

Christian Ministry Light Unit 3
Practical Issues
Common Objections to Christianity

Today's Cultural Climate

The way it was	The way it is
<p>1. Spiritual background</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nominal Christian experience—most people had some exposure to the Christian world view. Information such as "The Four Spiritual Laws" provided compelling reason to receive Christ. While many never heard the gospel, people did believe the basic concepts of a just and loving God, "true moral guilt," and forgiveness. A clear presentation of the Gospel put these concepts together in a way that often made sense to this critic. 	<p>1. Spiritual background</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little significant exposure to the church. Many people mix and blend different faiths to arrive at what they believe (E.G. New Age). It is common to hold that all faiths are equally true. Note: unfortunately, even many with an evangelical church background have bought into this. Today's perspective is that we are not able to call things morally right and wrong (it is not "politically correct"). People today will say that assigning true moral guilt to someone or some situation is "intolerant;" rather, we should be open to everything. Therefore the Gospel message doesn't fit with this perspective.
<p>2. What the critics thought</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critically minded skeptics appealed to reason and evidence (especially science). Christians would defend their faith (apologetics) using classical arguments (design of the universe, design of man, and the study of 'how we know what we know') or evidence (historical evidence for the resurrection, for the reliability of the Bible, etc.). The rational critic would often find these types of arguments persuasive. 	<p>2. What the critics think</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critically minded skeptics find the claims and content of Christianity dogmatic and offensive. Christianity can't possibly be universally true because it excludes other religious voices and traditions. "Hmmm, that's great for you, but you can't impose your truth on me." Truth and reason bounce off many people today. Christians still need to make use of classical arguments and evidences, but also need to be able to defend the notion of absolute truth and critique relativism. Therefore it will take more patience and "pre-evangelism" is often needed.

The most significant aspect of the "spirit of the age" today has to do with truth. While Christianity may be accepted as true for Christians, it can't be true for those who believe something else. And to "impose" your religious views on others would be viewed as intolerant, close minded and arrogant.

Two views of "truth"

1. "In here" (in my mind or in the culture). Truth is something we create
2. "Out there" (revealed by God). Truth is something we discover.

It is objective, not merely subjective (Rom. 3:4): The truth exists outside of us and is not affected by our force of will or our feelings. We have access to revealed truth, but we have not mastered it or been mastered by it completely. Our aim is to be biblical people. (1 Thes. 2:15) We are not always objective, but our aim is to be objective, fair, and just. Our response to the truth should be personal and thus has subjective elements.

It is absolute, not relative (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 4:12; Jn. 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5,6; Rev. 7:9,10). We are not absolutely correct or certain about everything, but we can be certain about some things. We do not have universal knowledge, nor do we know how to relate truth to every situation, but our aim is more knowledge and discernment for its application.

It is antithetical, not synthetic (Matt. 12:30; Ex. 20:1-6). We acknowledge supra-rational aspects of God, but we do not invoke "mystery" in order to sanction contradiction, intellectual laziness, or relativism.

Truth is a bestowal of God's grace, not my propaganda. Truth is given for our good, not to control and exploit us (Rom 1:16).

Two definitions of "tolerance"

1. BIBLICAL: Personal respect and love for individuals *despite deep disagreement with their beliefs.* The former (and biblical) definition of "tolerance" made a distinction between people and their religious beliefs. It meant that people should have the legal freedom to practice the religion of their choice, and that you should personally respect and love them, even if you conclude that their beliefs are false. We should expressly affirm this kind of tolerance and deplore this kind of intolerance.

2. CONTEMPORARY: Includes the old view, but adds that *we must affirm the validity of all beliefs.* Today's "tolerance" has removed the distinction between persons and their beliefs. It means that you must never call others' beliefs false or untrue, or you are an arrogant, intolerant bigot. But this definition confuses tolerance with truthfulness.

The impact of postmodernism and the new tolerance on our day-to-day lives:

Relationships:

Because there is no common basis of truth, there's no basis for resolving conflicts in relationships and moving forward.

