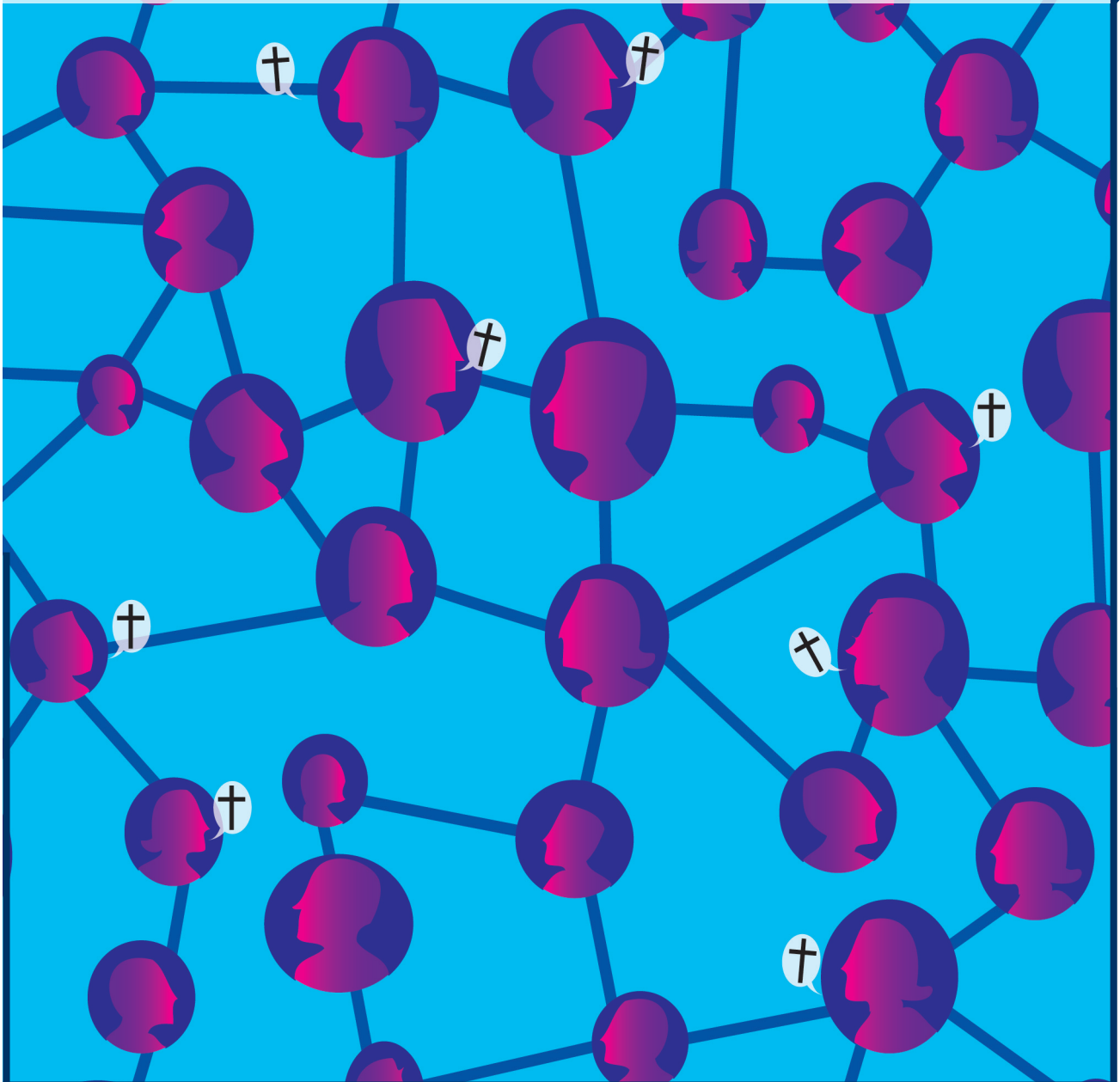


Confident Christianity



Christian Medical Fellowship of UK and Ireland has a membership of about 5,000 doctors and 1,000 students. It aims to address issues at the interface of Christianity and medicine and to help doctors and other healthcare professionals integrate their faith and medical practice.

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history of the Confident Christianity course

The material in this workbook was originally assembled by Dr Peter May and Dr Peter Short (both Southampton GPs) for a series of training conferences organised by Christian Medical Fellowship for medical students in 1989. Over 300 students attended the series which led to a programme of dialogue evangelism in the autumn term of 1989 when over 1,000 medical students in Britain were engaged in dialogue about the Christian faith. This was achieved through a series of lunches and suppers, held in conjunction with the distribution of an evangelistic booklet called *The Greatest Person?*

The original material was expanded and revised for a series of day conferences throughout 1993 under the title *Confident Christianity*. Although assembled with medical students in mind, it has no primary reference to medicine and can stand on its own as an introduction to the challenge and difficulties of engaging in dialogue about Christianity today.

outline for a saturday day conference

10.00	Registration, coffee and welcome	
10.30	Pre-evangelism _____	4
	Evangelism and the sovereignty of God _____	6
	What is the gospel? _____	7
	What makes a good gospel outline? _____	9
	A gospel outline _____	10
	Putting it into practice _____	11
12.30	Lunch	
13.15	How the apostles did it _____	12
	The nature of dialogue _____	14
	The basic question _____	15
	Avoiding the circular argument _____	16
	Relativism _____	17
15.00	Tea and coffee	
15.30	Role plays on the common questions:	
	▶ Is Christ the only way to God? _____	18
	▶ Isn't the Bible full of errors? _____	20
	▶ Isn't Christian experience only psychological? _____	22
	▶ How can miracles be possible? _____	24
	▶▶ The resurrection _____	25
	▶ What about those who have never heard the gospel? _____	26
	▶ Why suffering? _____	27
	▶ Won't a good moral life get me to heaven? _____	28
	Turning questions around _____	29
	Going for the jugular _____	30
	The Engel scale _____	30
	What is successful evangelism? _____	32
	Dialogue supper parties _____	33
17.00	End	

pre-evangelism

friendship and the art of conversation

Most people become Christians not through attending evangelistic meetings or church services but through contact with a Christian friend over a period of time. Such friendships develop only when people choose to spend time together and when there is enough trust established to communicate thoughts and feelings honestly. Then questions about meaning and purpose can be introduced naturally into the conversation.

Conversation can take place at different levels, for example:

- | | | |
|---------|---|----------------------------------|
| Level 1 | - | Cliché conversation |
| Level 2 | - | Reporting facts |
| Level 3 | - | Expressing ideas and judgements |
| Level 4 | - | Expressing feelings and emotions |
| Level 5 | - | Completely open |

It is obvious that if our conversation with non-Christians never moves beyond spouting clichés and reporting facts, if we cannot be honest about what we really think, we will not be successful evangelists. We need to become good conversationalists - being able to tease out first what our friends believe in order to bring Jesus and his teaching onto the agenda later. To do this we need to be able to ask intelligent questions. By asking questions Jesus and Paul could lead a discussion on virtually any topic to 'deeper things'.

challenging false beliefs

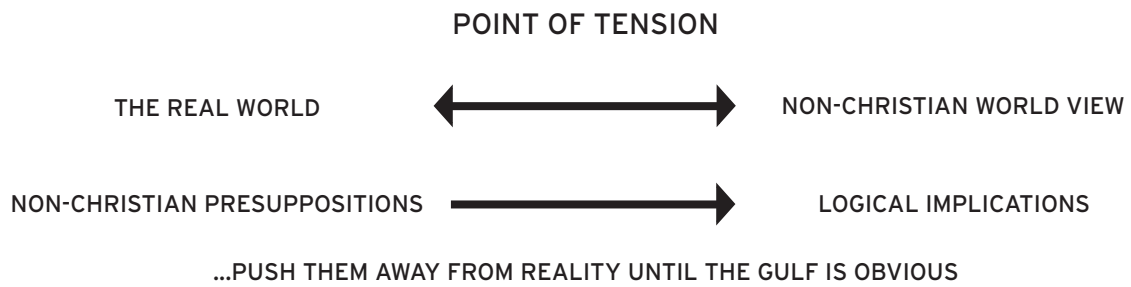
The gospel is God's power for salvation (Rom 1:16) but it can be very difficult to get it into a conversation when people don't see its relevance. Most people in this culture believe that God doesn't exist, that death is the end and that human beings are just clever monkeys. It is not surprising therefore that they are not asking how they can get right with God! So we have to make way for the gospel by helping them first to have doubts about their own cherished (false) beliefs.

Jesus continually challenged people's wrong ideas. Paul talked about 'demolishing arguments' and taking 'captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ' (2 Cor 10:4,5). Both Jesus and Paul were masters at (gently) showing others the holes in their own thinking (Lk 20:20-39; Acts 17:28-29). Similarly, once we have found out what others believe, we must begin to challenge those beliefs. Rather than being on the back foot defending our own beliefs - we can turn the tables.

'taking the lid off'

Non-Christian thinking about the world is at odds with reality. By probing questions, we can find the 'points of tension' between the unbelievers' view of the world, and the world as it really is.

Francis Schaeffer taught that when we find such points of tension, we should gently push the conversation towards the logical implications of the non-Christian assumption that has been made.



As we do this, it will become increasingly obvious that the world is not actually like that. Most people have not thought deeply about their non-Christian beliefs and it may well surprise them to hear their own thoughts as we encourage them to think out loud. For example if human beings are just clever monkeys then what is wrong with euthanasia or infanticide for handicapped people? If death is the end, what is the point of living morally in this life? If God doesn't exist what basis do we have for believing in absolute moral values at all? And if there are no absolute values how can we say that such things as murder, pornography or violence are wrong?

For a serious thinker, this can be a painful and distressing experience as the implications of what he is saying are exposed. Schaeffer referred to this as 'Taking the Roof Off' - confronting people with the painful logical consequences of their beliefs.[1]

None of this requires any 'God-talk'. Hopefully, after the stronghold has been brought down, there may well be an opportunity to discuss a different view of the world, which actually does justice to the richness and complexity of the world we find ourselves in. But that is to move on into evangelism!

reference

1. Schaeffer F. *The God Who Is There*. Hodder & Stoughton 1968; section IV, ch.2

evangelism and the sovereignty of God

introduction

To maintain our sanity we need to understand clearly who is responsible for what in sharing the Good News.

In particular we need to address the questions, 'What is God's part and what does he expect of me?' Get the answers to those questions wrong and you will find that your experience of evangelism is an unhappy one because you have fallen into one of these traps:

- ▶ 'If God is in control there is no point in me doing anything.'
- ▶ 'I feel so guilty that I don't share my faith with everyone I meet.'
- ▶ 'I must find a better technique to make people come to Christ.'
- ▶ 'I give up! None of those I talk to has followed Christ.'

