</sup> While there are over 200,000 places where these NT manuscripts differ amongst

themselves, only about 1% of those differences (which affect about 0.1% of the NT text) have any significant bearing on the meaning of the verse in question. Most importantly, not one of those differences affects any essential Christian doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

Do these well-attested NT documents tell the truth? We have good reason to believe they do. For instance, none of the NT documents mention the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, an earth-shattering event for the Jews, which occurred in AD 70. There are also indications within the text that imply the temple was still in operation. It stands to reason that the most likely reason for the absence of such information is because most, if not all, of the NT was written prior to the events of AD 70. Thus, there is good reason to believe the NT contains early testimony about Jesus and the Apostles.

The authors of the NT claimed to be eyewitnesses of the events recorded or claimed to have interviewed eyewitnesses. Even if we only have 1 Cor. 15:3-8, which critical scholars grant was written by Paul around AD 55, we have the core of Christianity and a powerful apologetic for Jesus' resurrection preserved in those few verses. We have much more than that however. There are hundreds of archaeological finds that verify various persons and places mentioned throughout the NT and several ancient non-Christian sources that corroborate many aspects of the NT narrative. Perhaps most powerfully, we know from both tradition and history that most of the Apostles were killed for proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. While people die everyday for what they believe, no one willingly dies for what they *know* to be a lie when they have nothing to gain. The Apostles would have been the perpetrators of the lie if the resurrection did not actually happen. Yet, they never recanted their testimonies. While it is true that some ultra-skeptical critics today attempt to question the very existence of a historical Jesus, there is virtually no reason to entertain such a notion. It is almost laughable, within the academic community, to suggest that a historical Jesus did not actually exist. The real question is "Who exactly was this historical Jesus?"

## Did Jesus Claim to Be God?

"LORD," as found in most modern English Bibles, is the equivalent of the Hebrew letters YHWH, also known as the tetragrammaton, and is usually transliterated into English as *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*.<sup>6</sup> This is the special name God gave for Himself in the OT (Ex. 3:14) as opposed to other titles for God such as *Adonai* and *Elohim*, which can also be used to refer to human rulers or false gods. While perhaps less than explicit to the modern reader, Jesus claimed clearly to His audience to be Yahweh come in human flesh.

Perhaps most explicitly, in John 8:58 Jesus said, "...before Abraham came into existence, I am!" (NET), equating Himself with Yahweh in Exod. 3:14. According to Ron

Rhodes, both “I AM” and “Yahweh” have the same root meaning from the verb “to be” and can be used interchangeably.<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ listeners knew exactly what He was saying, and they picked up stones to stone Him—the prescribed punishment for blasphemy. In addition, Jesus claimed to share glory with the Father (John 17:5) even though Yahweh clearly says He does not share His glory with anyone (Isa. 42:8).

Jesus also claimed titles for Himself that were reserved for Yahweh alone. He referred to Himself as “the Son of man” (Mark 14:61-64), a title given to the “Ancient of Days,” referring to Yahweh, in Dan. 7:22. He calls Himself the “first and the last” in Rev. 1:17, a title for Yahweh in Isa. 42:8. Jesus called Himself the “good shepherd” (John 10:11) even though the Psalmist calls Yahweh the shepherd (Psa. 23:1). Moreover, Jesus claimed prerogatives that belong to God alone. He forgave sin (Mark 2:5-11), declared power over life and death (John 5:21), accepted worship (Matt. 14:33; John 20:28), and commanded the same honor as the Father (John 5:23). In many ways Jesus clearly claimed to be God!

Again, His followers understood His claims to divinity and also called Him Yahweh in many places. For example, John writes in John 1:1 that Jesus (the Word) was “fully God” (NET). He says that Jesus created everything that has been made (John 1:3), yet Yahweh says He alone created everything (Isa. 44:24).<sup>8</sup> Paul called Jesus God in Phil. 2:5-11 and Col. 2:9. Referring to Jesus, Paul says, quoting Joel 2:32, in Rom. 10:13 “...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (NET), a verse that clearly says to call on the name of Yahweh.

The earliest Christians also understood Jesus’ divine identity. Pliny, the governor of Bithynia (in modern-day Turkey) during the early second century, condemned Christians for offering worship to Jesus “as if to a god.”<sup>9</sup> Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch who was martyred c. 107-110 AD, said Jesus is “the mind of the Father” and properly called “our God.”<sup>10</sup> From this sampling it is clear Jesus was understood to be God.

## Is Jesus Really God?

We have seen that Jesus claimed to be God, and that His earliest followers believed He was God, but do we have reason to conclude His claims were true? Recall that a claim verified by miracles gives us very good reason to believe it. The NT attributes many miracles to Jesus, but one stands above the rest, namely His resurrection. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, Christianity hinges on the resurrection, and we have good reason to believe it actually occurred.

Investigating the resurrection involves doing good history by explaining the key pieces of evidence, the historical puzzle pieces if you will, in the best way possible with the fewest un-evidenced assumptions. Most critical scholars will grant five key pieces that,

when taken together along with our background knowledge that God exists, show the resurrection is a historical fact.<sup>11</sup> Using F.A.C.T.S. as an acronym, here are the five key puzzle pieces.

### **F - FATAL CROSS**

Jesus actually died on the cross. This contrasts the swoon theory that Jesus somehow survived the crucifixion and was resuscitated. The biblical text, historical investigation, and modern medical science demonstrate that Jesus died.

### **A - ABANDONED TOMB**

Most scholars grant that Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb that was later found empty. It was falsely explained by inventing the story of the disciples stealing Jesus' body (Matt. 28:13).

### **C - CONVERSION OF THE DISCIPLES**

Jesus' disciples went from cowering away in a locked room (John 20:19) to turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). History shows that all but one of the disciples died for proclaiming the risen Christ. People may die every day for what they believe is true, but no one willingly dies for something they know to be false.

### **T - TRANSFORMATION OF JAMES**

According to Paul, Jesus' brother James was an eyewitness of the risen Jesus, as were the apostles and more than 500 others (1 Cor. 15:3-8). After the resurrection James transformed from skeptic (Mark 3:21; John 7:5) to leader of the early church and martyr (Gal. 2:9; Eusebius).

### **S - SAUL BECAME PAUL**

Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians, became Paul the Apostle after encountering the risen Christ (though his encounter was not a pre-ascension encounter like the others). He, too, died for his proclamation. Like James, something major had to happen in his life in order to cause such a drastic change that ultimately resulted in much physical suffering and death.

An actual resurrection of Jesus best accounts for all the puzzle pieces without forcing them to fit. Other theories simply leave some pieces out, are completely ad hoc, or unnecessarily rule out the possibility of miracles. As Paul says in Acts 17:30-31, "Therefore, although God has overlooked such times of ignorance, he now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he designated, having provided proof to everyone by raising him from the dead" (NET).

## **What About the Trinity?**

Jesus claimed to be Yahweh, the one true God, and He proved to be God via the resurrection. But saying Jesus is God raises a host of questions and objections. Let us examine a few such issues.

First, Jesus being God implies something like the doctrine of the Trinity. While the word “Trinity” is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, the doctrine of the Trinity accounts for the information God has revealed to us about Himself. It does not mean that God is one God and three gods or one Person and three persons, which would be necessarily false contradictions. Rather, the Trinity is the notion that there exists within the one God three co-eternal and co-equal persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is three in a different way than He is one (one “essence”/three “persons”). Thus, no contradiction results.

Second, the Trinity is not against reason even though it is beyond our ability to comprehend. Yet, we can apprehend what has been revealed to us. The most common illustration is that of an equilateral triangle. There is only one triangle, yet within that one triangle exists three equal angles. Each angle is distinct yet equal, and without them the triangle would not exist. Similarly, there is only one God. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, etc.

