

HOFW NEWSLETTER



February 1, 2009

Message from the chair:

Per several requests from our members, we will **not** watch the remainder of *Kansas vs. Darwin*. Instead, our own Dick Trice has offered to give a talk on Christianity and the Bible. Dick Trice's previous talk, a biography of Robert Ingersoll, was excellent. See you February 11th!

From http://atheists.org/What_to_ask_Preachers_and_Missionaries:

APOLOGETIC DEFENSES

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At one time or another we have all been accosted by religious propagandists hawking their wares with all the agility of a telemarketer interrupting supper. How one responds to this intrusion is of critical importance. Should you slam the receiver or close the door?

What do you do when evangelists come calling? If you can anticipate their argument and have some good rejoinders, missionary mornings can be not only fun but satisfying. You can bring the light of reason to the benighted.

Or should you view this as opportunity to correct a poor misguided human being who has been brought to your presence for enlightenment, if not salvation? While many opponents of religion opt for the former, a more prudent policy would suggest the latter. More than likely the religious proponent to whom you are speaking will rarely encounter someone able to correct his illusions with some well chosen queries and poignant observations. The arrival of a Jehovah's Witness or Mormon at the door, or a Campus Crusade for Christ missionary at your dorm, should be viewed as an opportunity to expose religion in general and the Bible in particular for the frauds that they are. Victory is obtained not by fleeing the scene feeling that you won because they failed to convert you, but only by remaining at the barricades and showing them the error of their ways.

Before meaningful dialogue can occur, however, apologists and missionaries must first be shown the error of their ways. Before they are going to listen to what you have to offer, they must first be convinced something is awry with what they believe. Only when they begin to acknowledge weaknesses on the part of their most cherished beliefs can a truly worthwhile encounter become viable. And for that to occur, most religionists will have to be given proof that comes from that which they hold most dear, namely their literature or sources. If one relies primarily upon bringing

scientific or historical information to the Bible, for instance, to prove the Bible is erroneous in many respects, the religious propagandists are simply going to say: "I don't care what you have. If it says the Bible is false then it is erroneous. Why? Because the Bible is divinely inspired and they aren't." So to influence millions it is unproductive to use extrabiblical information against the Bible. It will simply be discounted as so much devil's handiwork. Instead, critics of Scripture should go within the Bible and compare verse with verse.

When something in Deuteronomy is saying something in Exodus is a lie, or something in Chronicles is saying something in Samuel or Kings is false, or something in Mark is contending a comment in Matthew is erroneous – that's an entirely different matter. That is far more difficult to discount, minimize or ignore. In effect, armed with information of this kind you don't have something outside the Bible saying the Bible is false; you have the Bible saying the Bible is false – and that is far more potent and effective. The only drawback to this approach, however, is that it requires a degree of biblical knowledge that is at least comparable to that of the apologist.

Assuming the requisite knowledge on your part, the question then becomes one of deciding how you should proceed. For openers I would suggest some well chosen

questions, since the theology of your counterpart will more than likely be grounded in biblical fundamentalism. After fourteen years of publishing a periodical entitled *Biblical Errancy*, I have decided that the best questions are those which are simple, non-interpretive, present in nearly all versions, reasonably substantive, and poignant. Religionists in general and biblicists in particular, especially fundamentalists, view their defense of religion as being comparable to the Dutch man holding his finger in the dike. If one hole is allowed to remain unplugged, there goes the entire barrier. So one can expect an initial defense that is ardent, resolute, and sometimes strident.

Questions to Ask

For many years, I have used the following questions in pamphlets because of their simplicity and effectiveness:

* Why are we being punished for Adam's sin? After all, he ate the forbidden fruit, we didn't. It's his problem not ours - especially in light of Deut. 24:16 which says that children shall not be punished for the sins of their fathers.

*** For justice to exist, the punishment must fit the crime. No matter how many bad deeds one commits in this world, there is a limit. Yet, Hell's punishment is infinite. So where's the justice?**

*** How can 2 Kings 8:26 (which says Ahaziah began to rule at age 22) be reconciled with 2 Chron. 22:2 (which says he was 42)?**

*** While on the cross, Jesus is supposed to have said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). How could Jesus be our savior when he couldn't even save himself? Those aren't the words of a man voluntarily dying for our sins. Those are the words of a man who can think of a hundred places he would rather be!**

*** How could Jesus be a true prophet when he wrongly predicted (in Matt. 12:40) that he would be buried three days and three nights, just as Jonah was in the whale three days and three nights? Friday afternoon to early Sunday morning is a day and a half at best.**

*** How could Jesus be our model of sinless perfection when he denies he is morally perfect in Matt. 19:17? (“And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God”)?**

*** While on the cross, Jesus is made to say, “Forgive them Father they know not what they do.” To whom was he speaking? Biblicists naturally say “God.” But I thought he was god. How can god speak to god if there is only one god? That’s two gods.**