Sharing how God has given you a basis for resolving conflict in your relationships is a natural way to lead into a discussion about the gospel.

Society:

How would denying objective truth lead to serious moral problems?
Where are we seeing the impact of this view of truth in our culture?

Important Communication Guidelines

1. Find common ground.

Remember there are areas of common ground between Christianity and postmodern thought—even though we agree for very different reasons.

Why is connecting on common ground important?

We can correct misconceptions about Christianity. To meet loving, thinking, and culturally aware people is a great surprise to many—and often opens doors for further conversation.

Key areas of common ground with the postmodern world: Consider, "What is the biblical reason for each point?"

- **Human subjectivity:** Humans are not able to be totally objective largely because of the fall. We are subjectively involved in everything we evaluate.
Romans 1:21, 28; Jer. 17:9
- **Inadequacy of reason alone:** Reason alone is inadequate for the construction of a comprehensive worldview.
1 Corinthians 2:14; Eph. 1:17, 18; Is. 64:4
- **The myth of "progress":** Modernism and its myth of progress toward utopia should be critiqued. Biblically, utopia is not expected before Christ returns. In fact, the Bible predicts that society will worsen as we approach the advent of Christ to such an extent that human extinction would occur without his return.
Matt. 24:10-12; 2 Timothy 3:1-7; Matt. 24:22.
- **Critique of racism and sexism:** Multiculturalism and racial/ethnic equality is a great concern of the postmodernist as it is with God. We should be very

concerned about racism and sexism.
Gen. 12:1-3 (all nations blessed), Gal. 3:28

- **Concern for the environment:** We should be concerned for the care of the environment.
Gen. 2:15 (God's intention for humanity was benevolent rulership of the creation),
Rom 8:20,21 (This expresses God's intent to restore the natural realm)

What are the limitations of communicating *only* on common ground?

You can't stop here, or you only give the impression that Christianity agrees with our current cultural ideology (the mistake of all theological liberalism). You have to go on to explain what else Christianity says, including where we disagree with the current postmodern consensus (e.g., absolute truth, one way of salvation, ability to adequately understand the author's intended meaning, etc.).

2. Pick carefully what to disagree with.

When talking about spiritual things with people influenced by postmodern thought, you will hear all kinds of things you disagree with (examples: amorphous spirituality; relativism; positive statements about other religions, etc.). If you feel you must disagree with every false statement, you'll come off as excessively critical and probably not be heard. Instead, prioritize what you'll disagree with (e.g., "All forms of spirituality are equally valid.") and be prepared to let the rest go for now for the sake of continued open communication.

How can I deal with a controversial issue that threatens to kill communication? The key is to be honest with what you want to accomplish with them. That is, to help them know God.

e.g. "My beliefs aren't the same as yours, but I want to help you understand how I came to these conclusions rather than fight over it."

e.g. "What do you think Christians think about this topic?" Often times we can find common ground with the non-Christian and help them see the true biblical perspective on a particular issue. "Let's see if we can find out what Jesus would say about this."

3. Be patient. Our culture is biblically illiterate.

Our culture is much more biblically illiterate than it was before. Formerly, most Americans had "theistic puzzle pieces." They understood the basic theistic worldview—they just needed someone to show them how they fit the puzzle together (e.g., salvation by grace vs. by works). We can no longer assume that people have this knowledge.

- **It takes people longer to understand and make an informed decision about the Gospel.** Today, we find that it takes not days, but weeks and sometimes even months for people to understand the gospel and make a genuine decision to receive Christ.
- This means **we must shift our thinking from "event evangelism"** (where we explain and call people to a decision in one encounter) **to "process evangelism,"** where we may need to start with pre-evangelism and be very aware of the "decision continuum." (BOTH THESE TERMS NEED EXPLANATION)

- *Be gentle.* Remember that most people have not thought through the implications of their world view. We don't want to belittle them by destroying their position, even if we easily could. We need to help them see the inconsistencies in their world view and *gradually* they will develop a self critique. We rarely argue someone into saving faith!

