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## PRESENTING THE GOSPEL TO THOSE WHO REJECT SCRIPTURE

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**Abstract:** Presenting the Gospel is fairly straightforward when your audience consists of those who know and accept Scripture, but even in the U.S. many do not fall into this category. Some who accept (but don't know) Scripture won't believe your message without careful study on their own, and even then they may well be inclined to reject the testimony of Scripture rather than believe what it says about themselves. But Paul has left us an example of being all things to all men, that he might by all means save some. When he spoke to those who knew Scripture, he used Scripture. When he spoke to those who did not, he didn't use Scripture. How can we present the Gospel in a believable way to those who do not view the Bible as God's Word?

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Much of the evangelistic activity of the Christian church today is particularly in the U.S. is centered on presenting the Gospel to those who already know and accept Scripture. At least this is the impression one gets from the popular evangelistic methods currently in use.

Consider the "Four Spiritual Laws" booklet distributed by Campus Crusade.<sup>2</sup> This popular sixteen-page booklet presents the Gospel in a series of four laws, followed by an invitation to receive Christ. If a profession is made, the materials provided at the end of the booklet give the person assurance and get him or her started in growth. Each of the four laws is supported by two to four brief Scripture citations. Bible quotations are also given for the material on assurance and discipleship.

Another popular Gospel presentation is that used by Evangelism Explosion and briefly summarized in the booklet "Do You Know for Sure?"<sup>3</sup> To answer the question why God should let you into his heaven, the tract responds, "Did you know that the Bible tells you how you can KNOW FOR SURE that you have eternal life and will go to be with God in heaven?" Each of the five following points is buttressed by one to four Scripture quotations. As with the "Four Spiritual Laws," short Biblical quotations are given for the sections on commitment, assurance and Christian growth. Thus both these presentations assume that the reader accepts the Bible as God's Word.

## Belief in Bible

U.S. Population

Legend

 God's Inerrant Word



This is not unreasonable when one considers that an unusually large fraction of the U.S. population says it believes the Bible is God's Word. The Gallup publication *Religion in America* found 72% of the U.S. population making such an affirmation in a poll taken in 1984.<sup>4</sup>

Yet many of these do not know what the Bible says, since their acquaintance with Scripture is only piecemeal and at second hand, perhaps from very unreliable sources. A similar poll in 1982 showed that, while 70% knew where Jesus had been born (which every Christmas pageant tells us), only 46% could name all four Gospels and only 42% knew who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this widespread ignorance, we praise God that some of these will accept the Gospel when we tell them what it says. There are probably many thousands in the U.S. and millions throughout the world who have never clearly heard God's offer of free pardon, who yet by his grace will make an immediate decision when they do hear it.

Others will not accept immediately perhaps due to the large variety of religions in the world today, or to the many charlatans around with quick-fix messages but they will later turn to Christ after they learn for themselves what the Bible says. These can often be won through longer-term evangelistic Bible studies.

On the other hand, others who currently accept Scripture will later reject it when they find out what it really says.<sup>6</sup> They will prefer their own views and lifestyle to those taught by Scripture, which they formerly thought were the same.

And besides those who accept Scripture, there are large numbers in the U.S. who reject it. Some 5% deny the existence of any God or Universal Spirit, and only 66% believe in a personal God who watches over and judges people.<sup>7</sup> Some 23% do not believe the Bible to be God's Word and 30% believe it is sometimes mistaken, so less than half even profess to believe whatever it says.<sup>8</sup> And some additional percentage (probably a substantial number) would move into this position if pressed by the claims of Jesus and the Gospel.<sup>9</sup>

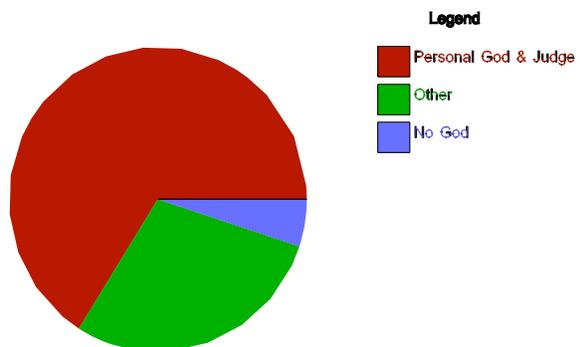
How can we present the Gospel to such people who reject Scripture? That is what we want to consider here.