Third, in addition to Jesus’ divine nature, as Philippians 2 notes, He added a human nature to Himself when He became man at the Incarnation. While Jesus is totally God, He is also totally man. Theologically this is known as the hypostatic union, two distinct natures in one person. Therefore, when asking a question about Jesus, we must consider this dual nature.

For instance, when Jesus says He doesn’t know something (Mark 13:32), we must realize that in His human nature He does not know, yet in His divine nature He knows all. When He gets tired or hungry, it is His human nature that suffers the limits of humanity not His divine nature. In other words, Jesus is not less than God. This is an example of the importance of a sound philosophy that informs our theology and understanding of the Bible (more on that in a moment).

Virtually no credible scholar denies Jesus’ actual existence, and many people claim He was a great man and a great moral teacher. Yet, as C. S. Lewis notes, “You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus is Yahweh, the great I AM, Being itself, the source of all creation (Col. 1:17). As such, this has tremendous implications for what He teaches.

# 5. What Does All of This Mean?

Recall that in our argument for God's existence we distinguished between act/potency and existence/essence. Potency limits act in all limited/changing things as essence limits existence to be this particular thing, like the balloon in our example from earlier, rather than something else. As Richard Howe observes, "Like a balloon that limits and shapes the air that infuses it, the essence of the creature bounds the otherwise limitless fullness of the perfections of existence."<sup>1</sup> We have seen that a theistic God simply is Pure Actuality or unlimited Being itself since His essence and existence are identical with no admixture of potency (see chapter three). As Pure Act God has no potential for change in any way. He has no need for anything and cannot be other than He is. He is the Uncaused Cause, the Uncomposed Composer, the great I AM (Exod. 3:14). He not only created us but is keeping us in existence every moment we exist (Col. 1:15-17). The importance of this conclusion cannot be overstated, for from this follows all the classical attributes of God.

Briefly, since God is Pure Act and not composed of actuality and potentiality, it follows that God is simple. *Simplicity* does not mean God is easy to understand. It means God is not composed in His Being of any type of parts (i.e., act/potency or existence/essence). Therefore, every attribute we are able to apply to God applies to Him wholly in His complete being. The divine attributes are only divided in our intellects as we refer in different ways to one and the same God.

For instance, given God's simplicity, we can know that God is infinite. That is, He is not finite since He has no limiting potentials. He must also, necessarily, be immaterial since a physical existence is a limited existence as we have seen. We can also see that God is Pure Perfection. To be perfect means to lack nothing according to one's nature/essence. God's essence simply is Being itself. He can therefore lack nothing since that would indicate a lack of being in some respect. Similarly, God is not a good thing among others. Rather, we can know that God is Goodness itself. A thing is good insofar as it is in being (i.e., to whatever extent it exists as the kind of thing it is). Again, as Pure Act or Being itself, God necessarily is Goodness itself. God is also omnipresent (i.e., everywhere-present). This does not mean that because God is so big, part of God is present everywhere. According to divine simplicity, God is wholly present to everything as the sustaining cause of all creation. It also follows that God is omnipotent (i.e., all-powerful). Since His power is identical with His unlimited Being, God has unlimited power to affect

change and/or create. God's omnipotence does not mean He can make square circles and rocks too big for Him to lift. Such ideas are contradictions, and contradictions are not actually possible things in reality. Likewise, we can know that God is omniscient (i.e., all-knowing). God's knowledge is identical with His Being such that God knows Himself perfectly and how His being can be or is being communicated to His creation. We can also know that God is omnibenevolent (i.e., all-loving) because to love is to will the good of another. As Goodness itself with all knowledge, God can only ever perfectly will our good. Perhaps surprising to some, God is also immutable (i.e., unchangeable). As Pure Act God has no potential to be changed. He does not react to circumstances because nothing catches Him unknowingly. Any change we perceive is found in us, His creation, not in Him. From this it follows that God is also eternal (i.e., not temporal). Time is a measure of change, but God has no potential for change. Therefore, God is not temporal as He has all perfection in His eternal now. More could be said, but this brief overview should provide the reasoning behind the classical conception of God.

Without a sound philosophy, the student of the Bible would be unable to ground such classical divine attributes. This is so because many passages of the Bible speak metaphorically about God as having various bodily parts. Unless there is some way to judge that such passages are figures of speech, one runs the risk of falling into heresy.

Consider the challenge of understanding the Genesis narrative when it says that Adam heard the sound of God "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8, NKJV). How could God walk in the garden without legs? If He has legs, how could He be transcendent to the universe as Christianity understands God to be? Some might suggest that perhaps these specific descriptions are a Theophany (an appearance of God in human form, referred to by some as a Christophany, before the Incarnation). Even if this explains the narrative here, there are many other physical descriptions of God, some of which cannot possibly be explained as a Theophany (ex. God's "wings" in Ruth 2:12 and Psa. 17:8).

It will not do to appeal to other verses of Scripture to adjudicate the matter. As an example, one might suggest that we can know from John 4 that God is Spirit, and therefore He cannot literally have bodily parts like legs. Thus (they might say), when Genesis 3 talks about God walking, it must be speaking metaphorically (if it is not a Theophany). The problem with this response is that there would be no way to judge whether the Genesis passage is to be taken as metaphor and John 4 is to be taken as literal or whether John 4 should be taken as metaphor and the Genesis passage is to be taken as literal. We can only defend the fact that the above Genesis verses are indeed metaphors and John 4 is literal by an appeal to reality.

To illustrate what is meant here, consider an easier example. When we read in Isa. 55:12, “For you shall go out with joy, And be led out with peace; The mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (NKJV), we know that this is metaphor precisely because we know from reality that mountains cannot sing and trees do not have hands. Our ability to know this is because of our simple apprehension of the nature of mountains and trees by means of our sensory faculties. But our knowledge of the nature of God (i.e., whether He does or does not have bodily parts) cannot be done directly by our sensory faculties. It requires more actions by the intellect. These actions constitute doing philosophy (or, more precisely, metaphysics). We can know by sound philosophy not only (to some extent) what the nature of God must be like (and thus we can know that He cannot literally have such bodily parts), but we can also know certain solid principles of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics). This is not to say that a believer cannot understand his Bible without formal training in philosophy. It is to say, however, that sound interpretations can only be rigorously defended against heretics and critics with some training in sound philosophy.

## What Did Jesus Teach About the Bible?

While for us, truth is the conforming of our minds to reality (see chapter two), in an ultimate sense, truth is the conformity of being to an intellect, specifically the divine and creative intellect (e.g. “true” love, a “true” gentleman, a “true” circle). Necessarily it follows that as Being itself, God cannot be anything other than Truth itself since what He *is* and what He *knows* are one and the same thing considered under different lights.<sup>2</sup> A lie or falsity is a privation of truth. Hence, God cannot lie because He has no potential to be other than He is. This agrees with the Bible’s depiction of God as well (1 Sam. 15:29; John 14:6; Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2).

We have seen that Jesus is God, the second Person of the Trinity. From a simple deductive procedure then, it is easy to see that whatever Jesus teaches is true (it corresponds to reality) because He is God and God cannot lie. But Jesus is also fully man. Could His human nature limit His trustworthiness? Not at all. Even from the standpoint of His willfully limited human knowledge, Jesus taught from what He did know, namely, whatever the Father taught Him (John 8:26).

Hence, we would be wise to consider carefully what Jesus taught. In the words of the Apostle Peter from John 6:68-69, “Lord [Jesus], to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God” (NET).