So what's the answer?

the big picture

We need first to see the big picture - it is God who is in control of history and the universe itself. He is its:

- ▶ Creator - Gn 1:1-2; Ps 8:3; 2 Pet 3:5
- ▶ Owner - Ps 24:1; Jb 41:11
- ▶ Sustainer - Heb 1:3; Ps 147:8-9,15-18
- ▶ Director - Dn 2:21, 4:17; Is 40:15,22-24
- ▶ Redeemer - Rm 8:20-22; 2 Cor 4:16-5:5

It is he who will bring history to an end (Rev 5:9-6:1). His ultimate plan is a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1; Is 65:17, 66:22) where there will be no more death, crying or pain (Rev 21:4), populated by a people drawn from every nation (Gn 12:3, Rev 7:9) who have been set apart to do his will (Titus 2:11-14; 1 Pet 2:9). He is now in the process of gathering this people (Mt 24:31) before the world as we know it is destroyed (Zeph 1:2-3; 2 Pet 3:7; Rev 21:1). This is achieved through evangelism, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:15-17; Rm 10:14-17).

God's sovereignty in evangelism

The proclamation of the gospel requires human instruments (us), but it is God's work. It is he who:

- ▶ Gives us the Word to proclaim - Rm 1:1,16
- ▶ Opens doors of opportunity to proclaim it - Acts 14:27; Col 4:3
- ▶ Gives us the courage to speak - 2 Tim 4:17; Acts 4:29; Eph 6:19-20
- ▶ Enables hearers to understand the message - Acts 16:14
- ▶ Convicts people of sin - John 16:8
- ▶ Enables sinners to repent - Acts 5:31,11:18; Eph 2:8
- ▶ Brings about rebirth - Acts 2:38; Rom 8:9; John 3:3-8

The fact that God is sovereign in evangelism takes an enormous burden off our shoulders. But it doesn't mean that we can sit back and let him do all the work. William Carey, the father of the modern missionary movement was told by the hyper-Calvinists of his day that if God wanted to save the lost, he would do it without his help. Carey's refusal to believe this led to the massive spread of the gospel around the world in the 19th Century. God has chosen to use us. It is certainly his work to open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears, so that people will recognize Jesus as Lord - but it is our work (in his strength) faithfully to proclaim and defend the gospel of Jesus Christ which is God's means to bring men and women to faith.

what are the implications for us?

1. The biggest obstacle to evangelism is not technique but opposition. Our enemy the devil's opposition will take many forms...often our indifference means he hardly need bother doing anything else. But in reality he is a defeated enemy because Christ who lives in us has conquered him (Eph 1:19-21) and we share his victory (Eph 2:4-7; 1 Cor 10:13; 1 Jn 4:4).
2. Our response needs to be spiritual and practical. Paul's response was to pray and encourage others to pray also (Eph 6:18-20). Prayer is central because it is a recognition of our humble dependence on God. If he does not inspire and empower our efforts, our work will be in vain (Ps 127:1). We must pray for opportunities and courage.
3. But it does not stop with prayer. We must also obey. We are commanded to ...'go and make disciples...' (Mt 28:19). We have actively to step out in faith and seize the opportunities he gives us.

conclusion

God is in control of the universe and our own lives. Evangelism, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is his work, but we are his instruments. We need first to pray for opportunities, and the courage to use them to step out in faith.

what is the gospel?

If we are living a consistent Christian life and praying for opportunities to speak of Christ, they will come. But will we be ready? Will we be able to explain confidently and coherently what we believe?

Where should we start? What should we include? How should we finish? Thankfully we have the example of the apostles themselves to follow. In the Book of Acts we find nine apostolic sermons which give a summary of the gospel.

1. Acts 2:14-40 - Peter at Pentecost
2. Acts 3:12-26 - Peter to Jewish citizens
3. Acts 4:8-12 - Peter to the Jewish ruling council
4. Acts 5:29-32 - Peter to the Temple Captain and Chief Priests
5. Acts 10:34-43 - Peter to Cornelius and his kinsmen and friends
6. Acts 13:16-41 - Paul to Jews and God-fearers at Antioch
7. Acts 14:15-17 - Paul to the Farmers at Lystra
8. Acts 17:22-31 - Paul to the Greeks at Athens
9. Acts 26:2-23 - Paul to King Agrippa at Caesarea.

It is worth looking at all of these in some detail. We will analyse Peter's talk to the Temple Captain and Chief Priests (number 4). Peter didn't have much time so it is both comprehensive and succinct!

'The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead - whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.' (Acts 5:30-32)

The essential elements of the message can be summarized as follows:

1. God has revealed himself in history through
 - a) fathers (ie. the prophets and patriarchs of the OT)
 - b) Jesus
2. The essential facts about Jesus are that he was
 - a) killed - (crucified)
 - b) raised to life - (resurrected)
3. God has thereby made Jesus
 - a) Prince (Lord and Judge)
 - b) Saviour
4. God is asking us to
 - a) Repent (ie. turn from our old way of living)
 - b) Obey (ie. put our trusting belief (faith) in Jesus)
5. He will then give us
 - a) Forgiveness (by the blood of Christ)
 - b) the Holy Spirit (to enable us to live a new life)

These are the essential points of the gospel. An accurate presentation should leave people in no doubt that they have a choice to make, to accept or reject God's offer. Also the consequences of rejection (ie. judgement - 2 Thes 1:7-10; Jn 3:36; 5:24; Acts 17:31; Rom 2:5) should be clear.

8

The most common mistakes are to leave out the need for repentance and the reality of judgement. A gospel message without a call for repentance can leave people falsely reassured that they have saving faith. A gospel message without warning of judgement can leave people thinking they don't need to make a decision. It takes courage to tell the whole story but if we don't, how are people to know, and thereby come to faith?

conclusion

The teaching of the apostles gives us a clear indication of what the gospel message is. We should know it thoroughly and declare it faithfully when God gives us the opportunity.

what makes a good gospel outline?

1. starting in the right place

Some outlines start with the fact of sin, and blindly assume both the existence of God and the fact that his character is morally pure. Other outlines start with a statement about the love of God, also making assumptions about his existence and character.

While many people hold vague assumptions about God's existence, they would seem to be even less certain as to what he is like.

It seems therefore important to start with an affirmation about God's existence, giving a good reason for such belief. That statement must then say what God is like, before anything else in the gospel can make sense.

2. being Christ-centred

Many gospel outlines hardly mention Jesus except to bring him in as a mechanism that solves a moral conundrum in the mind of God. They ask us to trust somebody they tell us very little about! Yet the gospel is all about Jesus Christ. You cannot talk about the gospel unless you are talking about him. By giving the existence of Jesus as the primary reason for believing in God, the outline goes to the heart of God's revelation of himself and avoids many peripheral issues.

3. calling for repentance

A group of Christian students 'brainstormed' a list of the essential ingredients of a good gospel summary. They came up with twelve items - but repentance was not one of them! Yet if any two words are repeatedly used in the evangelism of the New Testament, they are 'repent and believe'. Again and again modern evangelists tread lightly over the central call of the gospel that people must change the way they are living if they are to come under the kingly rule of God.

4. putting the cross centrally, but not first

The student brainstorming session put 'the cross' as the first ingredient in their list of gospel essentials. They were entirely right that the death of Christ is central to the 'good news'. However, to explain the meaning of the cross requires prior explanations about the existence of God, his moral purity, the sinfulness of man, the impending judgement, the deity of Christ and the significance of such a blameless one coming under God's judgement. The cross then is not the first statement of the gospel. Neither is it the fact that someone died on a cross that is important - all too many people did that - but that such a one should die this death. Neither are we saved by believing in a space-time historical event. Rather we are to put our trust in the person of Jesus who died for our sins and brought about the possibility of our undeserved forgiveness. Hence the apostle Paul proclaimed 'Jesus Christ and him crucified'.

5. being faithful about the coming judgement

The student list did not itemise 'judgement' for inclusion among their gospel statements. If any item will be omitted it will always be this one. It militates against the whole ethos of our culture that falls over itself not to blame anyone for anything. 'You make God sound like a mafia chief' was one response heard to a clear warning about the coming Judgement.

However, to ignore the judgement is to make a nonsense of the gospel. This above all other reasons is why well-meaning liberals are so ineffective in evangelism. If we are not going to be called to account for the way we have lived, then why do we need to be forgiven? What point is there in repenting of our sins? Why did God set out a rescue mission? Why did Christ suffer on the cross? Why did he send out evangelists? Why are we thinking about the essential ingredients of the gospel? We are wasting our time and God clearly wasted his if there is to be no day of reckoning. The judgement is like a corner stone against which all other walls of the gospel building line up and without which the entire edifice collapses.

Christ more than anyone gave the most emphatic warnings that we shall all have to face the judgement seat of God. Such warnings pervade his teaching. They are spelled out in the parables, and permeate the Sermon on the Mount. They are explicit in his personal encounters and were graphically illustrated in his deeds. You cannot be faithful to the teaching of Christ and avoid his solemn warnings of the coming Judgement. (Note the difference between a warning and a threat.)

Neither is our society surprised to learn it. When the awful truth dawns, it is seen to make sense. How else should God relate to our generation - except to call us all to account? Our deeds are not meaningless nor are moral values an illusion. It does matter how we live, how we treat one another, whether we tell the truth, whether we harbour evil thoughts, whether we are faithful to our spouses, whether we fiddle the books, whether we abuse the environment, whether we are self-centred, whether we care. And modern man is not ultimately surprised to learn it. He has believed it in his bones all along. In fact it comes as very good news - for ultimately every detail of our lives has meaning, every thought, every word, every action. And the prospect of being forgiven and having a new start is quite the most exciting thing that could happen to any of us. That's why we call it 'Good News'!