4. Seek to understand and tell your story.

"Socratic evangelism" means asking people questions, and then following their answers up with more questions. Get used to asking people about their beliefs about God, spirituality, etc. People are generally much more willing to talk about this today than they were ten years ago—especially if you really listen and don't immediately negate, correct, etc.

- *Share—don't declare.* In general, it is better to simply share what you have discovered rather than to declare what is true. This is not a cop-out to moral/ideological relativism; it is an understanding of communication dynamics. In a group setting, the speaker can be much more declarative and forceful because the individuals don't feel put on the spot. In personal conversations, declaration tends to close down communication, while asking questions and sharing your discoveries tends to open it up.

5. Remember the witness of Christian community.

Community is much more important in our culture than it was before, because of the unparalleled failure in relationships (marriage, etc.). Few things are more attractive to postmodern people than the discovery that we, as Christians, know how to build real love relationships. Not just the real love we must have for them, but also the real love they observe that we have for each other (Jn.13:34, 35). When they see this, they are often more open to hear about your explanation of this relational richness.

Therefore, rely more heavily on ongoing friendship evangelism than on one-time encounters with relative strangers ("warm" vs. "cold" evangelism). Where should we look to develop such "warm" relationships? How can we do this?

In addition, include ways to intentionally expose your non-Christian friends to your Christian friends (corporate vs. solely individual witness). What ways have we developed to do this?

Now let's see how we can apply these communications guidelines to some common objections to Christianity.

Objection 1: “How can you say that Christianity is the only valid religion?”

Let's deal with the perspective, "All religions are simply different paths to the same goal." (Different mountain roads which all lead to the summit).

A. *Many religions are contradictory.* While all religions have superficial similarities (Webster’s: "The service and adoration of God or a god expressed in forms of worship"), they make contradictory claims about foundational issues.

(Steve Turner) “We believe that all religions are basically the same . . . They all believe in love and goodness. They only differ on matters of creation, sin, heaven, hell, God and salvation.”¹

Are all religions basically the same or are there substantive differences?

Consider the disagreement between the five great religions of the world on these crucial issues:

	WHAT IS GOD	OUR SPIRITUAL DILEMMA	WHAT IS SALVATION	THE WAY OF SALVATION
CHRISTIANITY	Personal & Trinitarian	Separation from God because of moral guilt	Conscious, personal fellowship with God for all eternity	Receive the gift of God's forgiveness by faith in Jesus Christ
JUDAISM	Personal & Unitarian	Separation from God because of moral guilt	Conscious, personal fellowship with God for all eternity	Turn to God & live a moral life
ISLAM	Personal & Unitarian	Separation from God because of moral guilt	Enter Paradise for an eternity of sensual pleasure (<i>bur</i>)	Perform the 5 Pillars of Faith
HINDUISM	Pantheistic or Polytheistic	Ignorance that all is one	Freedom from conscious, individual existence ("moksha")	Better reincarnation by improving karma
BUDDHISM	Pantheistic or Atheistic	Ignorance that all is one	Freedom from conscious, individual existence ("nirvana")	Escape reincarnation by following 4 Noble Truths & 8-Fold Path

There are many fundamental contradictions as we review this chart. For example, God can't be personal and impersonal at the same time. Salvation can't be conscience existence and personal annihilation at the same time. The way of salvation can't be a free gift and a wage earned at the same time. The differences are very clear and all religions cannot be held as true.

¹ British Journalist Steve Turner quoted by Ravi Zacharias in his Harvard lecture "Is Atheism Dead? Is God Alive?" November, 1993.

Don't just contrast Christianity to the other religions. Evaluate the claims of Hinduism from an Islamic perspective, or the claims of Buddhism from a Jewish perspective.