When we began our investigation of the reliability of the Bible, if you recall, we fo-

cused only on the NT . The reason for this is because that is where we learn about Jesus (though He was prophesied in the OT). We concluded that Jesus is God and that whatever He teaches is necessarily true. Therefore, we can trust whatever Jesus teaches about the Bible as a whole.

As we examine the words of Jesus, we see that He affirmed the OT. When speaking to the unbelieving Jews, Jesus explicitly said in John 5:39-40, “You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me, but you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life” (NET). There can be little doubt that Jesus considered the OT the Word of God, which He fulfilled. But He did not stop there. Not only did Jesus affirm the OT, but He promised the NT. In John 14:26 Jesus tells His disciples, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will cause you to remember everything I said to you” (NET).

The divinely inspired authors of the promised NT agreed. For instance, Peter called the writings of Paul “scripture” in 2 Pet. 3:16. Paul concludes in 2 Tim. 3:16, “Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” (NET).

Jesus also taught that the Bible is inerrant, that is, that the original writings are without error (Matt. 22:29). While our understanding or interpretation of either nature or Scripture may be in error, we know the two will never conflict because the Bible is the Word of God, and God cannot be in error or untruthful; therefore, the Bible cannot err. That is not to say that the Bible does not accurately record many lies and sinful behaviors, but it does not affirm these things as good behaviors. May we take care to understand what the Word of God actually says.

# 6. But That's Just Your Interpretation!

All of us at one time or another have been involved with a Bible study where after reading a passage, the leader looks up and asks the group, “What does that passage mean to you?” On the surface it may sound like a reasonable, amiable question, but is the purpose of Bible study to bounce around subjective ideas based on changing times? Would not the serious student of the Bible want to know an objective meaning that is true for all people and at all time, one that reveals the mind of the Author?

What is objectivity when it comes to studying the Bible? Objectivity in Bible study means that it is possible to know what the text of the Bible actually means, to have a correct interpretation of the Bible.

However, for many Bible scholars today, objectivity is thought to be a kind of neutrality, or an approach to the text and to reality that is determined by one's own perspectives. According to these scholars, objectivity is rejected as a naïve approach that ignores what they believe is the all-important perspective of the interpreter. Their position is that Bible study involves interpretation, and interpretation involves everything that we think and everything we are, what we believe, our point of view, what we think is true and false, what is important to us, what we think about our world, our training, dispositions, and opinions—all these factors that come together to form our personal world view. Our personal world view determines how we interpret the world. It is like having a set of glasses through which we look at and interpret our world. Since no two world views are exactly alike and since our world view determines the way we look at the world, they say it is not possible to have an objective understanding of the Bible. This is a belief held not only by those outside the Christian church, but also by almost all Evangelical scholars today.

## Implications

There are two significant implications for Bible study that follow directly from these beliefs about objectivity. First, if objectivity is a kind of neutrality, then in order to be neutral, the reader must take off his glasses/world view. This creates a problem. It is our world view that makes understanding possible, and without your world view, you cannot understand or know anything. When you take off your glasses, you cannot see. So then, no one can study the Bible without looking through his own glasses/world view. But, it is this very world view that unavoidably influences your interpretation. So, every

interpretation will necessarily be a product, to some degree, of your own world view, and this fact militates against the degree of certainty about having arrived at the correct interpretation.

The second implication that follows is that with the rejection of objectivity there would seem to be no grounds upon which to decide whose interpretation is the correct interpretation. If every interpretation is the product of your own world view, then there can be no single correct interpretation. James Smart identified how the rejection of objectivity makes it impossible to know what God says in His Word:

The danger inherent in this development was that theological interpretations of Scripture would be its meaning for this or that theologian. Thus, theological exposition, instead of penetrating to the one word of God in Scripture that brings all Christians into fellowship with one another, would give each segment of the Christian community the license to read its own theological convictions out of the text of Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

Once we reject the possibility of objectivity, we have lost the very Word of God.

## Connecting Different World Views & Objectivity

Does this mean that it is impossible to know what God says? In fact, objectivity is possible even though each person has his or her own world view. How is it possible? This is because there are some things in the world that are the same for all people, all the time, no matter where or when they lived. These things are the first principles of thought and being we mentioned earlier. First principles are truths that cannot be denied. They form the foundation of knowledge and make it possible for different people with different world views to connect with each other and communicate to each other.

Let me give you an example of a first principle: the law of non-contradiction (also often referred to as the law of contradiction). This law means that a statement cannot be both true and false in the same sense. So, if I make the statement that “God is good,” this statement cannot be both true and false in the same sense. Either God is good, or He is not. You cannot have it both ways. We know that this is a first principle because it cannot be denied. Anyone who says that the law of non-contradiction is not true must use the law in order to deny the law.<sup>2</sup> Now, a statement can be both true and false, but not in the same sense. If I am living in Charlotte, NC, I can say, “I live in Charlotte, North Carolina,” and this is a true statement. However, if I were to move to another city in another state, then the statement “I live in Charlotte, North Carolina” is no longer true. So, the statement can be both true and false, but not at the same time or in the same sense.

The law of non-contradiction was as true for the biblical authors as it is for us today. Because of these first principles, like the law of non-contradiction, when the Bible says that “God is good,” then we know that this statement was as true for the authors of the Bible as it is for us today. Because these first principles are the same for all people at all times and in every place, we have a connection with the Bible that is not affected by our own personal world view. These first principles form the foundation upon which truth rests. These first principles also are true for everyone because that is the way God created the world, and because the first principles transcend our own world views, it is possible to have an objective interpretation, a correct interpretation, of the Bible. Let me apply this solution to the question of objectivity.

### **1. Doesn't everyone have his or her own world view?**

We do not deny the fact that everyone has his or her own world view. However, we disagree that a person's world view makes objectivity impossible. The fact is there are first principles that are common to all humans as part of the nature of humanity as God created it. For someone to say that there is no such thing as objectivity is to count on the objective meaning of this very claim. To deny objectivity while counting on objectivity is self-defeating. Indeed, any claim that denies first principles is ultimately self-defeating and false. Although everyone has his or her own world view, the foundation of any world view is the same for all people, at all times, in all cultures, regardless of language, background, training, world view, perspective, horizon, etc.

### **2. Can any world view be universally valid?**

It is simply false to claim that no world view is universally valid. In fact, this very claim assumes its own universal validity. It is undeniably the case that there are aspects of every framework that are unavoidable, self-evident, and true. The basic laws of logic and the undeniability of truth are the same everywhere and at all times. Consequently, any claim that denies these foundational principles is self-defeating and false.

### **3. But, isn't universal validity implied in the notion of objectivity?**

Not only is universal validity implied in the notion of objectivity, but it is also the very essence of objectivity. Anyone who attempts to deny neutrality assumes that his own claims are universally valid and therefore objective. To claim that there can be no neutrality assumes this very neutrality. All such claims are self-defeating and false.

### **4. Can an interpreter really be objective in interpretation?**

To claim that no interpreter can be objective in his interpretation is both self-defeating and false. For anyone to claim that no interpreter can be objective assumes that the one making the claim has been objective in his interpretation of the question of objectivity. Regardless of the fact that interpreters do not always achieve objectivity, the fact is

that objectivity is possible.

**5. If objectivity is possible, then isn't a "correct" interpretation also possible?**

Since objectivity is possible, then so is a "correct" interpretation. To claim that there is no correct interpretation assumes one's own interpretation is the correct one. This too is self-defeating and false.

**6. If objectivity is possible, doesn't that mean that it is also possible to judge whether an interpretation is correct or not?**

In spite of their denials of objectivity, some Evangelicals still think that it is possible to decide between interpretations. It is not only possible; it is unavoidable. Every act of understanding is, in one way or another, an act of deciding between interpretations. We hold one thing to be true and its contradiction to be false. We accept one view and reject its opposite. It is not necessary for Evangelicals to compromise on the notions of objectivity and truth in order to accept the undeniable fact that all understanding is mediated through one's own world view. The fact of self-evident, undeniable first principles constitute a foundation upon which objectivity is based.