6. anticipating relativism

Given that relativism 'is the central heresy of our culture' and can be very slippery to wrestle with, a good outline will anticipate the problems and not aggravate them. The objective nature of the empty tomb and the universality of the coming judgement concern absolute truths that have implications for everyone, not just for believers.

a gospel outline

It is one thing to know what the gospel is. But it is quite another to present it clearly and succinctly in a way that others can understand. A good gospel outline needs to be simple to remember, and free of jargon terms while covering the central issues of the gospel. The following outline, developed by Canon John Chapman, is a good example. Memorise the five headings:

- ▶ **GOD (RULER)** - God really exists. He created the universe and runs it and he made you and me to enjoy a relationship with him. We know this because he has clearly revealed himself through creation, through his dealings in history with the Jewish people and most perfectly through the person of Jesus Christ, God the Son. (Acts 2:32; Acts 17:26,27; Heb 1:1,2)
- ▶ **MAN (REBEL)** - None of us has lived consistently as though this was the true state of affairs. We have all by degree assumed that we have the right to run our own lives. Sometimes we have consciously disobeyed God; at other times we have just ignored him. It amounts to the same thing - rebellion. As rebels we rightly deserve God's judgement and to be banished from his presence. (Mk 7:21-23; Rom 3:12; Rom 3:23)
- ▶ **GOD (RESCUE)** - However, God love us and wants to rescue us from the fate that is coming to us. This is why he sent his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus, in dying on the cross, took upon himself the punishment we deserved and made it possible for our broken relationship with God to be restored. Jesus rose from the dead and has been given all authority in the universe by God. God is now waiting for us to respond to his offer of rescue through repentance (turning from our previous way of living) and faith (believing him and choosing to obey him). (Mt 4:17; Jn 3:16; Acts 17:30; Gal 1:3,4)
- ▶ **WHAT IF I DON'T (REJECTED)** - If we reject or ignore God's offer of forgiveness and reconciliation then there is no hope left for us. We will face God's judgement and will get what we truly deserve. We will be banished from God's presence and will go to Hell forever. (Jn 1:18; Rom 1:18; 2 Thess 1:8,9; Rev 21:15)
- ▶ **WHAT IF I DO? (RECONCILED)** - On the other hand if we stop rebelling against God and bring our lives under his rule, he treats us as though we had never rebelled. He forgives us for being rebels and gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit; enabling us to live a life pleasing to him and guaranteeing that we will be with him for all eternity. We become his friends and are adopted into his family. The choice is ours. (Jn 3:16, 5:24; Rom 6:23; Acts 2:38; Col 2:13)

putting it into practice

"It may sound a tall order but I believe the major beliefs of Christians can be reduced to five basic propositions. I want to outline them at the beginning of our discussion, and then questions can begin in any area you would like to take up.

God is the rightful ruler of the world and has clearly revealed himself in Jesus Christ

Contrary to popular opinion, God actually exists. He made the universe, owns it and runs it and as human beings we rightfully belong to him. Each one of us was made to enjoy a relationship with him forever. We know this is true because God has clearly revealed himself: through his creation, through his dealings with mankind (especially the nation of Israel) and most perfectly through his son Jesus Christ. Jesus entered history 2,000 years ago rather like the author of a play writing himself into the script and demonstrated who he was through his teaching, good works and miracles. His rising from the dead after crucifixion was the final proof of his true identity.

we have rebelled against God's rightful rule and deserve judgement

None of us lives as though this were the true state of affairs. All of us without exception, even the very best of us, have rebelled against God's rule and authority. We haven't lived in God's world the way he intends us to. Our rebellion may be active hostility against God, or it may equally well be passive indifference. Either way it has resulted in a breaking of relationships at all levels: between ourselves and God, between ourselves and others and between ourselves and the planet. As rebels in God's world we deserve nothing short of banishment and he has every right to exclude us from his presence forever.

God has a rescue plan to save us through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection

God loves us and longs to be reconciled with us. For this reason, at great cost to himself, he has taken the initiative by devising a rescue plan to restore our broken relationships with him. This involved sending his son Jesus Christ to take the punishment that was rightfully ours. Through his death on the cross and rising from the dead Jesus has dealt with our rebellion and has done everything necessary for our broken relationship with God to be restored. It is now up to us to respond by turning from our life of rebellion and by choosing to live under his rule.

if we refuse to be rescued we face God's judgement

If after what God has done we turn our backs on him then we will receive the judgement that we rightly deserve. God will banish us from his presence forever in Hell.

if we receive God's offer he forgives and restores us

On the other hand, if we stop rebelling and come before the Lord of the universe in humble surrender we are no longer treated as rebels. Instead God welcomes us as his very own sons and daughters and we enter into a restored relationship with him. He forgives us for all we have done wrong and by giving us the gift of his Holy Spirit he personally takes up residence in us - changing us into new people and guaranteeing that we ourselves will rise from the dead and be with him forever in the wonderful new world that will come into being when Jesus returns. The choice is ours.

summary

God is the rightful ruler of the world and has clearly revealed himself in Jesus Christ. We have rebelled against God's rightful rule and deserve his judgement. God has devised a rescue plan to save us through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. If we refuse to be rescued we face God's judgement. On the other hand, if we receive God's offer he forgives us and we live with him forever.

Now you may like to reflect on these propositions for a few moments before someone pitches in with the first question.

Thank you."

how the apostles did it

It is one thing to know a gospel outline - but it will not get us very far if we cannot get into an appropriate situation to use it. You can't just jump in with the Gospel at the beginning of a conversation.

So there is far more to successful evangelism than just knowing the *content* of the apostles' gospel sermons. We also need to understand the *context* in which they shared their faith. What was their strategy?

Essentially Peter and Paul shared the Gospel:

1. In words people understood
2. In an environment where their hearers felt comfortable
3. With the opportunity for discussion

in words people understand

Have you ever heard someone yelling instructions at a dog? Gary Larson, in an amusing cartoon demonstrates that the only word most dogs understand in a complicated command is their own name. The other words are simply 'not in a dog's vocabulary'.

But when we do evangelism we can make just the same mistake - using words that are not in the other person's vocabulary: Christian jargon words like justification, sanctification or expressions like 'washed in the blood' or 'substitutionary atonement'. But we can also use more common words like saved, God, blessed or even Jesus to which they give entirely different meanings.

Paul faced exactly this problem in Athens in Acts 17 where he used the Greek words for resurrection, Gospel and Jesus in conversation in the marketplace and was accused of being a 'babbling'. When he had the opportunity to preach later in the Areopagus he explained the Gospel in a way that used only words that his hearers understood and the reaction was very different. Like Paul, we too, need to de-jargonise our evangelism.

But speaking so that people understand is not just about the words we use. It also involves starting with ideas they are already familiar with as a means to introducing them to what is new in Christianity. In other words we should lead them from the truth they know to the truth they don't.

So we see Paul changing the 'package' in which he presented the gospel depending on the audience he was addressing. This is called contextualisation. So in the synagogue he established common ground with a Jewish audience by starting with Jewish history and Old Testament Scripture (*Acts 13:13-51*); with the rural folk at Lystra he spoke of God's control of the seasons (*14:14-18*); with the philosophers in Athens he quoted their own poetry (*17:22-31*). He took the truth they already knew to establish rapport.

We need to do the same. Jesus is the only way to God but there are many ways to Jesus and I have seen friends converted through a variety of bizarre routes to Jesus. We need to be sensitive to the way the Holy Spirit is leading a person and follow his lead!

in an environment they feel comfortable

A lot of traditional evangelistic methods involve pulling people into strange environments like a worship or guest services or evangelistic rallies. We may feel comfortable in such gatherings but our friends almost certainly won't and often they feel so uncomfortable they are unable to concentrate on what is being said.

Paul had a different approach. He went where his hearers felt comfortable, even if it was an uncomfortable place for him. He got used to addressing people in any venue where they were likely to gather - be it the marketplace in Athens (*Acts 17:17*), the Areopagus (*17:22*), the synagogue (*13:14*), his own home (*28:30*) or in a lecture theatre (*19:9-10*).

In so doing he was able to get a good hearing and the audience were able to relax. They got the dangerous message of the Gospel loud and clear, but in a safe place where they had a chance to consider it seriously. We need to follow the apostle's example by first asking where our friends feel most comfortable (eg. lecture theatre, common room, pub, home etc) and choosing to do our evangelism there.

with the opportunity for discussion

Many people think that a church sermon is the best vehicle for evangelism; but try getting your non-Christian friends along to a 30-minute monologue! Monologues are few and far between in the New Testament. And Paul's sermons are in general very short and invariably lead on to discussion.

Where Paul talks to unbelievers it is almost always in the context of dialogue. In fact the Greek word *dialogomai*, from which the word 'dialogue' is derived appears ten times between chapters 17 and 24 of the book of Acts - and literally means 'two way traffic of words'.

Paul 'reasoned' (17:2,17, 18:4), 'discussed' (19:9), 'argued persuasively' (19:8) and confronted (13:46). In fact he summed up his ministry by saying '...we try to persuade', (2 Cor 5:11), '... we demolish arguments and every pretension' (2 Cor 10:5). Paul clearly didn't feel that robust debate and discussion was in any way ungodly or unspiritual; in fact in his hands it was remarkably effective. We hear that some 'received the message with great eagerness' (*Acts 17:11*), 'were persuaded' (17:4) and 'believed' (17:34). Others 'sneered' (17:32), 'became abusive' (18:6) and 'stirred up persecution' (13:49). As always the gospel message produces reactions at both poles.

This two-way discussion meant that he could see if his hearers understood, could answer their questions or pose questions to them, and could deal with objections to his message that arose. Of course his desire was not to win arguments, but that people would be saved (*Rom 10:1*) through hearing the gospel (1:16). His priority was to win people to Christ. But his *strategy* involved teaching in words people understood, in an environment where they felt comfortable, with the opportunity for discussion. We are wise to do the same!

Why don't we? If we are honest the real reason is fear. It's just not comfortable getting that close to people. But we need to face our fears, and the next section tells us how.

Acts 17:16-34 - Paul in Athens

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸"For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

³²When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ³³At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

the nature of dialogue

Being open about your faith in God can be scary!

The common fears are:

- ▶ losing friends
- ▶ appearing judgemental
- ▶ not knowing how to answer their questions

On the first issue, all one can say is, 'Yes, that's a risk! Being a disciple is a costly business.' However, in our culture if we treat others with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:15,16) they seldom turn their backs on us.

On the second issue, criticism often arises from a common misunderstanding about Christianity. Most people believe this equation:

Being good = Being a Christian

Therefore, if you are hinting that you are a Christian and they are not, they understand you to imply that you are better than they are. Clearly this stands the gospel on its head and the sooner you correct their misunderstandings the better!

On the third issue, there is really no excuse. 'Common things occur commonly!' The following seven questions were spelled out by Paul Little in his best selling book 'How to give away your faith' (IVP) as the most common asked. If you haven't thought through them then you deserve to break into a cold sweat each time you share your faith. (More than that, it might be the reason why you get so few opportunities... After all, if you were God, would you give good opportunities to people who would botch it?!)

the seven deadly questions

- ▶ Is Christ the only way to God?
- ▶ Isn't the Bible full of errors?
- ▶ Isn't Christian experience only psychological?
- ▶ How can miracles be possible?
- ▶ The resurrection
- ▶ What about those who have never heard the gospel?
- ▶ Why do the innocent suffer?
- ▶ Won't a good moral life get me to heaven?

Although these questions come from an American context, you don't need much experience in dialogue evangelism to realise that they are equally common in Britain. Paul Western interviewed 600 people in Britain, asking them the question 'Why don't you believe in Christianity? Six answers outnumbered all others and he devoted the six chapters in his book 'Why we can't believe' (IVP Frameworks) to answering them.

They were:

- ▶ There's no proof
- ▶ Christianity is irrelevant.
- ▶ I've never really thought about it.
- ▶ The biggest obstacle is the church.
- ▶ There's so much suffering in the world.
- ▶ Christianity can't be the only way to God.

