

Defeater Belief #1: “The Bible is Impossible”

I. Defeater beliefs

- Defeater beliefs are non-Christian presuppositions that make it impossible to believe in Christ.
 - They are showstoppers for Christianity before the conversation even begins. If a defeater belief is true, then Christianity *cannot* be true.
 - Common modern examples: “There can’t be just one way to God; we can’t believe in a God who sends people to hell; Science has disproven the supernatural; the Bible has many offensive, outdated parts that we can no longer accept” (Keller, *Preaching*, p. 112).
- Discovering defeater beliefs:
 - Directly: “What makes it really hard for you to believe in Christ?” “What do you find most troublesome about the Christian message?”
 - Indirectly: observing what core commitments seem to close down the conversation before it even begins.

II. “The Bible could not possibly be true”

This basic objection has many specific forms. I list the objections below, along with some responses.

1. The Bible is outdated

- “It has a low view of women.”
 - Response: Actually, the the Bible has a very high view of women, dignifying them as fellow image-bearers with men (Gen 1:27), as vital to God’s plan of redemption (Gen 3:15), as heroic in faith and virtue (Ruth; Esther; Prov 31:10–31), and as fellow heirs of the full riches of salvation (1 Pet 3:7). For many, this objection is really a problem with their view of authority, as though all authority is exploitative, and therefore the authority of a husband over a wife is inherently bad.
- “It condemns homosexuality (and we all know that some people are born homosexual).”
 - Response: It is true that the Bible condemns homosexuality (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9). It is highly questionable that some people are born homosexual, as though our biology alone determined our sexual orientation. The deeper issue here is whether sexuality is our own possession to use as we please, or whether it is created by God, who has a vested interest in how we use it (and the right to tell us how to use it).

2. The Bible endorses violence

- “The OT shows God as angry and spiteful.”
 - Response: God’s own characterization of himself in Exod 34:6–7 is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” The OT over and over shows this compassion! God is often angry (in the *whole* Bible; not just the OT), but that anger is part of his glory! Far from being spiteful and compulsive, God is always angry for good reasons. He hates sin for how it offends his honor and wrongs the innocent. His justice is how he makes things right after sin makes a mess of things.

- “God commanded the genocide of the Canaanites.”
 - Response: God does not endorse genocide or unjust killing. This is another instance of his justice. The Canaanites were guilty of serious crimes (e.g., Deut 18:9–2: rampant child sacrifice, occult practices; Lev 18–19: rampant sexual immorality, idolatry). Before God judged them, he warned them so that there is time to repent (cf. Rahab in Josh 2:10–11)! Far from being a racist, God does not show partiality: Israel gets the same punishment later when they become “Canaanized” (Ezek 5:6–10).

3. The Bible is confusing

- “Everyone disagrees about what it means. I don’t have time to become an expert.”
 - Response: There is plenty of disagreement about the Bible, even among Christians who revere it as God’s word. But even if there is plenty of disagreement, there is still plenty of agreement on its core teachings. The Apostle’s creed and the Nicene Creed are examples of how Christians have agreed on the core aspects of biblical teaching for practically the entirety of church history! Don’t forget the Bible was written in the language of ordinary people; it says God gave it to “make wise the simple” (Ps 19:7); you don’t need a PhD to understand it!
- “I tried reading it once and it didn’t make sense.”
 - Response: Don’t give up! Although its meaning is plain, the Bible speaks of how important it is to have helpers who explain its meaning (Acts 8:31), and we need God the Holy Spirit to guide us into the truth (John 16:13; 1 Cor 2:14). God loves to reward those who exert themselves for wisdom (Prov 2:4).

4. The Bible is historically inaccurate

- “Archaeology has proven that ...”
 - Response: archaeology is a notoriously difficult and tenuous exercise of piecing together the tidbits of information which have survived 2000+ years amid the huge quantities of information that have been lost. Remember: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence (no archaeological evidence for the exodus? It doesn’t mean it never happened). We do have an enormous amount of confirming evidence. In some cases, we don’t know why two historical sources don’t agree, but history is complicated! God knows what he is talking about.
 - Augustine: “if in [the Scriptures] I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand.”

5. The Bible contradicts itself

- “Look at these contradictory ethical or theological teachings! Look at these historical details that don’t match up!”
 - Some approaches: 1. are we understanding the passages correctly? 2. Is this a tension or a contradiction? True theology is profound and deeply mysterious: tensions are invitations to go deeper! 3. We want to avoid quick harmonizations: hasty attempts to put things together when we have no evidence.

6. The Bible is irrelevant

- “Tons of people have gotten along fine without the Bible. I don’t need it.”
 - Response: have you gotten death all figured out? If God spoke to you about your life and your need to be reconciled to him, don’t you think that would be relevant to you? Ever heard of complacency? (a false sense of comfort). It’s possible to go one’s whole life ignoring the most important things in life: don’t let that be you.

III. Conclusion: the basic strategy

- In each case, listen! Try to understand what the real objection is.
- We need to be careful not to point people outside the Bible for reasons to believe the Bible.
 - The counter-intuitive way in which we prove the Bible is true: *by appeal to the Bible itself*.
 - If we look outside of the Bible to prove the Bible, whatever we look to becomes our ultimate source of authority. If we were to do this, the “proof” would actually undermine what we are trying to prove, because we make *ourselves* to be the final measure of truth.
 - In contrast, the Bible’s divine excellencies demonstrate its uniqueness as God’s Word, and we are able to recognize those excellencies by God the Holy Spirit, who is in us. The Bible is its own proof!
 - Calvin: “Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.”
 - WCF 1.5: “the heavenliness of the matter [of the Bible], the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; *yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.*”
 - There is a difference between saying “Scripture is infallible because it claims to be infallible” (bad) and “Scripture testifies to its character as the infallible Word of God” (good). Our faith is not a blind leap (fideism), but based on our encounter with the Bible’s divine character.
 - The truth of Scripture is the starting point of knowledge: you don’t prove starting points in the same way you prove other kinds of knowledge: does our starting point agree with where it leads?
- The problem is ultimately one of *posture* (remember our foundational classes). They are standing *over* the word, passing judgment on it for not meeting their standards (Rom 9:20). Only God can humble them.
- You don’t have to have all the answers. Simply invite them to read the word with you! So many of these objections are based on ignorance. Let God do the talking! He will woo his people to himself. If the Spirit is at work in them to give them eyes to see, they will say, “No one ever spoke like this!” (John 7:46)