



## Apologetics

Sample

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## Unit 3. Doubt, Faith and Jesus

### Exposing the faith behind doubt

People may express themselves in terms of doubt. They may say, “I don’t believe ...” Turn this around in your head. Ask yourself what it is they *do* believe. For example:

“I don’t believe in God” = “I believe there is no God.”

This exposes the ‘leap of faith’ that they are making. Their so-called ‘doubt’ is just as much an act of faith as your belief in God.

#### Exercise

Here are the issues addressed by Tim Keller in his book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Scepticism* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2008). They are common reasons for doubting Christianity. Restate them as statements of faith.

- You can’t take the Bible literally.
- There can’t be just one true religion.
- A good God could not allow suffering.
- Christianity is a straitjacket.
- The church is responsible for so much injustice.
- A loving God would not send people to hell.
- Science has disproved Christianity.

You can then begin to provide reasons for doubting their act of faith.

The aim is twofold:

- To create a space in which they are prepared to question their beliefs and examine the claims of Christ.
- To expose the underlying rebellion that shapes their belief: their beliefs are not the products of neutral, rational enquiry, but expressions of their avoidance of, and rebellion against, God.

## Exercise

Read Tim Keller, 'Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ', The Movement, October 2004.

This is available online at

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/entry/Deconstructing-Defeater-Beliefs-Leading-the-Secular-to-Christ>.

## Exercise

Tim Keller has identified some 'defeater beliefs' in his context of New York City:

- The other religions: "No one should insist their view of God is better than all the rest. All religions are equally valid."
- Evil and suffering: "A good, all-powerful God wouldn't allow this evil and suffering. Therefore, this God doesn't exist or can't be trusted."
- The ethical straitjacket: "We must be free to choose for ourselves how to live — no one can impose this on us. This is the only truly authentic life."
- The record of Christians: "If Christianity is the true religion, why would so much oppression happen in history with the support of the church?"
- The angry God: "Christianity is built around a condemning, judgmental deity who demands blood sacrifice even to forgive."
- The unreliable Bible: "The Bible can't be trusted historically or scientifically, and much of its teaching is socially regressive."

What are the defeater beliefs in your context?

As we saw in the previous unit, we need to persuade people that our story — the story of God — is true. But they will only explore whether truth is as we first persuade them that it might be a *better story*. We need to address their hearts before we can begin to address their heads. Commenting on Pascal, Graham Tomlin says:

For Pascal, presenting someone with a list of proofs for Christianity or evidence for faith is probably a waste of time. If someone basically doesn't want to believe, no amount of proof (or proof texts) can ever convince her. And even if she were convinced, then it wouldn't be the Christian God she had come to believe in, but only what Pascal called "the God of the philosophers". The crucial factor in persuading someone to believe, then, is not to present evidence, but first to awaken a desire for God in them. In other words, when commending Christianity to people, "Make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is." Such

arguments as there are for Christianity can convince those who hope it is true, but will never convince those who don't.<sup>15</sup>

We have a better story than any of the alternatives. We need to awaken a desire for God, to make people want Christianity to be true. Then they might be persuaded that it is true.

## A beautiful Saviour

To awaken a desire for God, our apologetics need to be Jesus-centred.

### Principle #1: Answer with the character of Jesus

Peter says that we are to answer people's questions "with gentleness and respect", or as Paul says, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." (Colossians 4:6). We need to give a response that is full of grace. What might this mean in practice?

- Listen to them. Give people a chance to talk. They will be more willing to listen to you if you listen to them.
- Ask questions. This is what Jesus often did. Find out what the real issues are.
- Be patient. Do not assume that you have to lead someone to Christ by the end of the conversation. Trust God to be sovereign over the process of someone's conversion.
- Less is often more. Do not keep talking. Give people time to think about what you have said.
- Show love. Remember that your life and our life together as a Christian community are often the most persuasive apologetic for the gospel (John 13:34-35).

### Principle #2: Answer with the message of Jesus

Peter says: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." So what is the reason for the hope that you have? What gives you faith, confidence and hope? It is your relationship with the One who is trustworthy. We have found Jesus and his word to be trustworthy. The truth is not summed up in a clever argument. The Truth is a person: Jesus.

Answer people's questions by pointing them to the person of Jesus. Make it your aim to introduce people to Jesus Christ and his word. Try to answer people's questions by directing them to Jesus — to some of the words he said or something he did. This means that they are not being confronted by something which they can dismiss as your point-of-view. They are being confronted by Jesus Christ — the person who is the Truth.

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<sup>15</sup> Tomlin, G., *The Provocative Church* (SPCK, 2002), 12

## Exercise

Using a story or saying from the life of Jesus, give a one-minute reply to the question: “How can you believe in a loving God who allows so much suffering in the world?”

The Bible is God’s word. God created by his word, turning darkness into light and chaos into beauty. God also recreates by his word. The Bible is the sword of the Spirit which transforms lives. It does not matter if people do not accept its authority straight off. Challenge them to be open-minded, to find out from the primary sources what Christianity is about. Let the Bible do its work in people’s lives. Invite people to read the Bible for themselves or, better still, to read it with you.

## Principle #3: Answer with the focus of Jesus

Jesus says that what shapes our behaviour is our hearts — our desires, longings and affections (Mark 7:20-23). This is true of people’s questions and rejections of God. We reject God because we treasure something more than God.

When Jesus meets the Samaritan women in John 4:4-30 he appears dramatically to change the subject in verse 16. But in fact he is exposing where the woman is looking for living water. She is looking for satisfaction and meaning in men or sex or intimacy. Jesus exposes the idolatrous desires of her heart so she can understand and embrace his offer of living water that satisfies eternally.

## Reflection

Look at Luke 18:18-25. What question does the young man ask? What reply does Jesus eventually give in verse 22? What is the link between the two?

## Exercise

Think of the person who asks the question, “How can you believe in a loving God who allows so much suffering in the world?”

- What might be going on in their heart?
- How would you find out?
- How would this affect your response?