There is considerable overlap. We are not often told the questions before we go into an exam! It would be very careless of us to allow ourselves to be examined about our beliefs without having carefully considered how we might answer these questions and comments.

the real question

Of course the real reason people do not follow Christ is not an intellectual one but a moral one. They are not prepared to repent! But before they can see this clearly, the intellectual debris must be cleared away effectively.

how to handle the basic question - why do YOU believe in God?

three valid approaches

- ▶ Beauty and design in the natural order - eg. Ps 19:1, Rom 1:19-20
- ▶ Inner awareness - eg. Acts 17:27, Rom 2:15
- ▶ God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ - eg. Col 1:13-15

three different sets of objections

1. **creation**
Genesis: Evolution
The problems of suffering and evil
2. **experience**
The world's religions
Isn't it all psychological?
Relativism and the nature of truth and morals
3. **Jesus Christ**
The reliability of the gospels

The art of dialogue evangelism is to anticipate the possible responses to what we are saying. Eventually any discussion about Christian belief will involve some discussion about the nature of the documents of the New Testament. Here is the bottom line in 'apologetics'. You may have to discuss all the other subjects as well! However, if you reply to 'the basic question' using approaches (1) or (2), it is you the evangelist who has put these other subjects on to the agenda for discussion!

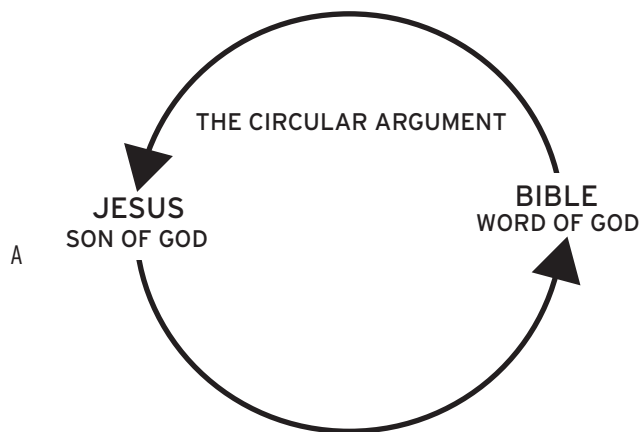
conclusion

The basic answer? Head for the heart of the gospel - talk about Jesus!

avoiding the circular argument

Christians commonly present a circular argument in the way they discuss the authority of the Bible. They say that Jesus is the Son of God and produce proof texts from the Word of God to make their point. The unbeliever replies that he does not believe the Bible. The Christian then produces sayings of Christ that show the Scriptures to be the Word of God. The non-Christian replies that he does not accept that, only to be told that he should trust Jesus because He is the Son of God!

each is called upon to justify belief in the other



One reason we get into this predicament is that it was the apostle Paul's usual practice to evangelise the Jews by reasoning with them from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. The Jews however believed those Old Testament Scriptures to be inspired and authoritative. Paul had a very different approach addressing Gentiles (Acts 14 & 17). His theology remained biblical without presuming that Bible texts should be the final court of appeal.

second reason is that we do not think clearly about the object of Christian belief. We should be asking people to put their trust in a person, not a book. 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31).

Christians regard the Bible as the revealed word of God ultimately because we conclude that Jesus himself had that view of Scripture, and discipleship means intellectual as well as moral submission to his kingly rule. 'You call me Teacher and Lord. You

are right, for so I am' (John 13:13). Jesus insisted repeatedly 'A student is not above his teacher... it is enough for the student to be like his teacher' (eg. Matt 10:24). Trusting the Scriptures is a proper consequence of first of all submitting ourselves to Jesus and becoming his disciples. It is Jesus whom we are asking people to trust and obey.

our argument is linear not circular

The force of our argument about Jesus flows from the apostolic testimony about him recorded in the collection of first century documents that we call the New Testament. Our appeal to them is not as authoritative Scripture, but as credible historical documents.

In other words we start where they are. They cannot reasonably deny that these documents were written in the first century. We can produce compelling evidence that these writings have survived the centuries essentially as they were written.

The documents describe the amazing figure of Jesus of Nazareth, who gave the world a body of teaching that is there for everyone's evaluation. He is described as an exemplary character who practised what he preached. He is said to have performed amazing deeds, and his sayings are shot through with the most extraordinary claims he made about himself. The events of his life are said to have climaxed not only in his death but also in his resurrection.

The whole saga, because of the importance of his teaching, the example of his character, his astonishing claims and the impact he had made on the world's stage, demands evaluation from every thoughtful responsible person. They may conclude that the whole story is invention, but history is not on their side.

Our task is to argue from history that Jesus is the Son of God.

(For an example, see the booklet *The Greatest Person?*)

relativism

'It is a central heresy of our culture to say that all truth is relative; that one thing may be true for me and quite another may be true for you. This absurdity destroys the very notion of truth.... and is the result of muddled thinking. No one can seriously believe that a belief which contradicts his or her own is just as true. The expression "It is true for me" is self-confuting. Either a thing is true or it is not... Can we imagine saying, "Well the earth is round to me; but it may be flat to you"? The earth is either round or flat; it cannot be both; and what you or I think about it is irrelevant. You may claim that religion and ethics is not a matter of truth at all. Very well, do not use the word "true"; but if you use it, do not render it unintelligible by adding that empty phrase, "for me".' Prof Keith Ward in 'The Turn of the Tide' p.144 (BBC)

And so it can happen that you present the gospel clearly and faithfully only to be met by the response, 'It is nice for you to believe that. Personally, I'm into Zen Buddhism.'

The gospel seems to roll like water off a duck's back. Unless you make the right diagnosis, you may be left with the impression that you haven't prayed enough or that they are being morally obtuse, when in fact they have not understood what you are saying.

Of course, no one is a consistently thought-out relativist. You cannot argue that relativism is true in an absolute sense! At best it can only be relatively true. However, many people easily slip into relative ways of thinking. One minute they are talking as though truth was absolute and its opposite is untrue, the next minute they are talking as though there is nothing that is true outside our perception of it.

Francis Schaeffer wrote about the need to establish antithesis:

'This little formula, "If you have A it is not non-A", is the first move in classical logic. If you understand the extent to which this no longer holds sway, you will understand our present situation... The shift has been tremendous. Thirty years ago you could have said such things as "This is true" and you would have been on everyone's wavelength. Everyone would have been talking to each other as though the idea of antithesis was correct. Thus in evangelism you would have begun with the certainty that your audience understood you.'[1]

The first task then is to realize what is happening and not proceed until you are sure they are talking in terms of what Schaeffer was driven to call 'true truth'.

Certain aspects of the gospel help people to see the all-or-nothing truth implications of what we are saying - for instance, the tomb was either empty on that first Easter or it was not. It could not have been both. It could not have been empty for some people but not for others. Similarly, we shall either all appear before the judgement seat of Christ or we shall not, and whether or not that happens will not be decided on whether or not we believe it, but on other grounds entirely!

reference

1. Schaeffer F. *The God Who Is There*. Hodder & Stoughton 1968; section IV, ch.2

is Christ the only way to God?

We now live in a 'global village', a multi-faith society where exclusive claims may offend. Many adherents of other faiths are prepared to recognize Jesus as a great teacher, prophet, leader and reformer - even perhaps as one way to God. Are we not then being arrogant, intolerant and narrow minded by suggesting he is the **only** way?

First we must admit that the world's religions do have some things in common - they all recognize a spiritual dimension and have broadly similar moral codes. But closer examination reveals a multiplicity of differences - for example compare the teaching of the world's six major faiths (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism) on the nature of God, life after death, creation, sin and salvation. They cannot all be right! Perhaps all contain aspects of the truth. Perhaps. But if one is true in an absolute sense, then it follows logically that none of the others can be also. It's one or none.

Christianity makes three distinct claims with which no other religion agrees:

1. The deity of Christ (ie. Jesus is God - Jn 1:18)
2. The authority of the Scriptures (ie. The Bible is the Word of God - 2 Tim 3:16)
3. Salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8)

Each of these claims is rooted in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles - a denial of any is a denial of Christianity.

That Jesus **is the only way** is asserted by Peter, Paul and indeed Jesus himself. (Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5; Jn 14:6). Whoever does not believe in Christ stands condemned (Jn 3:18). Whoever acknowledges Christ will be acknowledged by him on the day of judgement (Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8) but whoever denies him will be denied (Mt 10:33, Mk 8:38; Lk 9:26; 12:9; 2 Tim 2:12). Anyone who is not for Christ is against him (Mt 12:30; Lk 11:23).

The exclusive claims of Christ are based on the teaching that he is himself God. This is directly stated in at least eight passages of the NT. (Jn 1:1-2; Jn 1:18; Jn 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom 9:5; Tit 2:13; Heb 1:8; 2 Pet 1:1) and strongly implied in others (Mt 1:23; Jn 17:3; 5; Col 2:2; 2 Thes 1:12; 1 Tim 1:17; Jas 1:1; 1 Jn 5:20).

Furthermore Jesus said and did things that in the Old Testament only God said and did.

1. He called himself -
I AM
(Ex 3:14 cf Jn 8:58; 6:35; 8:12,24; 11:25; 14:6; 18:5; Mk 14:62)
bridegroom
(Is 62:5; Jer 2:2; Ezk 16:8 cf; Mk 2:19f; Jn 3:29; Rev 19:7)
shepherd
(Ps 23:1; 80:1; Is 40:11; Ezk 34:15 cf; Jn 10:11-16)
the first and the last
(Is 44:6; 48:12 cf; Rev 2:8; 22:13)

Others called him Lord (Heb=YHWH, Gk=Kyrios)
(Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11; 1 Tim 6:15; 2 Cor 4:5)
2. He accepted worship
(Mt 4:10 cf; Mt 2:2,8,11; 14:33; Mk 5:33; Jn 9:38; Mt 28:17; Lk 24:52)
3. He created the world
(Gn 1:1; Ps 33:6,9; 148:5 f cf; Jn 1:1,3; Heb 1:2; Col 1:16;)
4. He existed before his birth
(Jn 17:5; Jn 1:1)
5. He forgave sins
(Is 43:11,25; 45:21 cf; Mt 1:21; Mk 2:7-10; Lk 7:48; Acts 4:12; 5:31)
6. He said he would judge the world - (Is 5:16 cf; Mt 25:31-46; Mk 8:38; Jn 5:22-30; 2 Thes 1:7-10)

We can tell from the reactions people had to him, that there was no doubt about what he was claiming. They either worshipped him (Mt 14:33; 28:17; Lk 24:52; Jn 9:38; 20:28) or accused him of blasphemy (Mt 26:65,66; Mk 2:7; 14:63,64; Lk 22:70,71; Jn 5:18; 8:5,8; 10:33; 19:7). He was killed because he claimed to be God.

Given the NT's unequivocal claim of Jesus Christ's divinity we cannot say that he was merely a great moral teacher, since a great moral teacher would not lie about his own identity. There are only four options open to us in considering a man who claims to be God: either he is a liar, a lunatic, a legend or the Lord.