### **The Example of Paul:**

The apostle Paul has set us an example in his evangelistic work on how to present the Gospel to quite diverse audiences.

### **Belief in God**

**U.S. Population**



<sup>4</sup> Gallup, *Religion in America*, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Gallup, *Religion in America*, 1982, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Gallup, *Religion in America*, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Gallup, *Religion in America*, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Gallup, *Religion in America*, 1984, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Gallup, *Religion in America*, 1984, p. 10.

To those knowing Scripture, Paul made use of this knowledge in pressing the claims of Christ. In the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:16-41), Paul spoke to Jews who had been raised in the knowledge of God's Word, to proselytes and Godfearers who had considerable exposure to Scripture, and probably to other Gentiles who were at least sufficiently interested in the God of Israel to come to synagogue to learn what the Bible teaches. Here Paul sketched the history of Israel, making use of numerous biblical allusions, and quoting from Ps 2:7, Isa 55:3, Ps 16:10, and Hab 1:5. Where his audience knows and accepts Scripture, Paul does not hesitate to use it. Yet even with Bible-believing audiences, the apostle does not expect them to take his word without checking it out. He argues with the Jews in Damascus (Acts 9:22) that Jesus is the Messiah promised in Scripture. And those in Berea (Acts 17:11) are commended for testing Paul's message by the Bible.

But to those not knowing Scripture, Paul does not assume such knowledge. Nor does he expect his listeners to take his word on faith either. In the market place at Lystra, where an audience of pagan Gentiles gathered at news of a spectacular healing, Paul (Acts 14:15-17) calls their attention to the creator God as seen in nature through his gifts of rain, crops, food, and joy. Though God has previously let the Gentiles go their own way, he has now sent Barnabas and Paul to call them to turn from their worthless idolatry and serve the living (i.e., the real) God. In the more sophisticated climate at Athens, Paul argues with the pagan philosophers and gains an opportunity for a hearing before the court of the Areopagus. Here Paul notes (Acts 17:22-31) that the Athenian worship is deficient because the creator God needs nothing from us, but instead he gives us everything. God made us humans to seek him, and he is not far away, as quotations from the pagan authors Epimenides and Aratus illustrate. God previously overlooked idolatry but now commands repentance, has set a day of judgment, and appointed Jesus as judge by raising him from the dead. In these two examples we see that, with pagans, educated or not, Paul appeals to such knowledge of God as they have, plus the evidence of what God has recently done by intervening in history through Jesus.

Besides these examples, Paul elsewhere tells us his guiding principles in evangelization. In 1 Cor 9:19-23 he urges the believers at Corinth to give up their own selfish attitudes, stop being stumbling blocks, and reach out to others. Though the Corinthians' major problem seems to have been getting along with each other in the congregation, Paul's illustration concerns outreach to the unsaved:

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law... so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law... so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

Paul's example suggests that we should not expect the unsaved to come looking for us (though perhaps they ought to, and some will), and that we should not expect them already to accept

Scripture or hold orthodox doctrines. It is up to us to put ourselves out and go where they are and find them, not only geographically, but also linguistically, culturally, ideologically, methodologically and emotionally, at the same time not compromising the Gospel itself.

### **Some Approaches to Those Who Reject Scripture:**

There are doubtless a number of approaches we can make to those who do not already accept the Bible as God's Word. Most of these will be audience-dependent in one way or another, just as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 9 above. An approach to Muslims will differ in many ways from one to Buddhists or secular humanists. And an approach to liberal, sophisticated Muslims would probably differ from one to their less educated brethren.