Know Your Apologist’s Arguments

Needless to say, some apologists for the Bible have spent an inordinate amount of time devising a wide variety of rationalizations to defend religion in general and the Bible in particular against these kinds of problems. In any encounter with the Bible’s defenders, knowing apologetic arguments beforehand is very important, because a few biblicists are knowledgeable and can handle themselves

better than most. Atheists and other freethinkers must not only know their material but also be aware of the arguments most often used on a regular basis by the opposition. So be prepared for the following defenses:

The “You are taking verses out of context” argument

If this one has been used once, it has been used a million times. Freethinkers are supposedly extracting one verse, while ignoring all those in the immediate vicinity. Not true is the only sane reply! One need only go to Proverbs, for example, to see that there is no context in many instances. The narrative is just a series of unrelated statements that leap from topic to topic. One need only read the verses verbatim to see what is being said, to see that nothing is being taken out-of-context. That’s a grossly unjustified and inaccurate criticism in hundreds of instances. Many conflicts between the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, to cite another example, involve nothing more than numbers and figures which aren’t open to interpretation or the contextual argument. If anyone really is taking verses out-of-context it is biblicists, who find scores of prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament by selectively quoting and isolating certain passages. Anyone

who has dealt with biblicists over any period of time knows that they are far better at eisegesis than exegesis.

The copyist defense argument

Biblicists will concede "The Book" has contradictions but contend that's because somebody incorrectly copied the original manuscripts. On page 15 of All About the Bible biblicist Sidney Collett says, "But in spite of all this painful care, mistakes did creep in, as the documents now in existence show; for this work of copying was after all human. Perhaps one of the most striking cases of a copyist's error is found in the age of Ahaziah, 2 Kings 8:26 stating that he was 22 years old when he began to reign, while 2 Chron. 22:2 says he was 42. Now none of the original documents in our possession help us in this at all, so that it is evidently due to an error of a very early copyist..."

To this one can only reply, What original documents? How does he know there were documents of this kind? And where are these original documents that are now in our possession? No doubt hundreds of scholars would like to have that question answered considering the fact that virtually all reliable authorities agree that there are no

extant manuscripts of any allegedly original Bible. On page 94 of *I'm Glad you Asked*, apologists Boa and Moody say, "Errors have crept into the biblical text through scribal mistakes and modernization. For example, 1 Kings 4:26 states that Solomon had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, but 2 Chron. 9:25 says that the figure is 4,000. The exaggerated figure in 1 Kings is a common scribal error due to similarity in numerical notation (Also compare 2 Sam. 10:18 with 1 Chron. 19:18)."

But how does he know that's true - since everyone agrees we have no copies of the originals? Anything we have, any translation, be it the KJV, the RSV, the NASB, the NIV, etc. is nothing more than a book composed by a group of people looking at a collection of documents that purport to be accurate representations of originals that no longer exist. We have thousands of documents and no absolutely certain way of knowing which ones have copyist errors and which are correct. In too many cases, estimates, "guesstimates," and votes have determined the outcome.

The "Freethinkers are unqualified to criticize because they don't know Greek and/or Hebrew" argument

Biblicists claim you have to know these languages in order

to understand the original meaning. In truth, you don't have to be a scholar in either. On page 20 of a work entitled *Bible Difficulties* fundamentalist, W. Arndt admits as much when he says, "With the various revised versions at hand, with an analytical concordance, with reliable commentaries, and with the help of dictionaries of the Bible language, the reader need not know Greek or Hebrew to verify the original meaning of a given passage. He has in his mother tongue the means whereby he may determine the correctness of most of the obscure translations." Moreover, one does not need to know these languages in order to ask questions like most of those posed earlier.

Of equal importance is the fact that scholars don't even agree on how verses should be translated. You could be the world's greatest Greek and/or Hebrew scholar and still have experts disagree with your interpretations. So who is correct? If scholars agreed, there wouldn't be so many versions on the market with major differences.

The "natural man" argument

First Cor. 2:14 says, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness unto

him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” In other words, until you adopt a particular mind set, a certain mentality, you will not see the Bible is true. All biblicists are saying with this circular argument is that if you accept it as true, you'll see it's true; and if you see it's true, you'll accept it as true.

The “Let Scripture interpret Scripture” ploy

This is as circular as the “natural man” argument. According to this you can only interpret the Bible accurately by seeing “the overriding theme.” But this defense is nothing more than a self-fulfilling strategy of picking and choosing passages which support a preconceived notion while ignoring and rationalizing away those that don't.

The defense employing Pascal's Wager

Another oft-invoked defense falls under the label of what is known as Pascal's Wager - You'd better believe it. You never know, it might be true. Don't take any chances; be

on the safe side. It goes without saying that those who believed something for that reason, and that reason alone, would be hypocrites of the first magnitude. Moreover, apparently they are under the impression that they can “fake out” this omniscient being in which they believe so fervently. He is conscious of everything except their attempt to sneak through the pearly gates by stealth.