Someone who deliberately lied about his identity would be a demonic deceiver and trickster. Someone who falsely believed himself to be God and told others so would be a deluded lunatic. The third option is that he never existed, or that his followers misinterpreted and distorted what he said, in other words that the story is a legend. Or finally we could conclude that he was who he claimed to be - the Lord.

As Christians, we must assert on his own authority that Jesus is both God the Son and the only way to God.

reference

1. Milne B. Know the Truth. Leicester: IVP, Ch.14

isn't the Bible full of errors?

In answering we need to ask why and when our friends think the Bible has been changed? There are four separate questions here:

1. did the events really happen in the way the eyewitnesses claimed? (Are there errors of fact?)

If the eyewitnesses did not relate the events as they originally occurred, then there are only two possibilities. Either they were mistaken or they deliberately lied.

Individuals may suffer from errors of perception but not whole groups. Unlike the 'revelations' of contemporary cult leaders many of the events described in the Bible were witnessed by more than one person. On examining the accounts we find a remarkable degree of consistency. Consider for example the parallel histories in Kings, Chronicles and the Prophets, the biography of Jesus in the four gospels or the 500 who were said to have seen Christ after the resurrection. (1 Cor 15:6)

On the other hand would the authors deliberately lie? According to tradition, eleven of the twelve disciples of Jesus met a violent death on account of their belief in his resurrection. Would they really have put themselves through such suffering for a faith they knew was false? (1 Cor 15:15-19; 2 Cor 11:23-29)

2. did the story change before it was written down? (Are there errors of verbal transmission?)

Many people in our twentieth century world of word processors, photocopiers and faxes disbelieve that verbally transmitted information could ever remain uncontaminated. An examination of the way stories are passed on in contemporary non-literate societies quickly puts paid to this kind of cultural arrogance. Oral traditions are composed in easily memorable format and are constantly repeated and checked. Some early Muslim converts memorised over 6,000 verses of the Qu'ran accurately! The capacity of the human memory is astounding, as any mother who has read to her children knows.

Despite this, there was no chain of verbal transmission before much of the Bible was committed to writing. The words and deeds of Jesus were clearly recorded by eyewitnesses (2 Pet 1:16; 1 Jn 1:3, 19:35) or at least by those who carefully interviewed them (Lk 1:1-3). The meticulous detail in some of the observations proves their authenticity (Jn 19:34-5; 20:6-7).

3. is what we have now what was originally written down? (Are there errors of written transmission?)

Scribes who copied Scripture were meticulous in their attention to detail. One has only to look at old manuscripts like the book of Kells in the Dublin Trinity College library, or some of the scrolls in the British Museum to see the truth of this. Even if we doubted this fact there are enough early copies of both Old and New Testament documents to show that they have not been changed over the course of time. Entire copies of the New Testament in Greek dating from the 3rd and 4th centuries (Codex Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus) can be viewed today. Some of the earliest fragments (eg. John Ryland) date from the lifetime of those who knew the apostles personally. Until this century the earliest Old Testament in Hebrew which we possessed was the Massoretic Text (cAD900). However, the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran in the 1940s, (which contain parts of every Old Testament book save one) are 1,000 years older and virtually identical.

When comparisons are made with other documents of antiquity the Bible documents stand alone in terms of authenticating evidence. We know about Julius Caesar (whose existence no-one doubts) from less than a dozen copies of the original documents, the earliest of which postdate his death by 1,000 years. By contrast there are over 24,000 records of the life of Christ surviving from the first two or three hundred years after he walked the streets of Palestine.

Apart from the New Testament documents, early Jewish and Roman literature also makes mention of Christ: his teaching, miracles, crucifixion under Tiberius and even the three hours darkness at the time of his death. (see Tacitus, Lucian, Josephus, Suetonius, Pliny and Thallus)

Archaeological discoveries have repeatedly confirmed that those who wrote the Bible were consummate historians of the first order. (eg. Ezra 6:13-16; Lk 3:1-2)

4. are there contradictions?

Those who make reference to the 'thousands' of contradictions in the Bible are usually unable to name one. Most genuine contradictions can be attributed to minor errors in hand copying of individual letters or numbers (eg. 2 Ch 36:9 cf 2 Ki 24:8) or to verses being taken out of context (eg. Mt 7:8 cf Pr 1:28). Others arise when the same story is told from the perspective of different observers (eg. Lk 24:1-2 cf Jn 20:1) This is what we would expect. If serial witnesses in court give identical testimonies, one might suspect that the evidence has been fabricated. Some contradictions may seem at first difficult to account for, but can be explained satisfactorily (eg. Judas's mode of death Mt 27:5 cf Acts 1:18 and Jesus' genealogy Mt 1:6-16 cf Lk 3:23-31). We need to develop reasoned defences for those most commonly raised, while accepting that there will always be mysteries. Apparent contradictions confirm rather than cast doubt on the Bible's authenticity. They would be carefully edited out in a fake. The fact remains that there is not a single error in the Bible that casts doubt on any significant historical biblical event or doctrine.

Throughout the last two thousand years the Bible has withstood vociferous criticism with flying colours. Those who are most vocal in questioning it generally either approach it with presuppositions (eg. that miracles cannot happen) or are unwilling to accept the personal implications of its teaching.

reference

1. A much fuller treatment of these issues than space allows here can be found in Josh McDowell's 'Evidence that demands a verdict'

isn't Christian experience only psychological?

'If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.' Voltaire

Isn't it possible to explain Christian conversion and behaviour in purely psychological terms? This question can be rather threatening. Our faith in Christ is intensely personal, and we are right to feel deeply about it. But emotional feeling can also be a snare (Je 17:9, Pr 14:12). If our conviction that Christianity is true is based solely on the fact that it 'brings us peace and joy', then we will be in trouble when those emotions fade, or when we meet someone who is equally 'sure' about another faith.

The first step in coming to terms with this question is in realising the basis of our assurance. Assurance is a three-legged stool. The first leg is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit testifying to us that we are children of God (Rom 8:16; 2 Cor 1:22). The second leg is the fact that we believe in Christ as risen Lord and Saviour (Jn 5:24; Rom 10:9; 1 Jn 5:9-13). The third leg is the reality of a changed life (1 Jn 3:18-19, 5:2). Subjective sensations, conscious convictions and outward actions all work together: heart, mind and will.

the basis of our faith: fact not feeling

Our faith is ultimately not based on subjective feeling, but on objective fact. We know that Christianity is true because Jesus rose from the dead (historical fact) and gives us his word as his bond. This is the real basis for our emotional responses, heartfelt beliefs and wilful obedience.

This is why our security in Christ is not in jeopardy when our feelings change. Nor will we be disturbed when those of other faiths appear to have 'peace of mind' and 'conviction' that their way is equally right. The fact that a person sincerely believes something, or even dies for it, does not make it true.

The presupposition behind the question 'isn't Christianity only psychological?' is that by explaining psychologically why a person has Christian beliefs, one can disprove the belief. This is confusing two separate issues: how one comes to hold a belief and whether or not the belief is true. Just as a person can have false beliefs for good reasons, so he can have true beliefs for bad reasons.

it's just the way you were brought up!

The question often comes in the form of an accusation: 'You only believe because of the way you were brought up.' The implication is that if we had been brought up in a Hindu culture, we would have been Hindus. This is easily countered by two simple observations. Firstly, many people convert to Christ from profoundly non-Christian backgrounds. There are now Christians from virtually every language group, cultural background and religious tradition in the world. The only thing they have in common is their love for Christ. Secondly, many who are 'brought up' as Christians later deny their religious upbringing and turn away from him.

you're only in it for what you can get out of it!

Sometimes it may be implied that we believe only because we stand to gain something by believing. In other words Christian belief is essentially selfish. This can be upsetting because Christian character is supposed to be characterised by selflessness. Before we tie ourselves in knots by trying to prove how altruistic our motivation is, we need to remember that we are Christians, not to gain heaven nor to escape from hell, but because we are convinced that Christ's claims are true. We are convinced not only that he died and rose from the dead, but that his death was on our behalf (2 Cor 5:14). Believing this, what choice do we have but to be his followers? (Jn 6:66-69)

We can admit that we are pleased to live in hope of heaven and to escape hell, but we don't for one minute think that these are rewards for believing. They are unmerited gifts of grace. In fact the Christian life is not all peaches and cream. We have to follow Christ in the shadow of the cross and this is not easy. Being a Christian means that we will inevitably, at some stage, face hardship and persecution (Jn 15:20; 2 Tim 3:12; Heb 12:7). We could reply to this sort of challenge by saying that the only reason the non-Christian doesn't believe, is that he is not prepared to 'count the cost' of being a Christian.

you're nothing but a...

Another tack critics may take is to try and explain our beliefs according to some psychological theory of behaviour. For example they may take the view that our beliefs are programmed in our genes, or the product of punishment and reward (Skinner), subconscious drives (Freud) or biochemical reactions. We first need to acknowledge the element of truth in this. Man is a complex being, and each of these models does explain his behaviour, emotions and beliefs to some extent. However it is over-simplistic to say that man is nothing but a clever monkey, a stimulus response machine, a bundle of repressed drives or a complex chemical reaction.

This 'nothing buttery' excludes the possibility of the free will and independent consciousness, which is part of the every day experience of all of us. Man's thoughts and behaviours are not all pre-determined. If this were so we could not make objective judgements about anything, not even about our capacity to make objective judgements. If our friends insist that everything we do or think is predetermined then we only need respond that their thought that everything is pre-determined must be similarly pre-determined!

a hidden agenda?

There is sometimes a hidden agenda behind the question 'isn't it all psychological?' Sometimes the person asking it would like to become a Christian, but feels that their own upbringing puts them at a disadvantage. We need to be sensitive to this and take the opportunity to tell them about the power of God to overcome all obstacles. God understands all our difficulties. After all he has been a man himself (Jn 1:14; Heb 4:15). He knows that we are dust (Ps 103:14), and will never turn away anyone who comes to him (Jn 6:37). To the contrary, he promises that those who seek will find (Je 29:13). What seems impossible to us is always possible for God (Lk 18:27).

how can miracles be possible?

Many people say they are unable to believe what the Bible says about God because they are unable to believe that miracles happened. They are at least clearly able to see what some liberal theologians can't - that belief in the God of the Bible implies belief in the miraculous. To deny the miraculous is to deny God himself. If miracles did not happen, then the resurrection did not happen and our faith is therefore in vain (1 Cor 15:32). So as Christians we must argue that miracles did happen - and ask our friends why they believe they didn't. We will normally receive one of four answers:

miracles didn't happen because there is no evidence they happened

It is necessary here to present the evidence for selected biblical miracles - pointing out that many of them convinced hardened sceptics, surprised even the faithful and were accepted as facts by eyewitnesses who had strong vested interests in not believing. This will usually push the **person** on to one of the other three arguments or a discussion about the reliability of the Bible as a historical record.

miracles didn't happen because there are natural explanations of what happened

People who use this argument will generally give examples of natural explanations for miraculous events - for instance Sodom was destroyed by a volcano, the Red Sea parted because of a strong wind, the Jordan dried up because of a landslide. The implication is that because a reasonable natural explanation can be found, there are no grounds for claiming God was the cause.

