

## Do not rely on extra-biblical, intellectual arguments.<sup>1</sup>

***It is impossible to convince a man to believe by simply addressing all of his intellectual objections.***

During the past century, the evangelical church has drifted from a reliance on the gospel itself, and has increased its dependence on the use of extra-biblical, intellectual arguments in order to “convince people to become Christians.” When I first came to Christ in the late 1970’s, I enjoyed reading a book by Paul Little entitled, “How to Give Away Your Faith.” This book, like many similar books, presents logical arguments that support various Christian beliefs. Examples of these beliefs include the infallibility of the Bible, the existence of God and the deity of Christ. In his book, Paul Little taught that we should use these arguments to address intellectual objections to the gospel message. So, I learned some of these and used them at times when discussing the gospel with unbelievers. One of my favorites states that Jesus could only be one of the following:

- the Son of God
- a liar
- a lunatic
- a legend

This argument states that there can be no other logical possibility. For example, He could not have merely been a good man because a good man does not claim to be the Son of God if he is just a man. If He were merely a man, then stating such a claim would make him either a lunatic or a liar. Either way, He would not qualify as a good man.

While I enjoy reading such logical arguments and would never discourage others from doing the same, I believe that dependence on them in evangelistic outreach is unfounded, biblically speaking. In fact, Paul would say that to do so makes the cross “empty of its power.” (See I Corinthians 1:17.) Please consider some observations from the Bible and ask yourself if perhaps you might be wrongly relying on the use of extra-biblical, intellectual arguments in order to “convince people to become Christians.”

As we already observed from Luke’s testimony in Acts, Paul “reasoned” with his hearers. Please understand that I am not suggesting that we abandon the biblical practice of reasoning with people. As you study the Bible, ask yourself, “What did the Apostle Paul, Jesus and the other disciples reason with their hearers about?” Was their reasoning designed to address intellectual objections raised by the hearer? Were they debating the existence of God? Were they debating the authenticity of the Scripture? Were they using extra-biblical, intellectual arguments to prove that Jesus was God come in the flesh? By examining the biblical record, you will see that they were not doing any of these things.

Some have suggested that Paul used extra-biblical arguments in his short sermon at Athens (Acts 17). I suggest that upon closer investigation, you will see that he merely used extra-biblical data to gain the attention of his hearers, not debate or convince them. Once he had their attention, Paul immediately shifted the attention to gospel truth that was aimed at the heart, not the intellect. It is noteworthy that he did not debate the existence of the One True and Living God with the polytheists in the crowd. He merely stated as fact that He is the Creator and that, as His creatures, all people are accountable to Him and should therefore **REPENT**. Then he said that God has appointed a man (Jesus) to **judge the world in righteousness** and proved it by **raising Him from the dead**. (Acts 17:22-31.)

Paul did not rely on intellectual arguments in his preaching. He relied on the biblical truth calculated to impact the heart. This is in keeping with his testimony, “*My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God*” (I Corinthians 2:4-5 NKJV). Rather than depend on carefully crafted arguments to persuade men intellectually, he stuck with the gospel itself that he referred to as, “**the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.**” (See Romans 1:16.) He obviously knew that many people would think of him as an intellectual fool for preaching the gospel because he also said, “*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*” (I Corinthians 1:18 NKJV).

Paul was an intellectual giant in his day. Yet, when we study the book of Acts and Paul’s epistles, we see that Paul resisted the use of his superior knowledge to debate with people merely on an intellectual level. Rather, he reasoned with people about the same types of things that Jesus reasoned with them about. The Bible says that Paul reasoned with people “from the scriptures” (Acts 17:2). I cannot find any examples of Paul relying on extra-biblical, intellectual arguments designed to “convince people to become Christians.”

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<sup>1</sup> In this book, “extra-biblical arguments” are defined as arguments not contained in the Bible that are designed to provide intellectual reasons that support various Christian beliefs. Many people call these intellectual arguments “apologetics.” Examples of these beliefs include the infallibility of the Bible, the existence of God, the deity of Christ, etc. Such beliefs are taught by the Bible but some people use intellectual arguments based upon logic in an attempt to prove to people that these things are true. Since the arguments themselves are not contained in the Bible, I classify them as “extra-biblical.”

Why do so many Christians rely so much on the use of extra-biblical, intellectual arguments in their evangelistic outreach? Perhaps they falsely think that if they can somehow convince people that their intellectual objections are unfounded, nothing will prevent them from making a decision to start following Christ.