We believe that the God of the Christian Scriptures has created us after His image, and this insures the objectivity of truth and a correct interpretation of His Word are in fact possible.<sup>3</sup>

# 7. What Can We Conclude?

If you recall, we said the Bible would distinguish between our remaining theistic world views. We can conclude that the Bible is in fact God's true Word revealed to us and that we are capable of accurately understanding what He has said. This means that Christianity is objectively true, regardless of what anyone believes about it. Using our indispensable tool of the law of non-contradiction, which says opposite ideas cannot both be true at the same time and in the same way, we can immediately know that any world view that contradicts Christianity is necessarily false. That is not to say that other world views are incapable of containing any truth whatsoever. Any world view that says, for example, "You should love your neighbor as yourself," says something true. It is simply that where it contradicts or opposes Christianity, it must necessarily be false at those points. This is not a matter of preference or probabilities; rather, it is a necessary truth given that our reasoning about Christianity is sound.

Such a conclusion is a far cry from any type of blind, wish-in-the-dark faith. As we have seen, this is a reasoned faith where every step in the argument builds on the other, and each step is supported by solid evidence and philosophical demonstration. Reason, however, can only carry us so far because it is not enough for us to simply know *that* God exists. Biblical faith is a reasoned response of *trust in the authority of God*, much like our decision to trust the well-trained doctor's diagnosis and treatment protocol for illnesses we may not see or understand. As Aquinas says, "Faith then gives us a sort of knowledge. For when we believe our minds assent to something knowable, but not to something we see, but to something He whom we believe sees."<sup>1</sup>

God's diagnosis is that we have failed to be the men and women we are supposed to be—that we are sinners deserving of separation from Him (spiritual death/hell; Rom. 3:23). We cannot reason our way to a right relationship with God. He must reveal the way to that restored relationship (which He has done in the Bible), and we must take Him at His word. Jesus, the God-man, came to pay our sin penalty for us by dying on the cross (Rom. 5:6-11, 6:23) as the only means of reconciliation (John 14:6), and by trusting in His death and resurrection, we will be saved (Eph. 2:8). That is the Gospel (the "good news").

Why trust the God of the Bible? Because the Gospel is true and the only cure to our very bleak diagnosis (1 Cor. 15:3-8). The God of all creation is sustaining you in existence at this moment to give you a choice. We know He is Love and Goodness itself, and He offers to restore your broken relationship with Him so that you will one day know Him

as He is and enjoy Him forever (1 John 3:2; Psa. 23:6). That is life's true purpose.

We come to Him by trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection as payment for our sins (John 3:16). He takes us just as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way. From there, we can give God our lives to use for His glory (Matt. 16:25).

As philosopher Étienne Gilson says,

God creates, not that there may be witnesses to render Him His due glory, but beings who shall rejoice in it as He rejoices in it Himself and who, participating in His being, participate at the same time in His beatitude [true happiness]. It is not therefore for Himself, but for us, that God seeks His glory; it is not to gain it, for He possesses it already, nor to increase it, for already it is perfect, but to communicate it to us.<sup>2</sup>

*The choice is yours.* If you have never trusted in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can do so right now. Wherever you are, humble yourself before God, confess your sinfulness, acknowledge that Jesus is God and that His death and resurrection paid your sin debt, and ask Him to save you (John 3:16; 1 Cor. 15:3-8; John 6:35-40). Please do not wait until the opportunity to receive this free gift from God is gone (Heb. 9:27). **If we can assist you in any way on your journey, please contact us at SES: (800) 77-TRUTH / [info@ses.edu](mailto:info@ses.edu) / [www.SES.edu](http://www.SES.edu)**

# Appendix 1. Methodology

One distinctive of Southern Evangelical Seminary that the reader has seen displayed throughout this booklet's argumentation is a commitment to Classical Apologetics.<sup>1</sup> To say that an apologetic method is 'classical' is to say something about how SES does apologetics. It offers an answer to the question "what is the proper way for Christians to defend the truth of the Christian faith?" SES's commitment to Classical Apologetics arises from what SES believes about the nature of God and how He has created us in His image, including how we reason as humans and how we know truths not only about God, but about the rest of His creation.

## The Biblical Basis for Apologetics

In a mild sort of irony, Christian apologists sometimes find themselves needing to give an apologetic for apologetics. We are called upon at times to defend the fact that defending the faith is indeed biblical.

### **The Bible is clear about defending the faith.**

In several places, the Bible commands us to defend the faith. First Peter 3:15 tells us to "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear"(NKJV).<sup>2</sup> Jude 3 says, "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (NKJV). Another passage that is seldom cited in this context is Titus 1:10-11a. "For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped" (NKJV). The pressing question here is exactly how are we to stop the mouths of the insubordinate? I submit that it is through sound argument that can leave them without anything left to say in response. We see several instances of this very thing in Jesus' encounter with the Sadducees. Matt. 22:23-24 recounts the incident where Jesus was challenged to explain whose wife would a woman be in the next life if she was married to more than one man in this life. After schooling them in sound reasoning and biblical interpretation, the narrative observes that He had "silenced the Sadducees" (NKJV). In another instance we find, "But they could not catch Him in His words in the presence of the people. And they marveled at His answer and kept silent" (Luke 20:26, NKJV).

Being able to cogently respond in certain situations is one of the distinguishing characteristics of a church elder. In the passage in Titus, right before the passage cited above,

we learn that the overseer must be able “by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (NKJV). Convicting those who contradict involves defending the truth claims of Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Apostles engaged in defending the faith.**

We can also see that the Apostles themselves modeled for us defending the faith. A chain of references throughout the book of Acts shows how often they confounded, proved, had dissensions and disputes, reasoned, explained, demonstrated, spoke boldly, persuaded, and solemnly testified with Jew and Greeks in the synagogues, marketplace, and schools about the things concerning the Kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> One can make several observations about how the apostles reasoned. Notice that they confronted both those who had a regard for the authority of God’s written word (the Jews) and those who did not (the Greeks). Sometimes the appeal was from that biblical authority (Acts 17:2) and sometimes it was from other sources (Acts 17:22-33). The reactions ranged from some believing (Acts 17:4, 12), to some not believing (Acts 17:5), to some wanting to hear more (Acts 17:32).

## **The Anatomy of Classical Apologetics**

Given that the biblical mandate for apologetics is clear, exactly how should the task be undertaken? Classical Apologetics is characterized by three levels of demonstration: philosophical foundation, the existence of God, and the truths of Christianity. The order is deliberate as the first level makes the second and third steps possible, and the second step makes the third step possible.

### **Philosophical Foundation**

The first level maintains that philosophy is essential in establishing the foundation for dealing with unbelievers who might bring up certain challenges, including the challenge that truth is not objective or the challenge that only the natural sciences are the source of truth about reality. Thus, when encountering the unbeliever (and sometimes even a fellow believer), the Christian must (if the occasion demands it) defend that reality is knowable, that logic applies to reality, and that morally fallen human beings have some capacity to intellectually understand (even if they morally reject) certain claims of the Christian faith. It might also be necessary, depending upon the assumptions of the unbeliever, to delve into issues regarding the nature of reality itself.<sup>5</sup> The apologist would not necessarily need to deal with these matters in as much as many unbelievers (and believers) already work with these normal, rational commitments. Only in those cases where the unbeliever (or believer) has been unduly influenced by Postmodernism (the idea that truth is relative to the individual or culture or is otherwise qualified from its classical un-

derstanding)<sup>6</sup> or scientism (the idea that only the hard sciences can deliver truth about reality)<sup>7</sup> or some other false philosophical system would the apologist have to deal with these issues. Thus, unless your hearer is open to the tools and principles of objective logic and reasoning, it will impossible to embark on a defense of the faith with him.