The first thing to assert is that because we can find a natural explanation for some event does not mean that God was not involved. The God of the Bible is the sustainer of the universe (Heb 1:3). It is He who covers the sky with clouds, supplies the earth with rain, makes the grass grow and sends the snow, frost, hail and breezes (Ps 147:8-18). Furthermore it is God who installs kings (Dan 4:17; Rom 13:1) and removes them (Is 40:23), indeed it is even God who determines the throw of the dice (Pr 16:33). God works in and through natural events and the fact that natural explanations for miracles can be found should not disturb someone with biblical faith (Ex 14:21). Natural events are part of God's providence.

Secondly, there are many miracles in the Bible for which no natural explanation can be found - a stick turning into a snake (Ex 4:2-4), an iron axe-head floating (2 Ki 6:6) or the instantaneous healing of congenital blindness (Jn 9:1-34). They run completely counter to the laws of nature.

miracles didn't happen because miracles can't happen

Some people argue that miracles are impossible because they break the laws of science - but this is based on a misunderstanding of what scientific theory is.

Scientific theories are not prescriptive but descriptive. They do not prescribe how nature must behave. Rather they describe how nature has behaved in the past - as a basis of predicting how it might behave in the future. Accordingly no scientific theory is carved in letters of stone. Any theory can be disproved by a single fact, which means that scientific theories are often being updated in the light of new observations.

A true scientist does not ignore facts that don't fit his theory. Rather he modifies his theory to accommodate these facts. We accept that miracles happened because reliable witnesses observed them. Whether or not we can explain them in terms of existing scientific theories is irrelevant.

miracles didn't happen because I have never seen a miracle

Occasionally people claim that they only believe what they have seen with their own eyes. However, if pressed, they will readily admit to believing many other things on the basis of oral or written testimony.

conclusion

The real reason people fail to believe the biblical reports of miracles is because they fail to believe in God himself. Once one believes in an omnipotent being who created and sustains the universe, miracles cease to be an intellectual problem. Similarly once one believes that such a God could become a man, such issues as the virgin birth, the healing miracles of Jesus and indeed, the resurrection itself, pale into insignificance.

the resurrection

'Christianity stands or falls on the claim that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.' So claimed Ludwig Kennedy in a recent radio debate with Lord Rees-Mogg. He was right. The Apostle Paul put it even more bluntly: 'If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith'. (1 Cor 15:14) The resurrection is of first importance (1 Cor 15:3,4), and yet the difficulty of accepting it is a major barrier to faith. How can we defend our belief in it?

We need to argue that although the resurrection appears incredible, we believe it happened on the basis of solid evidence.

First, no one disputed the fact that **Jesus died on the cross**. He was seen to breathe his last by eyewitnesses, and was certified dead by Roman soldiers whose very business was killing. They decided not to break Jesus' legs (customary practice to hasten death in crucifixion), because they were convinced he was dead already; and this was confirmed by the observation of 'blood and water' (separated cells and serum) coming from his pierced side. This only occurs as a post-mortem event.

The so-called 'swoon' theory, that Jesus may have only fainted and revived in the cool of the tomb, is much more difficult to substantiate. It involves believing that a man beaten to within an inch of his life, impaled on a cross and then wrapped in 75lbs of bandages and spices (rather like a POP cast) could somehow unwrap himself, push away a one ton boulder, single-handedly overcome an armed Roman guard; and then persuade over 500 others that he had conquered death. The foolishness of this position is evidenced by the fact that no one dared suggest the possibility until centuries later. Would Christ, the model of integrity, really deceive his followers by claiming he had risen when he knew he hadn't? Apart from the testimony of eyewitnesses, no secular historian at the time (see Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus and Lucian) doubted that Jesus died.

Second, **the body was gone**. If the Jews had removed it (Mary's immediate assumption) then they would simply have reproduced it at the first rumour of resurrection. If the disciples had removed it, they would not have subsequently been prepared to die for what they knew had not happened. In any case, the tomb was heavily guarded, and they had all run for their lives when Jesus was arrested. Pilgrims never flocked to Jesus' tomb. It was empty.

Third, the **post-resurrection appearances** were impressive. Despite Jesus' repeated predictions that he would rise from the dead, all his followers first thought of other explanations for the missing corpse. What convinced them? Mary, the twelve disciples, the followers on the Emmaus Road, Paul and 500 others (1 Cor 15:6) became convinced when they saw him. Some have suggested hallucinations as an alternative explanation; but hallucinations do not occur with varied groups, on multiple occasions, in different places, over a period of several weeks. They don't light beach fires or eat fish either!

Fourth, one has to account for the rapid spread of Christianity after Christ's death. Most of the twelve disciples later died for their belief that Jesus was God. Although dying for a belief does not make it true, the point is this: they came to believe in Christ's divinity after being convinced that he really had risen from the dead. It was this conviction that transformed them from fearful cowards into the bold apostles who literally turned the world upside down. The survival and growth of the early church resulted from the unshakeable belief that Jesus was alive.

Fifth is the personal experience of Christians, generations of people who have come to know Jesus as a person, with whom they enjoy a genuine friendship. Christianity is not just a creed to be followed or an ideology to be embraced; it is a dynamic relationship with a real living God - through Jesus Christ.

People who are unconvinced by the above usually have one of two problems. They may be doubting the reliability of the New Testament documents on which the arguments are based. In this case we are back to a debate on the question 'Isn't the Bible full of errors?' Alternatively, they may have philosophical objections to miracles per se. Here, no amount of historical evidence will convince them. We need to deal with their fundamental objection to the miraculous. (see 'How can miracles be possible?') In reality, the real miracle is the incarnation. Once we accept that God can become a man; then a resurrection presents no difficulty at all.

Of course, the fundamental block to belief is not intellectual, but moral. In Jesus' own words, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' (Lk 16:31) For those who choose not to believe, no amount of evidence will suffice.

what about those who have never heard the gospel?

In short, we do not know! 'The secret things belong to the Lord our God' (Dt 29:29). Certainly we cannot speak for any individual. However, the Bible does not leave us totally in the dark and various approaches towards an answer can be made.

We are not here considering the fate of those who openly reject Jesus. The Bible has much to say on that score (eg. 2 Thes 1:8-10). Rather we are considering the fate of those who through no fault of their own have never heard of Jesus. We only need to think of all those who died before Jesus was ever born to realise the scale of the problem. What then can we say?

the justice of God

If Christianity is true, then God is a morally perfect and just being. He also knows everything and his very nature is love. The idea that on the Day of Judgement there will be a massive miscarriage of justice, either because God didn't know or didn't care is inconceivable. Such a God would be an evil tyrant, not the merciful Lord revealed by Jesus. So whatever does happen would leave any moral observer entirely satisfied that the God of all the earth has done right (Gn 18:25).

general revelation

No one is totally ignorant about the true and living God. 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse' (Rom 1:20). This includes the moral character of God as evidenced by our consciences (Rom 2).

the Old Testament heroes

The Old Testament heroes of faith had little knowledge of Jesus yet found God's mercy. Jesus described Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as feasting in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 8:11) while heaven itself is described as being at Abraham's side (Lk 16:23). Christ's sacrificial death on the cross hundreds of years later seems to have acted retrospectively for them (Rom 3:25, Heb 9:15). Is it not possible then for others who have not heard of Jesus to respond to the knowledge of God they do have in the way those heroes did?

We needn't conclude from this that such an admission would be to undermine the church's missionary task. After all, those men were the shining exceptions, not the rule. Moses descended from his encounter with God on the Mount to find the Israelites worshipping a golden calf! The lament of the Psalmist was that God looks down from heaven to see if there are any who seek God, only to find 'Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no-one who does good, not even one' (Ps 53:1-3). Rather, it is the preaching of the gospel that is God's chosen means of disturbing the complacent, bringing conviction of sin and calling men to himself. Those who hear his call begin to seek after God for mercy and forgiveness.

the honest seeker

Jesus promises that those who do seek after God will find him (Mt 7:7). This may mean that they will come to hear the good news about Jesus in this life. But clearly that wasn't the case for the Old Testament characters. It may therefore mean that such people can live without any assurance of forgiveness and yet are forgiven by God through the atoning death of Jesus, after casting themselves on God for his mercy. **The gospel** then would bring such seekers not so much forgiveness itself as the assurance of being forgiven.

summary

Only God knows how individuals will fare on the day of Judgement. Such matters are no proper concern of ours. 'Vengeance is mine, ' says the Lord, 'I will repay' (Rom 12:19). Yet we have every reason to believe that God will do what is right. Everyone has enough knowledge of God in order to seek after him but the general situation is that men do not, even though their consciences condemn them. Hence we are called to proclaim the gospel and urge that men and women be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:20). Certainly, those who have heard the gospel and rejected God's offer of forgiveness will be judged on a totally different basis from those who while remaining in substantial darkness earnestly seek the truth, confess their sins and cast themselves on the mercy of God.

why suffering?

a study guide on a recurring theme in dialogue

The Christian worldview has a great deal more to say about suffering than any other religion or philosophy. It gives substantial (albeit incomplete) answers to our questions. The Bible is a practical book, not satisfying our idle intellectual curiosity (Mt 11:25) but giving us enough information to live by. Certain truths seem clear:

- ▶ God is good and everything he created was 'very good'.
Ps 100:5; Mt 5:48; Gn 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31.
- ▶ God whose nature is love (1 Jn 4:8) made man in his own image, capable of responding to his love or rejecting it. Man is not a programmed machine, but was created with a free will.
Gn 1:26,27.
- ▶ Man's deliberate disobedience caused evil to be set loose in the world.
Gn 3:1-19; Rom 5:12.
- ▶ The fall affected every part of our nature, including the mind, conscience and free will.
2 Cor 4:2-4; Tit 1:15; Rom 7:15-24.
- ▶ The vast majority of the world's suffering is directly or indirectly due to man.
- ▶ Some suffering is due just to the way the world is. So Jesus tells us not to lay up treasures on earth 'where moth and rust corrupt'. Presumably, the dietary habits of moths and the oxidation of iron are morally neutral in themselves, as opposed to the thieves who 'break in and steal' (Mt 6:19).
- ▶ However, the whole creation was affected by the fall.
Gn 3:17,18; Rom 8:20-22.
- ▶ There are spiritual forces of wickedness 'in high places'.
Gn 3:1; Rev 20:2; Eph 6:12.
- ▶ No one is innocent. Mk10:18; Rom 3:23.
- ▶ Our suffering is not directly related to our sins. Lk 13:2-5.
- ▶ Judgement can begin now. Acts 5:4,5; Rom 1:18ff.
- ▶ God will eventually wipe out evil, but delays judgement out of mercy. 2 Pet 3:9.
- ▶ Out of his love, the Judge has become the Rescuer. Jn 3:16.
- ▶ He drank the cup of suffering to the dregs in order to save us.
Is 53:3ff; Mt 26:38; Lk 22:44; Mt 27:46.
- ▶ He is calling out a mighty army of disciples to do battle with evil and suffering wherever they find it. Mt 25:31-46; Jn 17:18.
- ▶ God has revealed all that we need to know (Jn 20:31) but not everything we might like to know. Mt 24:36; 1 Cor 13:12.
- ▶ One day suffering will end. Rev 21:1-5.

mysteries remain

They include 'the secret things' which 'belong to the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.' Dt 29:29.

further reading

1. Lewis CS. *The Problem of Pain*.

footnote

1. The question of suffering is not just an academic issue. The questioner may well have in mind some bitter personal experience - all the more reason to handle the subject 'with gentleness and respect' (1 Pet 3:15). It should be possible in any attempted answer to bring the discussion to central issues of the gospel in the death and resurrection of Christ.

won't a good moral life get me to heaven?