I have heard some people use I Peter 3:15 to support the use of extra-biblical, intellectual arguments in evangelistic outreach. *"Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you."* The word "answer" is used to translate the Greek word "apologia." In this verse, Peter refers to that which produces hope in us. What is it that produces hope in the believer? Is it a series of intellectual arguments that justify our position?

### ***Be Ready to Give an Answer.***

It is clear that Peter instructed Christians to be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks him the reason of the hope that is in him. Perhaps because they are not experiencing persecution, many Christians misunderstand what type of answer Peter had in mind and how it should be provided. Most Christians think that if they are to fulfill Peter's instructions, they must learn various intellectual arguments aimed at convincing people that God exists, or that Jesus rose from the dead, or that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, or other such things. This is not at all what Peter had in mind. Let us consider I Peter 3:15 along with other scriptures to determine how we should understand him properly.

*"Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, always being ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (I Peter 3:15).* (sanctify means to set apart)

To begin, it should be noted that in order to fulfill this instruction, we must first "set apart the Lord God in our heart." This is the essential prerequisite and in fact the only way we can "be ready" to give an answer. Notice Peter does not say, "First, learn intellectual arguments so that you will be ready to give an answer." No, he instructs us to do something spiritual— "Sanctify (set apart) the Lord God in your heart." It is not an intellectual preparing but a spiritual preparing that is specified by the phrase "sanctify the Lord God in your heart."

This indicates a cause-and-effect relationship. If we do not first "set apart the Lord God in our heart," then we simply won't be ready to give an answer. But if we do set apart the Lord God in our heart, we will be ready to give an answer.

So, what does it mean to set apart the Lord God in our heart? I suggest it can also be stated, *"I beseech you brethren through the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this age, but transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you might prove what is the good and pleasing and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1-2).* It means total surrender with nothing held back. After all, Jesus is Lord, the ruler and He owns me. I don't have a right to direct my life because it is now His. I am bought with the price of Jesus' blood. Unless and until this surrender is a reality in the life of a Christian, he will not experience what it means to walk in the Spirit. If not fully surrendered, his spiritual experience with Christ will be dysfunctional. In this condition, he will not be spiritually prepared to give an answer about the hope that is within him. In fact, that hope will be dim because the experience of Jesus living in him will be difficult to discern by him.

The true Christian life requires total surrender with nothing held back. (*"Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it"* Luke 17:33.) In this condition, the Spirit has free reign, and the Christian is empowered by God's grace to walk in the Spirit and fulfill His good pleasure. As he walks in the Spirit, he experiences the reality of Jesus living in him. In this condition, he experiences the hope of eternal life. *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."* (See Colossians 1:27.) His hope is not generated from head knowledge. A man can know all the creeds and intellectually agree with all the doctrines of the Christian faith and yet not possess hope. Hope comes only when a man's experience is in harmony with his doctrine. Without his experience being in complete harmony with his doctrine, he really cannot possess hope and therefore cannot fulfill Peter's instruction. This is why Peter begins by saying, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts."

With all these things in mind, let us now consider the nature of the answer we are to give for the hope that is in us. Before doing so, let me address a common misconception relating to the Greek word "apologia" that Peter used when he said, "be ready to give an answer." The Greek word apologia can mean "a defense" or "an answer." The KJV translates it *answer* while the NASB translates it *defense*. Many Christians mistakenly think that I Peter 3:15 teaches we must be ready to effectively debate those who argue against the tenants of the Christian faith. In other words, we should be ready to prove that what we believe is intellectually reasonable and logical. This is not what Peter is saying. He says, "Be ready always to give an answer to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you." Our answer, or "defense," is in response to someone who asks us a reason for the hope that is in us. Our answer is NOT in response to the skeptic who asks, "Why do you believe such an absurd thing?" Peter is indicating that the question being asked is coming from a person who is sincerely wondering why we have hope.

It MUST be noted that a major theme in Peter's first epistle is the **suffering** that Christians endure because they follow Jesus. The recipients of his letter were often threatened with death and had undergone much persecution. As the unbelievers observed the Christians suffering, they took notice that they seemed to have hope in spite of all the mistreatment and suffering. This

undoubtedly caused some to ask Christians the reason for their hope. It didn't make sense to them that they willingly endured so much suffering. Why did they have hope?