Since many today profess to be atheists or agnostics, it is not unreasonable to present evidence for the existence of God, without worrying too much whether they *really are* atheists. This approach might take a philosophical form to reach those who have some training or interest in philosophy,<sup>10</sup> though the fraction of people today that fit in this category is apparently rather small.<sup>11</sup> Since science is highly regarded in modern culture, the rapidly growing evidence for God's existence being uncovered by scientific investigation will probably have a greater impact on larger numbers, though here too the number of people who are scientifically literate is small.<sup>12</sup>

There are many more in our society and especially around the world who believe God exists, yet who do not identify him with the God of the Bible. For these, it may be most effective to present the claims of Christianity in contrast to other religions<sup>13</sup> and to give evidence for the truth of Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Some in our society accept the truth of parts of the Bible, but not those which seem unreasonable to them. These may be helped by responding to the things which trouble them<sup>15</sup> and by presenting the claims of Jesus and evidence for his resurrection.<sup>16</sup>

All these approaches can be very helpful to remove stumbling blocks that keep many from coming to Christ. They can also encourage Christians, giving them more confidence in the truth of Christianity and the defensibility of the Bible, particularly as many believers have been badgered into silence by the intellectual arrogance of skeptics. In addition, this material can be helpful in stopping the mouths of opponents,<sup>17</sup> who often seem to think (and certainly teach) that Christians are ignorant, gullible people who are afraid to face the truth.

But all these methods will be fruitless if the person is not inclined to listen. A friend of mine who was an atheist until well into adulthood was once asked how he would have reacted in earlier years to some evidence I had just presented. His response was, "I would never have gone to a talk of that sort"! Others may not be inclined to listen because for them Christianity is just one of many religions clamoring for attention. Or because they know Christianity would interfere with their preferred lifestyle. And many others already have a religion which satisfies them.

How can we incline a person to listen? Ultimately we can't. Only God can finally do this. Sometimes he uses disaster in a person's life, or some other incident that does not involve believers. But God often lets us share in drawing others to himself, sometimes by friendships, sometimes by the unsaved person observing our lifestyle when we don't even know it. Just as a preacher cannot guarantee his congregation will listen to the sermon, neither can we guarantee a hearing from the unsaved. But just as a preacher can do some things to make it more likely the congregation will listen, so can we as evangelists. We need to work on reaching out to where people are as regards interests, education and intellect in order to be more effective.

One approach used effectively in centuries past deserves more attention than it is currently getting, especially given the great interest today in psychology and self-help. This approach is to help people see that they really are sinners and that this is a very serious problem indeed. In pointing out the problem of human sin, we must not merely communicate on the level that this is what God says, so take it or leave it. The audience may just take this as evidence that the Bible is not God's word after all. Too many in our society are already turned off by evangelicals preaching against sin as though we ourselves have licked the problem, when it is obvious to the unsaved that we haven't. Talk about an unconvincing argument! We need rather to present the biblical teaching on sin in such a way that it is clearly true, not just to those who already accept Scripture, but to those who don't.

G. K. Chesterton once said that original sin is the only doctrine of Christianity which can really be proved.<sup>18</sup> Without endorsing Chesterton's claim that it is the only such doctrine, we can make use of the sort of evidence he had in mind. An excellent presentation along these lines using the research findings of modern psychology has been given by David G. Myers of Hope College.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the popularity of the "self-esteem" movement and its claim that the main human problem is too low an opinion of ourselves, Myers notes that research psychologists have amassed a "powerful river of evidence" that exactly the opposite is true, that we most commonly have an unrealistically good opinion of ourselves. Myers sketches six lines of evidence for this:

1. We tend to accept much more responsibility for our successes than for our failures, which are typically seen as bad luck or someone else's fault.
2. Most of us view ourselves as above average in any particular good trait, and a large percentage of us put ourselves in the very highest percentiles.
3. When we cannot deny that we did a particularly nasty thing, we are usually quite good at justifying it.
4. We commonly overestimate the accuracy of our judgments and the truth of our beliefs.
5. Most of us are unrealistically optimistic in remembering and reporting information about ourselves, and in predicting how well we will do in life.

6. We consistently overestimate how virtuously we would act in hypothetical situations compared with how we actually act in real ones.

Although Myers does not list it with these six, another feature he notes is also relevant:

7. Depressed people are typically more accurate in their self-appraisal and more likely to see themselves as others see them.

Such materials might be very helpful in getting people to see that their own evaluation of their attitudes and performance may not be a realistic picture of how God views them.

A related matter which is also important in presenting the Gospel to those who do not accept Scripture is the need to remove stumbling blocks they have picked up along the way. Many in our culture (even in the church) have distorted ideas about the Gospel which tend to obscure its message or make it look arbitrary. We must be very careful to keep in mind and convey to our listeners that God is just, that He hates sin, and will not allow sin to go unpunished, and that he couldn't be a good God if this were not so.