In a recent television interview Peter Ustinov, the famous actor, was asked for his 'doctrine of man'. He gave the reply 'Man is essentially good!' and was rewarded with sustained applause from the audience. Even among those who believe in the reality of heaven and hell, the popular conception is that the latter is reserved only for arch villains like Stalin, Hitler or Genghis Khan - perhaps along with a handful of gang rapists and serial killers. Most people, however, are thought good enough to pass the test. This sort of thinking is widespread but totally at odds with the Christian gospel.

Our acceptance by God does not depend on our goodness, but rather on his mercy (Lk 18:9-14; Tit 3:5). In answering the question 'Won't a good moral life get me to heaven?' we need to assert the following:

the reality of judgement

The Bible teaches that death leads not to extinction of perception, not to reincarnation, not to a disembodied existence of the soul - but rather to judgement (Heb 9:27). At this point there is a separation between those who are consigned to Hell, and those who are to receive resurrected bodies (Phil 13:2; 1 Cor 15:35-56; 2 Cor 5:1-9) and join Christ as his subjects in a new heaven and earth (Is 65:17-25; Is 66:22-24; Rev 21:1-5). Any who doubt the reality of Heaven and Hell should be reminded that this is the teaching of Jesus Christ himself and his apostles (Mt 10:28, 11:20-24, 13:37-43, 47-50; 25:31-46; Jn 5:22-30; 2 Thes 1:7-10; Rev 20:11-15).

the necessary pass-mark of perfection

God's standard is not that we be better than others, but rather that we be perfect (Mt 5:48). To stumble at just one point is to fail completely (Jas 2:10). Furthermore in God's eyes bad thoughts are no less evil than bad actions - lust is equivalent to adultery (Mt 5:27,28) and anger to murder (Mt 5:21,22). As we become conscious of God's real standards, it becomes apparent that even the morally upright fall short of them (Rom 3:20) - as the examples of the apostle Paul (Phil 3:4-7) and the Rich Young Ruler (Mt 19:16-30; Mk 10:17-30; Lk 18:18-30) clearly demonstrate.

the universality of sin

With this standard in mind it is clear that there is no one 'who does what is right and never sins' (Ec 7:20). To the contrary all have fallen short (Rom 3:9-12, 23; Ps 14:2-3, 53:2-3). Even our good deeds are bad in God's sight (Is 64:6). Since we cannot save ourselves it follows that our only hope is to be rescued by God (Mt 19:25-26).

the perfection of Christ

By contrast with man, the sinlessness of Christ is taught in the Bible as an established fact (Is 53:9; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 Jn 3:5). He can confidently challenge his accusers to find fault 'can any of you prove me guilty of sin?' (Jn 8:46). He is therefore the only way to God (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5).

salvation only by faith

Eternal life therefore cannot be gained by our own efforts. It is a free gift of God which must be received by faith (trusting belief) in Christ (Rom 1:17; 3:22; 6:23; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8,9; Phil 3:9; Tit 3:3-6; Heb 11:6). If we could achieve it by our own efforts, it would not have been necessary for Christ to give his perfect life on our behalf (Gal 2:21).

summary

A good moral life cannot get us to heaven. It is not good people who go to heaven, for no one is good enough. Good people (those who think they are good enough) go to hell. Bad people (those who realise they fall short of God's standards and look to his mercy) go to heaven if they put their faith in Christ (Jn 3:16, 5:24).

turning questions around

Once we begin to master answers to the difficult questions evangelism becomes much more fun! But is easy to get carried away in debate and end up losing sight of our real goal. Our aim is not to win arguments but people. We need to urge our friends to get right with God (2 Cor 5:20).

Most of the seven deadly questions can be 'turned around' to bring Jesus back to centre stage. After all, he is our message (1 Cor 1:23). We should aim to make acceptance or rejection of Jesus and his teaching the real issue in every question. Here are some examples of how to do it:

1. why does God allow suffering?

'The issue of suffering is a tough one - but ultimately God is going to put an end to all suffering by creating a new heaven and new earth. However, before this happens, Jesus must return to judge. When he does it will be too late for anyone to change sides, and this is why God delays. He doesn't want to end it all before everyone has had a chance to repent. Perhaps you are one of the very people he is waiting for. Don't you think it's time you did something about it?' (2 Thes 1:8-10; 2 Pet 3:9)

2. how can Christ be the only way to God?

'You've got to realise that Christianity and the other religions are mutually exclusive. No more than one of them can be true. If Christ really is who he claimed to be then all the other religions, regardless of how true they might seem, are wrong. There is no other option. I believe that Christ is the only way - because that's what he himself said - and because I believe on the evidence of his life, death and resurrection that Jesus Christ is God. Who do you think he was?' (Jn 3:16-18)

3. isn't the Bible full of errors?

'Jesus believed the Bible. He put his stamp of authority on the Old Testament (by believing its history and prophecy, by using it as the final court of appeal in debates and by obeying its teaching) and he commissioned the writing of the New Testament. I accept his judgement on the matter - and I haven't yet heard any arguments that have convinced me otherwise. If you know any I'd be fascinated to hear them - and also to know why you doubt Christ's word yourself.' (2 Tim 3:16,17)

4. isn't Christian experience only psychological?

'I am a Christian because I believe that Jesus Christ is God. And I believe that on the basis of the evidence of his life, death and resurrection. Psychology has nothing to do with it. However, I'm beginning to wonder if there might be a psychological reason for you choosing not to believe it! Would it be fair to say that if you started believing in Christ certain things in your life might have to change?' (Rom 1:18-20)

5. how can miracles happen?

'If we can accept that God exists and could become a man then such things as virgin births, turning water into wine, healing the sick and raising the dead would pose no problem at all. I believe on the basis of Jesus' claims, life, death and resurrection that he was God in human flesh. I can't explain the facts of his life in any other way. I'd be fascinated to know how you explain them.' (1 Jn 4:2,3)

6. what happens to those who have never heard?

'This is a difficult question but at the end of the day it's God's problem, not ours. He is the judge, and his decision will be fair, just and final. But I do need to emphasise that the Bible is very clear about what happens to those who have heard the gospel and have chosen not to believe it - and I think that's the category of people that you're in, isn't it? What about you?' (Rom 1:20)

7. won't a good moral life get me to heaven

'Yes, a good moral life will get you to heaven, but there's a catch. It has to be as good as Jesus' life to reach the required standard. Christians do not believe they are good people. Rather they recognise that they are bad and that their only hope is to receive God's mercy and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. As a Christian that's my personal position. How about you? Do you think you measure up?' (Rom 3:23, 6:23)

going for the jugular

If you sense the person may be close to a decision, don't hesitate to go for the jugular! The following questions can provide a good way in:

1. Have you ever considered becoming a Christian? (Yes - go to 2; No - ask 'why not?')
2. Are you there yet or are you still on the way? (If 'still on the way' go to 3)
3. How far along the way are you? (Deliberately open-ended)
4. What do you think is stopping you going further? (May indicate the key issue blocking faith)
5. Do you want to become a Christian? (Yes - go to 6, No - ask 'why not?')
6. Are you ready to become a Christian? (Yes - go to 7, No - ask 'why not?')
7. Would you like to become a Christian right now? (Yes - go to 8, No - ask 'why not?')
8. Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead?
9. Do you believe that he died for you personally - for your sins?
10. Would you like to pray right now to make him your Lord and Master?

sinner's' prayer

Dear Lord God, I realise that I have been running my own life my own way and have not acknowledged you as my rightful master. When I look at your standards, I am ashamed of many things in my life. Please forgive me for being such a rebel. I come to you now in humble surrender. Thank you for taking the punishment my self-centredness deserves. Thank you for dying on the cross in my place. Thank you for forgiving me for the wrong things I have done. Thank you for rising again to give me eternal life.

I know I can't live up to your standards in my own strength. Please come into my life and change me. Please give me your Holy Spirit to be with me forever. Please get to work inside me, alerting me to my selfish thoughts. Please show me how you want me to change and give me a deep desire to love and obey you. Stir me into action that I might love and care for others as I set out to follow your example.

Thank you for your promise that you will never leave me, and that you will take me to be with you forever when I die. Thank you for giving me through your Spirit the power to change, so that I can become the sort of person you want me to be. Thank you for my new brothers and sisters in Christ to help me along the way.

I acknowledge you as my new Master, and now commit myself to serving you, alongside other Christians, whatever the cost may be, all the remaining days of my life. Amen.

the Engel scale

Many people today, like the philosophers at Athens, are miles away in their thinking and their behaviour. A short presentation of the gospel may be the first they have ever learned about Jesus. If they are to come to trust him, they will need to learn much more. Hopefully they will read the gospels for themselves and will probably have to wrestle with many questions and issues. The seed is sown but may even take years to come to fruition. The *Church Growth Movement* has popularised the 'Engel Scale' which helps us to understand the different positions members of our audience may be in and how the gospel may affect them prior to converting them.

- 10 - Awareness of the supernatural
- 9 - No effective knowledge of Christianity
- 8 - Initial awareness of Christianity
- 7 - Interest in Christianity
- 6 - Awareness of the basic facts of the gospel
- 5 - Grasp of implications of the gospel
- 4 - Positive attitude to the gospel
- 3 - Awareness of personal implications
- 2 - Challenge and decision to act
- 1 - Repentance and faith
- 0 - Regeneration

How you describe the stages is not the point. Some such evolving sequence happens to everyone who becomes a Christian. Some people have no idea about the Christian Faith and may perhaps be committed to some other creed. Others have imbibed Christianity from their earliest days but have never clearly understood the significance of Christ's death or the response that they are personally required to make. Others again will have specific misunderstandings or doubts that need to be addressed before they can see the issues clearly. It may be a tremendous achievement to bring an atheist through to open agnosticism (perhaps from 11 to 7), or an agnostic through to grasp the implications of the gospel (say 9 to 5). In neither case have they been converted but their understanding has leapt forward.