What is the basis for a Christian's hope? Is it because there is strong intellectual evidence that God exists? Is it because there is strong intellectual evidence that Jesus rose from the dead? Is it because there is strong intellectual evidence that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God that He has faithfully preserved? I believe that there is strong evidence for all these things but the evidence, though intellectually convincing, **cannot produce hope!** If a man's hope is based solely on such evidence, then his hope has no depth and if faced with the threat of severe persecution and death, it will evaporate. The hope that Peter is talking about is the sure promise of God itself (the Gospel) and the reality of it being lived out in us (*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*)

Therefore, if a Christian stoops to debating by using intellectual arguments that he believes prove things like the existence of God, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, etc., he is failing to fulfill Peter's instructions in I Peter 3:15. Instead of doing this, he should proclaim the Gospel itself for this is the objective reason for the hope that is in him. He can also testify about the reality of Jesus living in him which is evidenced by a completely changed life. These things answer anyone who sincerely asks a reason for the hope that is in the Christian.

When we understand this properly, then we realize why there is no record in the New Testament of any Christian leaders making intellectual arguments in order to prove that God exists, or that Jesus rose from the dead, or that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, or other such things. On the contrary, we see an excellent example of how Paul fulfilled Peter's instruction when we read the book of Romans. This is a letter he wrote to people he had not met. In it, he gave a very detailed answer for the hope that was in him. Being a lawyer, he did so in such a way that it truly qualifies as "a defense" for the hope that was within him. He did not give evidence for the existence of God. He merely stated it. He did not sight evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. He merely stated it. He did not give evidence that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, he merely quoted it as if it is indeed God's Word. He did not try to prove that Jesus was God incarnate. He simply proclaimed it.

The book of Romans contains the message Paul proclaimed wherever he went. Its content is in harmony with Paul's testimony from his first epistle to the Corinthians.

*"Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect" (I Corinthians 1:17 NKJV).*

*"My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:4-5 NKJV).*

Paul did not debate the Gospel. Rather, he proclaimed it. As he did in his epistle to the Romans, Paul publicly reasoned with people about the same things hoping they would hear and believe. Whenever they refused to receive it, he would not debate with them. Rather, he warned them, and then left them, and went to find other people who would hear and believe. Below is just one example Luke gives in Acts of Paul doing this. There are several others.

*But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:45-46 NASB).*

Luke records how Paul ministered the Gospel and thus fulfilled Peter's instruction.

*And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" (Acts 17:2-3 NASB).*

Paul was fulfilling Peter's instruction. He was giving an answer (making a defense) for the hope that was in him. The hearers in this case included some Jews and also some Gentiles that had been exposed to the Jewish Scriptures. The recipients already believed in the existence of God and believed the Scriptures were God's authoritative Word. But many of them did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah or that He rose from the dead. So, Paul reasoned with them **FROM THE SCRIPTURES** giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer (as a substitute sacrifice for sins) and rise from the dead. To make his case, he did not merely read passages like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. He reasoned with them from the Scriptures to demonstrate WHY the Christ had to suffer as the substitute sacrifice for sins. This is exactly what Paul does in Romans chapters 1 – 3.

The reason why the Christ had to suffer is that sinful man is alienated from the Holy God, condemned and headed for eternal punishment. God, being perfectly righteous cannot let the guilty go unpunished. The sin had to be punished. If people come to the judgment with their sins, God has no choice but to send them to hell forever because He cannot simply excuse sin. Sinful man can do nothing to make himself acceptable to God. But God provided a way of salvation by sending His own Son to take the punishment we deserve. This is why the Christ had to suffer. There could be no other way of salvation. Since Jesus did come and complete His work, there is salvation and therefore hope that is based upon the sure promise of God. Paul's message gives the hearer the solid reason for the hope within him.

Seeing that there is no biblical record of leaders trying to convince people that God exists, or that Jesus rose from the dead, or that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, or other such things, why do some Christians insist we need to do it? Perhaps they do not fully embrace the fact that the gospel must be believed from the heart.

Maybe the problem is that they do not consistently engage in evangelism. Then, when they do engage in it, they typically find themselves talking with a skeptic. Rather than just warn the skeptic and walk away as Paul did, they sense a responsibility to continue the dialog since they don't often find themselves engaged in evangelism. Perhaps if they engaged in it much more, they would realize that instead of talking with the skeptics, it is far more productive to warn and leave them and then seek out those whom God has prepared to hear the Gospel and concentrate on proclaiming the Gospel to them.

Maybe the reason is a defective theology. For example, many Christians hold to theology that teaches unregenerate man has the power within himself to seek God. Since in their minds, man has this power, it behooves the evangelist to do everything in his power to intellectually convince the unregenerate man to seek God by offering all sorts of logical evidence for things like the existence of God, the integrity of the scripture and Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They think that if the unregenerate man can be convinced of things like this, then he will more likely decide (on his own) to become a Christian.