Philosophy also is essential in dealing with certain interpretive issues of the Bible. Two areas come readily to mind. The first has to do with the principles of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), generally considered. The second has to do with specific interpretive issues dealing with the nature of God Himself.

Every reader of the Bible has some method (whether consciously or unconsciously) of how to interpret it, which is to say that every reader of the Bible has some hermeneutic. The question is this: where does one get one's principles of hermeneutics? It is impossible to get one's principles of hermeneutics from the Bible itself. This is so because, if one could understand the Bible in order to get these hermeneutical principles, then he understands the Bible before he has his principles of understanding the Bible (which means he would not need the principles he was seeking to get from the Bible). On the other hand, if he thinks he cannot understand the Bible without some principles of understanding the Bible (I would argue that this has to be the case), then that means he could not understand the Bible enough to get the principles themselves (if he was committed to the notion that he gets those very principles from the Bible). Either way, he runs into an impossible situation. We see, then, that it is impossible to get all of one's principles of interpretation of the Bible from the Bible itself, even if he can get some of them. Instead, they have to come from somewhere else.

The reader might be expecting me to argue here that these principles must come from philosophy. This is not my position. Instead, these principles of hermeneutics are grounded in the nature of reality itself. To be sure, reality is what it is because God is who He is and creation is what it is because of how God created it. In all of this, I am not suggesting that one has to do an in-depth examination of reality in order to somehow excavate principles of hermeneutics so that he can then begin to understand his Bible. Rather, I maintain that, in many (if not most) instances, such principles of understanding are very natural to us as rational creatures created in the image of God (in a way analogous to how we naturally perceive the physical world around us with our sensory faculties). It remains, however, that there are occasions where a more in-depth philosophical examination of the issues is warranted. This is increasingly so as false philosophies grow in their influence on people's thinking.

The second interpretive issue has to do with the specifics of what the Bible says about the nature and attributes of God. As we have said, without a sound philosophy, the stu-

dent of the Bible would be unable to ground the classical attributes of God, including God's immateriality and infinity. The problem is not merely academic. There are teachers within the ostensive Christian community who embrace such heresies as God being a finite, limited being. Consider these words by Word of Faith teacher Kenneth Copeland:

The Bible says [Isa. 40:12] He measured the heavens with a nine-inch span. Now the span is the difference, distance between the end of the thumb and the end of the little finger. And the Bible says; in fact the Amplified translation translates the Hebrew text that way: that He measured out the heavens with a nine-inch span. Well, I got a ruler and measured mine and my span is eight and three quarters inches long. So then God's span is a quarter-inch longer than mine. So you see, that faith didn't come billowing out of some giant monster somewhere. It came out of the heart of a being that is very uncanny the way He's very much like you and me: a being that stands somewhere around six-two, six-three, that weighs somewhere in the neighborhood of a couple of hundred pounds, a little better, has a span of eight and, I mean nine inches across; stood up and said 'Let it be!' and this universe situated itself, and went into motion. Glory to God! Hallelujah!<sup>8</sup>

The same problem is also exemplified by Finis Jennings Dake, the editor of the *Dake Annotated Reference Bible*.<sup>9</sup> Dake views that God is a person "with a personal spirit body, a personal soul, and a personal spirit, like that of angels, and like that of man except His body is of spirit substance instead of flesh and bones."<sup>10</sup> Dake also argues that "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all present where there are beings with whom they have dealings; but they are not omnibody, that is, their bodies are not omnipresent. All three go from place to place bodily as other beings in the universe do."<sup>11</sup> He undoubtedly says this because of how he takes those verses that speak of God in bodily terms. He argues,

God has a personal spirit body (Dan. 7:9-14; 10:5-19); shape (Jn. 5:37); form (Phil. 2:5-7); image and likeness of a man (Gen. 1:26; 9:6; Ezek. 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jas. 3:9). He has bodily parts such as, back parts (Ex. 33:23), heart (Gen. 6:6; 8:21), fingers and hands (Ps. 8:3-6; Heb. 1:10), mouth (Num. 12:8), lips and tongue (Isa. 30:27), feet (Ex. 24:10), eyes and eyelids (Ps. 11:4; 33:18), ears (Ps. 18:6), hair, head, face, arms (Dan. 7:9-14; 10:5-19; Rev. 5:1-7; 22:4-6), and other bodily parts.<sup>12</sup>

One should take careful notice of how many verses of Scripture Dake has cited. I sus-

pect that if one were to challenge Dake that God does not literally have these bodily parts, his response would be that it is he who is taking the testimony of Scripture seriously since that is what the text seems (to Dake) to clearly say. The only way to answer Dake is by an appeal to sound philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Existence of God**

The second level of the Classical Apologetics method maintains that God's existence can be proven by a number of lines of evidence and argument. How this step figures into the overall case for Christianity must not be overlooked. Classical Apologetics maintains that the existence of God must be affirmed before the specific evidence for the truth of Christianity in particular will make sense. Demonstrating the specific truths of Christianity involve, among other things, an appeal to miracles. This is so because God used miracles to vindicate the message proclaimed by His prophets and apostles and His own Son. But miracles are possible only because God exists. This is so because miracles are supernatural acts of God. There cannot be acts of God unless there is a God who can act. Thus, the existence of God must be demonstrated (in those instances where His existence is doubted or denied) before the specific arguments for Christianity can be put forth. If one employs the metaphysics of Thomism, this is not merely a general theism. Instead, such sound metaphysics is the only way to prove the classical attributes of God that the Church has cherished throughout its history. What is more, as sound philosophy has eroded from the general Christian philosophical community, to the same extent these classical attributes are eroding.

### **The Truth of Christianity**

Once the existence of God is proven (and, thus, the possibility of miracles is thereby established), specific arguments are given for the truth of the Christian faith, including arguments from manuscript evidence, archeology, and from other corroborating historical evidence for the historical reliability of the Bible, arguments from the Bible and other sources for the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, and arguments from the teachings of Jesus for the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, one can see that there is, indeed, a mandate from Scripture to engage in apologetics. According to the Classical Apologetics approach, demonstrating the truth of Christianity necessitates the tools of sound reason and logic that can be employed to build the case that God exists and has certain attributes and that God has revealed Himself in history through His prophets, apostles, and ultimately through His Son Jesus Christ. This mandate has been incorporated into the very DNA of Southern Evangelical Seminary.

# Appendix 2. Inerrancy

Some readers are likely familiar with the online exchanges between SES co-founder Norman Geisler and resurrection scholar Mike Licona regarding the nature and extent of biblical inerrancy (i.e., the concept that the Bible is without error in the original manuscripts). Licona's printed works and public debates/discussions have brought to the forefront the current trend on the part many evangelical thinkers to move away from a classic understanding of inerrancy. This article will use Licona's claims as example cases for what we see as the most important issues and should not be considered as a personal attack on someone we consider a brother in Christ and fellow defender of the Faith. For a more complete treatment of inerrancy as such, consider reading the 1978 *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* constructed by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.

In his book *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (IVP Academic, 2010), Licona says that statements in Matt. 27:52-53 referring to dead saints coming out of their graves after Jesus' resurrection are apocalyptic and therefore do not refer to any actual historical events because, as apocalyptic, Matthew did not intend that they be taken as historical. Geisler argues that this is a denial of inerrancy while Licona claims that this is a matter of interpretation, not inerrancy.