Some years ago I came across a salvation tract which illustrates this problem in a distressing way.<sup>20</sup> The tract starts out by describing the all-too-common practice of getting a traffic ticket "fixed." If you know the right people at City Hall, it said, you can avoid paying the fine. They will "take care of it" for you. Similarly, the tract went on, if you know God, He too will rescue you from the penalty for your sins. God forbid! Here we have twisted the free grace of God into crooked politics! No wonder some people despise the Gospel! Scripture tells us again and again that God does not practice favoritism and we must not either (Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1 Tim 5:21; Jas 2:1,9; Ex 23:3; Lev 19:15; Gen 18:25).

The biblical teaching about hell is another big stumbling block to most unbelievers. In seeking to remove stumbling blocks, we have no right to evaporate or dilute Scripture, but we must also be careful not to exaggerate what it says either. Many people seem to think that hell is the "great torture chamber in the sky" (or rather, under the earth), where Satan and his demons are busy concocting torments for the damned. This has been the occasion for some opponents to compare God unfavorably with Hitler and similar characters. Scripture is clear (so it seems to me)<sup>21</sup> that hell will last forever and that it is decidedly unpleasant, but this must be presented as consistent with God's justice. No one will get what they don't deserve. A helpful suggestion made years ago by Charles Butler arises from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man is pictured as continuing to sin (in thought and words) after he has died. Perhaps, then, the eternal punishment of hell is not an infinite punishment for a finite series of sins committed during our life on earth, but rather an infinite series of finite punishments which match the infinite series of finite sins we will continue to commit in hell since we have rejected God's offer of pardon.<sup>22</sup>

This brings up another common stumbling block C what about those who have never heard? For many, this is the clearest indication that Christianity is really arbitrary and that the Christian

picture of God is that of one who is unjust. I suggest that we Christians have not done the best we could in defending God on this point, being more like Job's three friends than we ought to be.

There is, of course, the problem of children who die very young, before they are old enough to understand the Gospel. I do not intend to address this question, except to point out that (in another context) God himself feels the force of Abraham's plea, "Shall not the God of all the earth do right?" and He will vindicate himself at the judgment. However, none of us (and none of our audience bringing such objections) fall into this category, and God sometimes chooses not to answer questions that don't concern us directly, just as Jesus would not answer Peter's question about what would happen to John (John 21:19-23).

As for people who are old enough to understand the Gospel, what about *those* who have never heard? If I understand Scripture properly, there aren't any! All have experienced God's general revelation. God has revealed in nature that He exists, that He is good, and that He is powerful.<sup>23</sup> In our consciences, God has also revealed that He exists, that He is good, and that we aren't.<sup>24</sup> We are thus in bad trouble! We can cast ourselves on God for mercy, asking Him to forgive us and rescue us from our sin, even though (apart from Scripture) we have no guarantee he will do so.<sup>25</sup> God could only forgive us on the basis of Jesus' work in paying for sin on the cross. How much do we need to know about Jesus to get saved? I don't know; perhaps nothing. The Scripture certainly seems to indicate that people were saved before Jesus came, and not just those who were Israelites.<sup>26</sup> Of course, God would not have given the New Testament revelation if it were not needed, but we should not assume that God has arbitrarily made changes in the way of salvation over the course of human history. In any case, it is clear that we must not be depending upon our own goodness, for that is not good enough, as even our own conscience witnesses. Nor should we depend on the assurance of various unauthorized teachers, whether professing Christians or representatives of other religions.<sup>27</sup> And we certainly must not be presuming upon God's forgiveness even as we continue going our own way in sin and rebellion, for God is just and he will by no means clear the guilty.

### **Conclusions:**

A perennial problem the Church has faced through this century is the loss of so many of its children when they go away to college. Some, of course, are just maturing and beginning to make their own decisions now that they are no longer under the supervision of their parents. Many such will decide to go their own way, especially if an easy out is provided by the classroom instruction and moral climate of the school they attend. Others, unfortunately, are not adequately prepared to face the challenges they encounter there, even though they would like to remain in the Church. I felt myself in something of this situation when I went away to Duke University out of a "moderate" Southern Baptist church just outside Washington, DC.