But even more importantly, you'd have to believe thousands of religions simultaneously just to be “on the safe side,” because you could never be sure which one taught the truth. Why focus only on Christianity unless, of course, you have already been indoctrinated to believe it is somehow superior to all others? Many beliefs of different religions are diametrically opposed. How, for example, could I be a Moslem and a Christian simultaneously, when one of them says that Trinitarians are guilty of blasphemy and are condemned? Because a dichotomy is present, and one excludes the other, a gamble is unavoidable. All Christians are gambling not only with respect to which denomination is correct but with respect to whether or not one should be a Christian, period. They are also involved in an even more serious gamble from their perspective.

Anyone acquainted with the Old Testament knows that the god of the Bible is one of the most appalling beings imaginable. After citing a list of his atrocious acts strewn

throughout the Old Testament (a list of which can be found in issues 115-120 of *Biblical Errancy*), one would be well within his rights to ask, "Now can you imagine any being saying, "Yes that's my book, that represents me, that's the way I am" - especially a supposedly perfect being? Not only does no one in history have a worse record, but the devil comes out of Scripture looking much better than "god." Yet, biblicists are portraying, selling, spreading, and propagating the Bible as HIS Book. From their perspective, one can only shudder at the fate that awaits their arrival. The god in which they believe is no doubt waiting for an opportunity to even the score! After all what would you do to a group of people who wrote a book describing you in such an atrocious manner and then labeled and disseminated it as your book? And to think that Jews and Christians chide Atheists and other Freethinkers for taking a gamble. Biblicists are engaged in more wagers than a Las Vegas high roller!

The "Critics are over-using the literal approach" defense

"You have to realize there are symbolic meanings and metaphors" is the common refrain. This defense is usually employed when the common sense interpretation of the natural meaning of the words creates an obvious inaccuracy or absurdity. Although a valid defense in a few instances, it is nearly always employed for no other reason than to escape a mess. An excellent example is at the beginning of the Bible, in the third chapter of Genesis. God tells Adam and

Eve not to eat the forbidden fruit “lest you die.” They eat the fruit, but do they die? No, of course not. In fact, Adam lives to be one of the oldest men in the Bible according to Gen. 5:5. Instead of admitting that their god deceives in this mythical account, apologists will seek to interpret the verse “spiritually” by saying that a literal death was not intended. But what does the verse say? It is clear to all but the most intransigent.

The “That’s what it says but that’s not what it means” argument

To that one can’t help but ask: If that’s not what it means, then why was it translated that way? Advocates of this tactic are actually saying they could have constructed a more appropriate version of the text than a panel of experts and, in so far as the text under consideration is concerned, the latter are incompetent. In effect, adherents to this defense are contending they know Greek and Hebrew better than a distinguished group of scholars. Virtually every version of the Bible on the market was composed by a group of Greek and Hebrew translators who examined a wide variety of manuscripts and chose the wording they deemed most suitable. For this defense to merit serious consideration it would have to emanate from someone who was not only exceedingly adept in the art of translating but extremely well versed in Greek and/or Hebrew. Unfortunately, those who rely upon it most are often anything but.

The argument invoking cultural differences.

Essentially this is nothing more than a duck-and-dodge strategy of claiming we don’t do or say it nowadays the way they did back then. Unfortunately this ploy won’t stand the strain – not only because of its very limited applicability, but because its advocates are again alleging that they know Greek, Hebrew, and the cultural context of words better than those who did the translating. If the translators of a modern version chose an English word to represent a word used

thousands of years ago and an apologist contends the word chosen conveys the wrong impression or idea, it is incumbent upon him to provide a more accurate version. All too often the detractor is either unwilling or unqualified to offer alternatives.

The defense accusing critics of pettiness

A defense often relied upon accuses critics of pettiness. Pettiness is a matter of opinion, and what is petty to some is justifiably serious to others. Effective lawyers often use details deemed “petty” by their opposition. Ironically, after all is said and done, Christian apologist Richard Sisson provides as poignant a comment on these apologetic defenses as anyone, when he says on pages 55 and 56 in the second volume of *Answering Christianity’s Most Puzzling Questions*, “People do strange things when they are cornered by facts. When evidence cannot be denied, men who care nothing for the truth simply become illogical. Minds become willfully ignorant and emotions turn hostile.”

How relevant, how prevalent, and how cogent!

SUMMARY

In summary, Atheists and other Freethinkers should be reasonably well acquainted with apologetic works and arguments. One should prepare as would a general going into battle. Anyone who intends to fire something over to the other side should know what could return in response! All teams in sports send out scouts to evaluate the opposition. Businesses buy and analyze their competitors’ products; and all nations spy on one another constantly. Each knows he must discover what resides in the other’s arsenal before success is a

realistic option. Those who engage in dialogue without having done their homework can expect to be hit with unfamiliar arguments, thrown off track, and even unnerved to some extent. So, knowing what lies in the opponent's inventory prior to an encounter is both prudent and wise. That's not to say the opposition won't score some points. At one time or another, every Freethinker has not fared as well as he would have liked. But, the secret is to do your research, be prepared, be logical, return to the fray, and don't quit. If you have done what is required, they won't have a chance. It is not so much that science, logic, and facts are superior to superstition, faith, and revelation. It's that they aren't even in the same league.

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