First of all, it is unprecedented that an author, including Matthew, would stick a piece of apocalyptic literature in the midst of historical reports. As Grant Osborne puts it, "Would Matthew switch back and forth from history to legend to history without some type of hint? In fact, the entire crucifixion scene—Jesus' remarkable serenity throughout the day, the darkness, the tearing of the curtain, the earthquake, the raising of the saints—transcends history and demonstrates the intersection of human history by divine power. If there is a supernatural God, there is no reason to deny the historicity of this scene."<sup>1</sup> But let us assume, for the sake of argument, that this is the case. Licona and others have argued that as apocalyptic literature Matthew did not intend that this statement be taken as historical fact.

Not only is it nearly impossible to know with any degree of certainty what the intent of an author was, it is even more difficult to prove one's suppositions about an author's intent. Therefore, an interpreter cannot use his suppositions about intent to determine the meaning of his text. That being the case, Licona and those who try to defend him on this point are utterly mistaken about resting their argument on suppositions about Matthew's intent. We cannot know Matthew's intent, and, consequently, we cannot use that

supposition as a basis to tell us what Matthew's text means.

But, let us suppose that we can know Matthew's intent and that this intent is that these two verses are apocalyptic literature. This does not in fact eliminate the problem. In defense of Licona's claim, Licona and others have attempted to appeal to an analogy between statements in Revelation and the statements in Matthew's Gospel. For example, some have argued that if we take Matthew's statement literally, we would have to believe that Satan is a literal dragon, but this completely misses the point. In Revelation, although Satan is indeed not a literal dragon, the symbol of the dragon symbolizes a literal Satan, a being that actually exists. An analogy of Matthew's statements about the rising saints with Revelation is a faulty analogy. What Licona is saying is not that the raising of some of the bodies of the saints is an apocalyptic statement about a real event, but that such an event did not in fact occur. But this is not what biblical apocalyptic statements do. In Revelation, if indeed it is apocalyptic literature, which is not at all backed by scholarly opinion, the apocalyptic statements are indeed symbolic, but they are always symbolic of some actual reality, and the events in Revelation, though symbolized, are nevertheless actual events, either events that have occurred or events that will yet occur. Licona is saying that Matthew did not intend that the reference to the raising of some bodies of the saints be understood as referring to actual events. This is a totally different matter.

Secondly, Licona and others claim that Licona's position is a matter of interpretation, not a matter of inerrancy. The problem with this claim is that the word "interpretation" is very ambiguous. If we use the term "interpretation" to mean what the words and phrases say as linguistic and syntactical units, then Licona is simply wrong. Understanding the meaning of the words and statements as linguistic/syntactical units does not yet address the question of whether the statements refer to actual historical events. Everyone who reads these verses understands the same linguistic/syntactical meaning of the words: "And tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had died were raised. (They came out of the tombs after his resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people)" (Matt. 27:52-53, NET). The tombs were opened, the bodies were raised, etc. That is simply the linguistic/syntactical meaning of the words and phrases. Once we have established what the linguistic/syntactical meaning is, then we should go on to address the question of whether those events actually occurred. So, for Licona et al. to say that Licona's claim is just a matter of interpretation is seriously misrepresenting the case, and, it seems, seriously misunderstanding the case.

Now, if by the term "interpretation" we mean inferences and/or implications from the text that we might draw, or whether the statements refer to actual events, or genre classifications, or other aspects that the term "interpretation" has been used to mean over

the years, Licona is certainly not wrong, but in this case his claim is certainly irrelevant to the issue. Although it may be interpretation in the latter sense, to say that Matthew's statement does not refer to any actual historical event(s) is simply not a matter of interpretation in the former sense. Rather, it is a matter of whether Matthew was telling the truth or not (i.e., do his statements correspond to reality). As we have said, even apocalyptic statements are symbols of actual historical things or events, and whether apocalyptic or not, there is nothing in the text that would lead one to think that Matthew is not referring to actual historical events. So, if the events did not actually occur, then Matthew's text is presenting these events as if they occurred when in fact they did not. This is clearly a matter of inerrancy.

An even more obvious instance is when Licona says certain statements in John's Gospel are candidates for embellishment. An embellishment is when an author puts something in the text that he knows did not occur, but he puts it in for effect or impact. In another place Licona says that John actually changed the hour of the day from what the other Gospel writers reported and that John purposely made this change when he knew it was not the actual time. Licona is saying John actually misrepresented the time. What can this be if not lying? And it is certainly not a matter of interpretation. Licona is denying inerrancy, unequivocally.

Licona is not saying that this is merely apocalyptic literature, but that as apocalyptic literature, Matthew did not intend for these statements be taken as referring to historical events. Even in the wildly fantastic statements in the non-canonical Book of Enoch, one can only assume that Enoch believed that the events he describes actually occurred. Whether they occurred or not, Enoch presents them as actual events. Nowhere does Enoch say he did not believe his apocalyptic descriptions and symbols referred to actual historical events, so we can only grant that he in fact did believe this. Now, if it turns out that the events Enoch described did not actually occur, then we would be justified in saying his text was in error and Enoch was mistaken.

This is the same thing Geisler is saying about Licona's claims. Licona claims that the events in Matt. 27:52-53 did not actually occur because, as apocalyptic literature, Matthew did not intend them to be taken as referring to historical events. But Licona cannot know Matthew's intent, and even if he did, it does not follow that because a text is apocalyptic that it cannot or does not refer to historical events. To claim that the events in Matthew's text did not actually occur is simply not a matter of interpretation. Even if we take Matthew's text to be apocalyptic, which is by no means certain, Matthew presents the events as actual historical events or as symbols of actual historical events, but nevertheless as events that actually happened. If they did not occur, Matthew's Gospel is in

error, and this is certainly a matter of inerrancy.

To be sure, an errant Bible does not necessarily mean that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Nevertheless, an errant Bible provides no firm foundation from which to accurately know the Gospel and discover the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Given that truth is that which corresponds to reality, and God, as ultimate reality, is Truth itself, because we have every reason to believe the Bible is trustworthy when it claims to be the Word of God, we have every reason to believe it is without error.

*Adapted from SES professor Thomas Howe's "The Real Issue" on the Howe Random blog, posted Dec. 23, 2011: <https://tahowe.wordpress.com/2011/12/23/the-real-issue-2/>*

# Appendix 3. Evil & Suffering

If what has been put forward in the preceding chapters about reality, God, human beings, and Christianity are correct, then we must use this information to understand and, perhaps here only briefly, clarify the perennial questions about evil and suffering. Toward this end, we will first review some concepts related to existence: God's nature, creation, good, and evil. Then we will offer brief answers to some questions related to God and evil.<sup>1</sup>

While a defense of God's nature cannot be made here, there are two relevant points that must be taken from such a defense (see chapters three and five). First, God is *simple* as opposed to composed. This entails something very important about God. Namely, God is not created. God is not changeable in any way. Thus, God is not an individual belonging to the natural or physical world as everything created is composed and changeable, but God is not. Therefore, there is an important distinction to be made between *all* created things and the *one* uncreated God.

Second, God is *Good* in an absolute sense (see chapter five). This does not mean that good is a property to be ascribed to God or even that God is maximally good. It means that Goodness and God Himself cannot be distinguished. They are one and the same. Moral goodness is only something that can be ascribed to creatures that behave, which change and need improvement. While we can say God is good, we cannot say God needs moral improvement. Thus, God cannot be considered a creature that acts morally in the world. Hence, God is not morally obligated or in need of acting according to a standard or law. Such descriptions as 'morally good' are only applicable to creatures found in the world. These two points are often lost in a discussion of God and evil.