Someone might ask, "Why am I making such a big fuss over all this anyway? Does it matter that much if a Christian makes efforts to provide historical, logical or scientific evidence for things like the existence of God, etc?" I make a fuss over this because I think the Apostle Paul would make a fuss over it. He said to the Corinthians:

*"My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5 NKJV).*

Paul also thought that if he resorted to using "wisdom of words," the cross of Christ would be made of no effect. (See 1 Corinthians 1:17.) I have watched public debates between Christian apologists and leaders of other religions or atheists. Generally, those who attend are already set in their thinking. Spectators from both sides usually go away thinking their side won the debate. The worst thing is that many go away thinking that two different views were presented, and each view had some merit. This is not how the Gospel should be represented. It is not just another possible viewpoint. It is the only way of salvation, and no other view should be given any credence whatsoever. Engaging in such a debate automatically gives the opposing view some credence. As a result, the cross of Jesus is made to appear less than what it is. It is emptied of its power in the eyes of many who watched. THE GOSPEL IS NOT TO BE DEBATED! The Apostle Paul refused to do so and so should we. It is the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us represent it as if it is truly the only way of salvation purchased by the precious blood of Jesus.

Let us do as Peter instructed us in 1 Peter 3:15 but let us do so in accordance with the biblical pattern and with the full authority given us by Christ. Let us therefore set apart the Lord God in our hearts so there is nothing held back whatsoever.

Unless we set apart the Lord God in our hearts, our hope will be dim. To unbelievers, we will appear like everyone else, living our lives as if there is no God and no future hope. But if we set apart the Lord God in our hearts, the Gospel will continually be in our hearts and minds, and unbelievers that come in contact with us will notice something different about us. Our hope will be evident. Unbelievers will occasionally ask us a reason for the hope that is in us. When they do, we will have the privilege of proclaiming the same glorious truths that Paul recorded for us in the book of Romans.

***Let us preach the gospel, not debate it.***

Please understand that I am not saying that it is wrong to learn apologetic arguments. In fact, I would recommend that Christians read books that contain them. I think that such arguments have their basis in logic and as such can be employed in our meditations about God, Jesus and His wonderful Word to us. Yet, I think that many Christians have fallen into the habit of wrongly relying on the use of these extra-biblical, intellectual arguments as if they form a biblical basis for evangelistic outreach. It is impossible to convince a man to believe by simply addressing all of his intellectual objections.

The key element of evangelizing the lost is not the use of extra-biblical, intellectual arguments but rather, the communication of the gospel in such a way that the listener gains a mental understanding of its relevance so that it leaves an impression on his heart. As long as the listener understands our language, this can be accomplished regardless of his background, because all people have the same need! They are all sinners that have a false comprehension of their condition before God. If the listener gains a mental comprehension of the gospel in such a way that his heart is impacted, God is then able to regenerate him whenever He decides because the gospel is the supernatural seed of God. *"Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of God" (Romans 10:17).* When we reason with people, let us use the biblical record as the foundation to demonstrate how God has poured out His mercy by coming to earth as a blood sacrifice who would bear the punishment people deserve in such a way that His righteous demands were fully satisfied.

***Avoid arguing with unbelievers about their pet points.***

Normally, unbelievers do not want to talk about the truth. They usually try to avoid it. *“Each one that practices evil hates the Light and is not coming to the Light lest his deeds be exposed.” (John 3:20).* If unbelievers don’t want to be entirely rude by slamming the door in our faces, they will try and deflect the discussion away from the gospel by citing their own talking points. The woman at the well did this during her conversation with Jesus when she tried to suggest that “she had her religion.” (She was a Samaritan and Jesus was speaking from the standpoint of a Jew.) To deflect the argument, she tried to imply that since she was not a Jew, the things Jesus was saying did not apply to her. Rather than debate her, Jesus simply quoted truth from the Scripture as the final word.

Muslims will try to deflect the conversation by saying they don’t believe Jesus died or that the Bible cannot be trusted. It does not matter what they believe intellectually. Our approach should be the same as that of Jesus and His apostles. We should point them right back to the truth, fully believing in our hearts that the Bible is God’s Word, and that Jesus did indeed die because man is guilty and has no way of paying the price required for all his sin.

Because we are fully convinced of these things, we don’t have to feel as if it is our job to defend our position. Rather, we can come right back to the subjects that they don’t want to face: their sin, God’s righteousness and their just condemnation. After they understand what the Bible says about their predicament, we can reason with them about gospel truth. For example, we can get them to mentally agree that if the Almighty God did indeed come to earth in order to sacrificially die in their place, such an act would be a powerful demonstration of His love for them personally. So, even if they refuse to believe the truth, we can reason with them about it in order to convey gospel truth.