Neither must we rush people into the Kingdom of God as if our pressurising can manipulate the power of God in their lives. Our task is to sow the seed and leave him who nourishes the hidden seed to bring it to fruition in due time.

what is successful evangelism?

Given that the gospel itself is God's powerful agent in evangelism through which he reveals himself (Rom 1:16,17), and given that it is in the mind of God to whom he chooses to reveal himself (Matt 11:27), we then have the right framework to discuss what constitutes success in evangelism.

Without this perspective on the sovereignty of God and the gospel as his chosen means of bringing people under his kingly rule, we will be liable to see success in terms of head counts and look for power in evangelism in all the wrong places - in fact anything other than the gospel itself.

So evangelists will whip up emotions, raise the tone of their voices, bring on the soft background music, claim miraculous healings, spend whole nights in prayer, and concentrate on techniques in bringing people to the point of decision. Of course people can be converted in the context of all these things, but their conversion still depends on them hearing the gospel. Faith comes by hearing (Rom 10:17), and what people need to hear is actually the gospel itself.

three criteria for measuring success

1. non-Christians must be present

This rather basic thought actually calls the lie to many of our efforts in evangelism. Churches are often solely dependent for their outreach on non-Christian people attending their gospel services. Twenty-five years ago this may have been a reasonable approach and in ten years' time it might be worth relying on again, but today very few rank outsiders will darken the doors of our churches and then only for very special occasions.

It is the perpetual fear with all attempts at mass evangelism that over 95% of those present will be the faithful flock. We must therefore find methods where complete outsiders will be able to hear the gospel. Dialogue Supper Parties are one such method, Michael Wooderson's scheme 'Good News Down The Street' is another. Perhaps you can think of a third?

2. the gospel must be clearly and persuasively presented so that people can understand it

This of course addresses the evangelist and questions whether he can speak the same language as his audience, whether he is 'accurately handling the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15), whether he distorts the message perhaps to make it more palatable to his audience (2 Cor 4:2), whether he is gifted and able to 'argue persuasively about the Kingdom of God' (Acts 19:8).

This must not be an excuse for the rest of us to opt out and leave the work to such gifted evangelists! (gospel work would stop overnight!) Rather it is a challenge to all of us to be prayerfully critical of what we are doing, to work hard at the task before us and to learn from our mistakes. Some may be better evangelists than others, but we are all called to give a reason for the hope that is within us (1 Pet 3:15).

3. the atmosphere must be conducive to listening

If you have gone to the trouble of getting your unbelieving friends to attend, and found an evangelist who will faithfully and clearly proclaim the gospel, it is tragic if they cannot hear what he is saying. So a dialogue supper can be ruined by the rattle of washing-up going on in the next room, an open-air can be (and in my experience invariably is) ruined by the noise of the traffic and other events occurring nearby. Mass evangelism is ruined if the sound amplification isn't working. Our personal witness is ruined when we ourselves are the distraction. This may relate to personal mannerisms or bad breath, or more importantly to our lack of Christ-likeness. 'I cannot hear what you are saying because your life is shouting too loudly.'

If these three criteria are fulfilled - unbelievers are present and the gospel is clearly presented in an atmosphere which enables them to consider the issues carefully, then our work in evangelism has been done successfully irrespective of how many people become Christians! It is the work of God's Holy Spirit to cause people to be born again. We must do our allotted part in evangelism and wait prayerfully for God to do his part - to honour his Word as he chooses.

dialogue supper parties

One of the most effective methods of engaging in evangelism is to invite your friends round for a meal with the explicit purpose of having an after-supper discussion about Christianity. Ideally one or two Christians need to invite about a dozen of their uncommitted friends. An attractive and enjoyable meal is had by all. The dialogue leader has the opportunity to get to know the guests. Preferably everyone then retires to another room, leaving the washing-up well alone! Coffee is served and then the hosts invite the leader to start the discussion.

If it is well set up, the ensuing dialogue is usually good for a couple of hours during which time the gospel is well aired, its implications pursued and many objections and misunderstandings are discussed. The guests have a good opportunity to state and explore their views and even the persistently unconverted usually enjoy the evening thoroughly and are grateful for the opportunity to take part.

Problems arise from various sources

1. Lack of good friendships with non-Christians who would respond to such an invitation. It may be necessary to invite up to twenty people, for an adequate number of acceptances.
2. Invitations that are unclear as to the nature of the meeting.
3. Inviting people who have nothing in common with each other and are asking very different sorts of questions, so the group doesn't gel.
4. Too many Christians come, with consequent religious in-talk over the meal, and jargon during the dialogue. The fewer Christians the better! Non-Christians will feel more at ease if they sense they are in the majority.
5. Too much time spent over the meal, leaving people too tired or too late to get into the subject matter.
6. Too much alcohol (often brought by gracious guests!).
7. Guests insisting on washing up, or Christian friends doing it too loudly in the next room.
8. Inappropriate contributions from the Christian hosts who haven't grasped the principles of dialogue evangelism and fail to appreciate the experience, skills and 'apologetics' of the leader.
9. Failure to appreciate group dynamics, allowing the discussion to splinter.
10. Failure to put the guests at ease eg. by saying (or worse, singing!) 'grace', or by attacking guests for their views. The host who thumbs a big black Bible is particularly unnerving!

It should not surprise us that the best things we can do in evangelism require the most care and preparation.

Discuss the wording of the invitation with the dialogue leader. If the evening has been misrepresented, his job could be very difficult! A clear statement about the subject matter is essential and this must focus on the truth claims of the Christian faith, rather than its relevance. Put the focus on Jesus; not religion, the church or ethics.

Invitations need to be given personally (whether written or verbal) without expecting an immediate reply. People need time to consider whether they really want to come. Reluctant guests can make everyone feel awkward. However, they must eventually be pressed for a definite decision. If things are left on the understanding that they 'will try to come' many will take the easy way out on the night. It is not unreasonable to expect a definite reply for catering purposes and guests will usually appreciate that. Furthermore an invitation that sounds vague will convey the impression that not much effort is being made and the meal may not be worth having.

Men are more likely to respond to an invitation from another man, rather than a female. Many men think religion is 'for the birds'.

Think through your policy on alcohol in advance. Will your friends be likely to bring a bottle? Will they feel ill at ease having a nice meal without a glass of wine? Can you provide alcohol free drinks (including beer and wine) for the stated benefit of clear-headed discussion? Avoid pre-dinner drinks (time is also against this) and keep careful control of the corkscrew. Provide attractive non-alcoholic options.

An experienced dialogue leader will know how to handle the discussion. He will start with a short summary of the gospel put across in terms of 'this is what Christians believe - let's discuss it', rather than 'this is what you should believe'. The questions and discussion are likely to flow easily after a short while. Patience for silent reflection is often necessary at first but if it is too prolonged the host might offer the first question. Make sure that it is a basic question that flows from the gospel summary and that non-Christians are likely to be wanting to ask. A question about the slaughter of the Canaanites at this stage will be unhelpful! Don't argue with the leader, even if you disagree with him. He has enough problems without the Christians turning on him!

Plan the timing and preferred method of ending the discussion. Some leaders like to 'bring the threads together' but others not. Most would want to recommend further reading. Some prefer to let it end naturally and open-endedly, perhaps even on a downbeat. However, it is nice to finish with a well-timed cup of coffee. Have it ready!

Thought also needs to be given to follow-up and the possibility of offering a 'Bible study' discussion on another occasion. One of the natural advantages of these groups is that the folk invited are friends with whom you have regular contact. Individual follow-up should therefore be fairly easy.

recommended reading

evangelism

Know and Tell the gospel - John C Chapman - Hodder & Stoughton

Evangelism - Now and Then - Michael Green - IVP

How To Give Away Your Faith - Paul Little - IVP

Explaining Your Faith without losing your friends - Alister McGrath - IVP

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God - J I Packer - IVP

Out of the Saltshaker - Rebecca Pippert - IVP

Evangelism Without Sounding Spiritual - Rebecca Pippert - Marc

apologetics

The Evidence for the Resurrection - Norman Anderson - IVP

Is the New Testament History? - Paul Barnett - Hodder & Stoughton

The Historical Reliability of the gospels - Graig Blomberg - IVP

Christianity on Trial - Colin Chapman - Lion

Introducing Jesus - Roy Clements - Kingsway

Thinking about Faith - David Cook - IVP

Blind Alley Beliefs - David Cook - Pickering & Inglis

The Evidence for Jesus - R T France - Hodder & Stoughton

What about other Faiths - Martin Goldsmith - Hodder & Stoughton

Ten Myths about Christianity - M Green & G Carkner - Lion

World on the Run - Michael Green - Hodder & Stoughton

You Must Be Joking - Michael Green - Hodder & Stoughton

Mere Christianity - C S Lewis - Fontana

Know Why You Believe - Paul Little - Scripture Union

Evidence that Demands a Verdict - Josh McDowell - Campus Crusade

More Evidence that Demands a Verdict - Josh McDowell - Campus Crusade

Christianity - A Ready Defence - Josh McDowell - Scripture Press

He Walked Among Us - J McDowell & B Wilson - Scripture Press

Bridge Building - Effective Christian Apologetics - Alister McGrath - IVP

Disarming the Secular Gods - Peter Moore - IVP

The God Who is There - Francis Schaeffer - Hodder & Stoughton

What's the Point? - Norman Warren - Lion

Why we can't believe - Paul Weston - IVP Frameworks

The Case against Christ - John Young - Hodder & Stoughton

Jesus The Verdict - John Young - Lion

follow up options

If you would like to get involved in dialogue evangelism discuss the various possibilities with other Christian leaders in your medical school. Review your programme, and pray through the implications.

Dr Mark Pickering at the CMF office in London will advise you about the possibility of arranging a training conference for your CU. How many of your group could you manage to get there?

What do you think of the booklet? Would you like to distribute them, and how? What about a 'talk-back'?

How many dialogue suppers could your group arrange? Can they be arranged sporadically in an on-going, low-profile way as a major strategy for your evangelism? (eg. 2 or 3 per term)

What other openings are there? (eg. dialogue fresher events, Easter dialogues on the subject of the Resurrection, etc)

When you have got some idea of what you would like to do, you may like to contact Mark Pickering directly and see if he can help or advise:

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Fax: 020 7620 2453

Email: mark.pickering@cmf.org.uk / info@cmf.org.uk

Website: www.cmf.org.uk

The confident christianity lectures are available on video/dvd. Enquiries to the CMF office at the address above. Supplies of the posters and the booklet are obtainable from the office at a very reasonable rate.

remember

'Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.' Ps 127:1