Because every created thing changes, it is dependent. God alone must give existence to all creation and keep it in continued existence (see chapter three). Some of the things God creates are living substances (vegetation, animals, human beings, etc.) with corresponding natures/essences. Because God is absolute Good, he can only create good creatures that are limited by their natures. Everything created has an efficient cause (God) and a final cause, or end/purpose, towards which it is directed in accord with its nature.

## What is Good and Evil?

The term "good" as applied to existing creatures is usually descriptive. Something is good if it possesses what it should have, or does what it should do, according to its nature (i.e., *what it is*). For example, a cat is considered a good cat if it is healthy and behaves

in ways we would expect cats to function. Even a virus, doing what viruses do, is good in this sense. Likewise, we know what a good human being is in terms of her health or his behavior because of their human nature. Here *good* is not a term meaning absolute perfection. Evil or badness, on the other hand, has no actual nature. It is not a *thing* or substance to be found in creation. Instead, evil or badness can only be found in some *thing* already created.

Hence, evil must be a lack in some created thing, a lack of a certain good that should be there. For example, blindness in a cat or person is bad or evil because sight should be there. But not every absence of a good is bad. For example, a rock or a plant not having sight is not a bad thing as its nature is not the kind of thing that has such a feature. No doubt evil can also be the presence of a thing or substance where it should not be. For example, if you feed the cat poison, it will die. Because poison should not be in the cat. Let us, however, consider these two options under the heading of *privation* as the absence of some good or the presence of some good that should not be there.

## God, Creation, and Evil

God, because he is absolute Goodness, freely *wills* to create only good things according to their finite natures. While God can create anything that is not impossible, God has freely willed that all such things in creation be interdependent. This we know from observing creation. The tree depends upon water to survive. The cat depends upon eating other animals to survive. The lack of these things results in an evil suffered, namely starvation. We can perhaps conceive of creation being other than this, such as each nature existing as an independent form with no interdependence on anything else, but such a world does not seem worthy of dominion or rule by a rational creature such as a human being.

God is free to create since nothing in His nature or acting on Him from without forces Him to do so. In creating everything good, according to its nature, God does not, and cannot, directly produce evil though He may permit the possibility of evil. Because God is good, even His permitting the possibility of evil is only ultimately a means to a good end for His creation. For example, consider a toaster that is actually being held together by and receiving power from the company that made it. The company in this example is still only the indirect cause of any bread being toasted. Someone must still press the button to begin the toasting process. If the button is not pressed, the company cannot be blamed for the bread not being toasted.

Because God created rational creatures (i.e., human beings) to live within and govern His world, there are two broad classifications of evil: *evil suffered* and *evil done*. The

first, evil suffered, is a lack or privation in a person because the interactive and interdependent world God created, for whatever reason, fails to provide their good. When healthy humans get a good virus, a person is sick. The evil has no nature or substance, but it is real since there is a privation in the person. Hence, God is not the direct cause of evil suffered. It is a by-product of the interacting, interdependent world God directly creates and holds in existence. And because God is good, all evil suffered has a concomitant good involved that we may or may not understand.

The second concerns evil done, or sin. It is good that humans can make choices. It is bad that humans make choices against what is good for them and others. We are created by God to have and to exercise free will. Such choices, however, can be made that lack goodness. Even when our Creator tells us what is not good (what is evil) for us, we can freely chose to do it anyway. Is God responsible for this? Not at all. Evil of this kind is not a nature or substance in itself although it is real. While the occurrences of committing evil (sin) are allowed to exist by God, He does not cause sin directly even though He sustains in existence the sinners who choose to sin. While God in His sovereignty causes our existence and ensures our free will in accord with its nature and limitations, He does not choose our actions for us. We choose them and are responsible for them.

In short, God is not directly responsible for *evil suffered* since it is a by-product of the good interactive material world God created and sustains. *Evil done* is directly willed by *people* and not directly willed by God. God allows the possibility of a free human (a good) to choose something bad. Hence, God does not directly cause evil, but He creates and sustains a world in which evil is permitted, knowing that He will bring good out of that evil. God's causation of our existence does not eliminate our free will. Such sovereignty ensures and enables the possibility and actuality of free human choices.

## Common Questions

*Since God created everything, must He have created evil?* God did not directly create evil. Evil has no essence or nature. Evil is a by-product of the good things God created because of their interdependent natures, or it is a result of a creature's rational free will wrongly exercised. God only creates the possibility of evil.

*Where did evil come from?* We might say *evil suffered* is an indirect result of the kind of world God created. One might object that it should be some other world, but it needs to be a world worthy and fitting for rational creatures to rule. Furthermore, if there were no rational creatures to find order and reason within the apparent randomness in such a world, then evil suffered would not be real. *Evil done* is purely the result of free will exercised wrongly by a rational creature in the world that God created. In either case, God is

only the indirect cause. He can no more be blamed for it, than a company can be blamed for a bad toaster, which the customer never properly used.

*How can God be all-good and all-powerful and allow evil to exist?* God being absolute Goodness and knowing everything only allows evil to exist in order to ultimately bring about a greater good for His creation. People must recognize and trust in God's all-lovingness and all-knowingness to bring this about. As hard as it is, we must live with our limitations in knowledge and understanding of the world and learn to rest in God's reasons for allowing some evil. God, because He is all-good, will defeat all evil (and will do it in a manner that preserves the free choices of his rational creatures). God, because He is all-powerful, can defeat all evil. And only God, since He is all-knowing, knows the best means and ways to defeat all evil.

*Why does God allow so much evil?* As horrific and long-lasting as some evil is, this question seems to assume too much. First, we have no agreed-upon way to measure or calculate amounts of evil. Second, even if we did, there is no person(s) that knows all the evil that has or will ever be suffered or done. Admittedly, we must appeal to faith in an all-good and all-knowing God. God only allows evil to exist in the world (in whatever amounts/duration), to use as a means to bring about a greater good. God cannot destroy free will since this itself would be a direct evil.

The struggle to understand evil and suffering is on-going. No human has the complete answer or understanding for any instance of evil and suffering. That is why we must remember that God has given believers a glimpse into the life to come for those who love Him and abhor evil. “[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more—or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist” (Revelation 21:4, NET).

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# Endnotes

## 1. What is Biblical Faith?

1. Richard Dawkins, *Enemies of Reason: Episode 1* (0:53), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyQ57X3Yh-H4&list=PL64A19417DAFD7BDA&index=1>
2. Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), 3092-3094), Kindle.

## 2. Can We Know Anything for Sure?

1. For a fuller treatment of epistemology, consider Frederick Wilhelmsen's *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1956).