This is a great shame when Christianity has such powerful evidences for its truth that impact directly on everyday, observable life. But the Church has all too easily fallen into a ghetto or fortress mentality,<sup>28</sup> trying to keep their flock from contact with unbelief rather than training

them to effectively impact the unbelievers around them.

We as apologists, theologians, teachers, and pastors need to help our people see where the facts really lie and encourage them to live redemptive lives in full contact with the unsaved.

### References:

1. Director, Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute (POB 423, Hatfield, PA 19440-0423); Professor of New Testament, Biblical Theological Seminary (200 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440).
2. Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade, 1965; recent reprint, n.d.).
3. *Do You Know for Sure?* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Evangelism Explosion III International, 1989).
4. "Religion in America: 50 Years: 1935-1985," *The Gallup Report* 236 (May, 1985): 47.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
6. Of the 72% who believe the Bible is the Word of God, 30% believe it is sometimes mistaken. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 50. From a 1981 poll.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
9. Probably in this category are a significant fraction of the children raised in Christian homes who abandon the faith when they leave home. Note how many of the Jews following Jesus left him when they began to understand what he was really teaching (John 6:60-71).
10. Some philosophical presentations: R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1984; I still find the ontological argument unconvincing); Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Worlds Apart: A Handbook on Worldviews*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).
11. The *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (1987) has a total of 263 thousand receiving undergraduate degrees in the sciences, math and engineering for the year 1984, against only 12 thousand in philosophy, religion and theology. The fraction of people in the U.S. with any significant training in philosophy is thus rather small, since the 5% of college grads above must have those in religion and theology removed and then be multiplied by the 21.4% of people who have completed college (*World Almanac 1993*, p. 191). Thus probably less than 1% have significant education in philosophy.

12. Some scientific arguments: Hugh Ross, *The Creator and the Cosmos* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1993); Hugh Ross, *The Fingerprint of God*, 2nd ed. (Orange, CA: Promise, 1991).
13. Claims of Christianity vis a vis other religions: Colin Chapman, *Christianity on Trial* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1975); Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).
14. Evidence for the truth of Scripture: John W. Montgomery, ed., *Evidence for Faith: Deciding the God Question* (Dallas, TX: Probe/Word, 1991); Robert C. Newman, ed., *The Evidence of Prophecy* (Hatfield, PA: IBRI, 1988); S. I. McMillen and David E. Stern, *None of These Diseases*, rev. ed. (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984); Kenny Barfield, *Why the Bible is Number 1: The World's Sacred Religions in the Light of Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); William Campbell, *The Qur'an and the Bible in the Light of History and Science* (Middle East Resources, 1992).
15. Responding to objections: See Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook of Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992). Many objections are more fundamental than those discussed in these works; for such see C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) and Norman L. Geisler and Ronald M. Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask: A Handbook of Christian Evidences* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990).
16. Evidence for the claims of Jesus and for his resurrection: Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1987); Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1988); Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); John Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* (Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1984); Gary Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).
17. As Christian leaders are instructed to do in Titus 1:9.
18. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1936), p. 24; his whole chapter 2 "The Maniac" is impressive.
19. David G. Myers, "The Inflated Self," *Christian Century* (1 Dec 82): 1226-1230; see also his book *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope* (Harper and Row, 1980).
20. I no longer have a copy of this tract. Even if I did, I am not sure it would be charitable to name its publisher!
21. Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching on Hell* (Bridgepoint/ Victor, 1992).

22. Though not totally satisfactory in some points, C. S. Lewis' book *The Great Divorce* (Macmillan, 1978) captures something of this.
23. See references in note 12.
24. See reference in note 19, above; also C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1952), part I: "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe."
25. Compare the reaction of the Ninevites to Jonah's preaching. Jon 3:9: "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."
26. Job, Melchizedek, Moses' father-in-law?
27. It would be interesting to analyse the world's religions as Satan's countermoves against what was known of the Gospel at that time and place where each particular religion originated.
28. See the trenchant remarks along these lines in Michael Bauman, *Pilgrim Theology: Taking the Path of Theological Discovery* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).