## 3. Does God Exist?

1. Richard Howe, "It's Worse Than I Thought," *Quodlibetal Blog: Musings from Anywhere* by Dr. Richard G. Howe, <http://quodlibetalblog.wordpress.com/2011/07/12/its-worse-than-i-thought/>.
2. Joseph Owens, "Aquinas and the Five Ways," *Monist* 58 (Jan. 1974), 33.
3. Henri Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Metaphysics*, trans. J. P. E. O'Hanley (Charlottetown, Canada: St. Dunstan's University, 1948), 71.
4. Edward Feser, *Aquinas (Beginner's Guides)* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 293-297, Kindle.
5. Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9, Kindle.
6. James E. Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 33-34, Kindle.
7. George Klubertanz and Maurice Holloway, *Being and God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Being and to Natural Theology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), 161.
8. *Ibid.*, 232.
9. Feser, *The Last Superstition*, 1929-1931, Kindle.
10. David Silverman, *Fighting God: An Atheist Manifesto for a Religious World* (London: Macmillan, 2015), accessed February 7, 2018, [https://books.google.com/books?id=6Ds6CQAAQBAJ&pg=PT234&lp-g=PT234&dq=silverman+reason+is+inherently+atheistic&source=bl&ots=poebFFzn-O&sig=KzubD8y8b-vcee\\_Ybz9Ztnv3WOk4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwjOpYDl4JXKAhUD8CYKHSb7Aj4Q6AEIIjAB#v=onepage&q=silverman%20reason%20is%20inherently%20atheistic&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=6Ds6CQAAQBAJ&pg=PT234&lp-g=PT234&dq=silverman+reason+is+inherently+atheistic&source=bl&ots=poebFFzn-O&sig=KzubD8y8b-vcee_Ybz9Ztnv3WOk4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwjOpYDl4JXKAhUD8CYKHSb7Aj4Q6AEIIjAB#v=onepage&q=silverman%20reason%20is%20inherently%20atheistic&f=false).
11. By human "intellect" we mean that aspect of a human being where by he is able to know things by abstracting the forms/natures of things, form judgments about things, and reason to further conclusions about other things based on what he knows.
12. Klubertanz and Holloway, 291-292.
13. Feser, *Aquinas*, 1938-1939, Kindle.
14. David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy) (New York: Routledge, 2007), 24-25. Kindle.
15. Edward Feser, "God, Obligation, and the Euthyphro Dilemma," last modified October 26, 2010, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/10/god-obligation-and-euthyphro-dilemma.html>
16. Feser, *Aquinas*, 1941-1944, Kindle.
17. Klubertanz and Holloway, 292.
18. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 121, Kindle.

#### 4. Can We Trust the Bible?

1. Justin Taylor, "An Interview with Daniel B. Wallace on the New Testament Manuscripts," *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, March 22, 2012, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2012/03/21/an-interview-with-daniel-b-wallace-on-the-new-testament-manuscripts/>.
2. Clay Jones, "The Bibliographical Test Updated," Christian Research Institute, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://www.equip.org/articles/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>.
3. Ibid.
4. Taylor, "An Interview with Daniel B. Wallace on the New Testament Manuscripts," *The Gospel Coalition Blog*.
5. Thomas Howe, *A Response to Bart Ehrman*, <http://www.isca-apologetics.org/sites/default/files/papers/Jared%20Martinez/Howe-AResponseToBartEhrman.pdf>, 15, accessed February 12, 2018.
6. Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 158.
7. Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1993), 115.
8. See also Col. 1:15-17.
9. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 1918, Kindle.
10. Ibid., 1947-1948, Kindle.
11. For details, see Gary Habermas and Mike Licona's *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004).
12. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (C. S. Lewis Signature Classics) (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 806-808, Kindle.

#### 5. What Does All of this Mean?

1. Richard G. Howe, *Thomistic Responses to Some Objections to Aquinas' Second Way*, [http://www.richardghowe.com/index\\_htm\\_files/ThomisticResponsestoObjectionstoAquinasSecond%20Way.pdf](http://www.richardghowe.com/index_htm_files/ThomisticResponsestoObjectionstoAquinasSecond%20Way.pdf), 5, accessed February 12, 2018.
2. Klubertanz and Holloway, 198.

#### 6. But That's Just Your Interpretation!

1. James D. Smart, *The Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 46.
2. In other words, by saying the law of non-contradiction does not exist, one is saying things can be true and not true at the same time in the same sense. If you insist that you are right that the law of non-contradictions does not exist, then you are saying what you just said does not need to be true. But you are insisting that it is true, so you are agreeing with the law of non-contradiction.
3. For a fuller treatment on objectivity, see Thomas Howe's *Objectivity in Biblical Interpretation* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

#### 7. What Can We Conclude?

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 29.
2. Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 104.

#### Appendix 1. Methodology

1. Some material in this article appeared in Richard Howe's "Classical Apologetics and Creationism," *Chris-*

*tian Apologetics Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 5-31.

2. The context of this passage is important. Peter is encouraging his readers to bear up under suffering and persecution. He seemingly expected the godly response to such suffering on the part of his readers to engender inquiries from others as to what it is that enables them as Christians to endure suffering. Peter expected that those watching would ask what is the reason for their hope. In response, the Christians were to be ready to defend their answer.

3. I am indebted to Simon Brace for helping me see the apologetic application of this verse.

4. Acts 9:22, 15:2, 17:2-4, 17:17, 18:4, 18:19, 19:8-10, 28:23-24.

5. Such issues would include the nature of universals, the essence/existence distinction, hylomorphic (form/matter) composition of sensible objects, and the relationships of the metaphysic constituents of sensible objects, including substance, accidents, and properties.

6. Some postmodernists mistakenly think that any contemporary emphasis on logic and reason (as one might find, for example, in contemporary contentions regarding the inerrancy of the Bible or in Classical Apologetics) is due to the unfortunate influence of Modernism (as they mistakenly understand it). Robert Webber claims that “the issue of modernity has revolved around reason.” [Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 98.] The fact is, Classical Apologetics’ commitment to sound reason finds its roots going back to (and indeed, beyond) Aristotle who said (regarding the definition of ‘true’ and ‘false’), “To say of what is, that it is not, or of what is not, that it is, is false, while to say of what is, that it is and of what is not, that it is not, is true.” [*Metaphysics*, IV, 7, 1001b26-29, trans. W. D. Ross in Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941.)]

7. Atheist Richard Dawkins maintains, “The presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence [i.e., God] is unequivocally a scientific question, even if it is not in practice—or not yet—a decided one.” He goes on: “There is an answer to every such question [about miracles], whether or not we can discover it in practice, and it is a strictly scientific answer. The methods we should use to settle the matter, in the unlikely event that relevant evidence ever became available, would be purely and entirely scientific methods.” [Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 58, 59.]

8. Kenneth Copeland, *Christianity in Crisis* Audio Tape (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1993).

9. Finis Jennings Dake, *The Dake Annotated Reference Bible* (Lawrenceville, GA: Dake Bible Sales, 1991).

10. Dake, *Reference Bible*, New Testament, 97.

11. Dake, *Reference Bible*, in the “Complete Concordance and Cyclopedic Index,” 81.

12. Dake, *Reference Bible*, New Testament, 97.

13. Lest someone think these examples are extreme, this issue of the attributes of God is becoming increasing more troubling even within evangelical circles. A perusal of systematic theologies and other sources dealing with Theology Proper over the last 150 years shows a marked drift away from the classical attributes of God. This drift (or in some cases, deliberate migration) is illustrated by the dispute over Open Theism. Gregory Boyd, in discussing certain passages of Scripture that describes God as experiencing regret or uncertainty about future outcomes, comments, “It is, I submit, more difficult to conceive of God experiencing such things if the future is exhaustively settled in his mind than if it is in part composed of possibilities.” [Gregory A. Boyd, “Neo-Molinism and the Infinite Intelligence of God,” *Philosophia Christi* 5, no.1 (2003): 192.] Time and space will not permit me here to examine the status of other attributes of God that are fading away within evangelical circles, including simplicity and impassibility. Nor will time and space permit me to go into the details of why these matter. The question one must ask, however, is how the aberrant or heretical thinking of Finis Jennings Dake and others can be answered. It is my contention that it can only be answered by sound philosophy and sound principles of hermeneutics (which themselves are defended by sound philosophy).

14. I am indebted to R. C. Sproul for this template (basic reliability of the New Testament, who Jesus is,

what Jesus teaches about the Bible) in his “The Case for Inerrancy: A Methodological Analysis,” *God’s Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1974): 242-261.

### **Appendix 2. Inerrancy**

1. Grand R. Osborne, “Matthew,” in *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1044.

### **Appendix 3. Evil & Suffering**

1. This discussion draws upon the thought of Norman L. Geisler’s *If God, Why Evil?* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2011.) and Brian Davies’ *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum, 2006) which are recommend.