Consider the conclusion of these scholars of world religions:

Anderson (Christian): “The fact is that generalizations about religion are almost always misleading. Nothing could be further from the truth than the dictum . . . ‘Religion has not many voices, but only one.’ . . . Even the most cursory examination of the theology of these different religions reveals far more contradiction than consensus.”²

Zaehner (Hindu): “To maintain that all religions are paths leading to the same goal, as is so frequently done today, is to maintain something that is not true . . . (T)he basic principles of East and West . . . simply are not starting from the same premises. The only common ground is that the function of religion is to provide release; there is no agreement at all as to what (we) must be released from. The great religions are talking at cross purposes.”³

Clendenin (Christian): “Contrary to the idea that all the religions teach the same thing, by virtue of their historical particularity and specificity the many religions offer us radically divergent pictures of God, the world, life, death, the afterlife, and humanity . . . Historically and empirically it is obvious that a common essence is precisely what religions do not have; they aim at different goals, teach contradictory doctrines, and prescribe radically different experiences. Religion as a common genus simply does not exist.”⁴

Netland (Christian): “It is difficult indeed to escape the conclusion that some of the central affirmations of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Shinto are opposed; as long as the meanings of the doctrines within the respective religious communities are preserved, they cannot be jointly accepted without absurdity.”⁵

Panikkar (Pluralist): “(Pluralists must abandon their quest for a common essence because) the incommensurability of ultimate systems is unbridgeable . . . (and any) alleged common denominator is a sheer reductionist abstraction.”⁶

Conclusion: Therefore, the “Different mountain roads which all lead to the summit” analogy is simply not true. The roads are on different mountains, they lead in fundamentally different directions and they end on completely different summits! We cannot hold the view that all religions are basically the same if we know the basic tenets of those religions.

² Sir Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984) p. 15.

³ Cited in Colin G. Chapman, *The Case For Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1981) p. 143.

⁴ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995) pp. 64, 108.

⁵ Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991) pp. 110, 111.

⁶ Raimundo Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tigris, and the Gangis," In Hick and Kitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988) p. 110.

B. Even the pluralist doesn't accept all religions as true or valid. Especially when they prescribe practices that are morally repulsive, even the most thoroughgoing religious relativist will usually admit this.

How many of us are really prepared to say that Baalism (with mandatory child-sacrifice), or many African Islamic sects (with mandatory clitorrectomy), or Australian aboriginal animism (with headhunting) are valid religions? How open-minded would we be about our children converting to these religions? How many of us would be able to say with a clear conscience "I'm glad you've found what's true for you?"

How many of us are ready to accept Hinduism's teaching that women cannot enter the eternal state, or the Koran's teaching that (Jihad) holy war is a virtuous way to spread the faith?

(Daniel B. Clendenin) "Do we really want to say . . . that all religions and religious practices without exception are pathways to God? . . . What about Hindu widow-burning, female infanticide, or Aztec human sacrifice (Hans Kung notes that 20,000 people were sacrificed in four days at the consecration of a temple in Mexico in 1487)? . . . But in assessing religion, pluralists have the problem of avoiding radical relativism, which . . . is inherent in their position. In fact, consistent relativism would render both praise and blame impossible. As the pluralists themselves acknowledge, without some criteria it is impossible to distinguish between Jim Jones and Mother Theresa, between an Amish village and David Koresh's Waco compound. To make critical judgments of any sort requires some standard or standards, but to introduce such criteria in order to judge religions is to no longer accept them all as equally true and good."⁷

C. It is condescending to say all religions are the same.

By insisting that all religions are really talking about the same thing (the "Real," the "sacred," etc.), it refuses to take seriously the truth claims of those religions. Thus, religious relativism, which accuses absolutist religions of being condescending and dismissive toward religions that disagree with them, is actually condescending and dismissive toward all religions!

(Daniel B. Clendenin) "Pluralism . . . is incompatible with and even antithetical to any traditional account of religion. If the pluralist is right, then the adherents of all the major religions . . . are badly mistaken in their traditional understanding and practice of their various faiths. Consequently, a consistent pluralism requires a drastic revision . . . a genetic-like mutation, of all human religiosity as it has been conceived and lived throughout human history. It is obvious that such an absolutistic diagnosis and prescription are as theologically and culturally imperialistic as one can imagine . . . Pluralism's residual patronization lurks in the idea of a common essence. It suggests that the particularity of a religion's cumulative tradition really does not matter, that its many incongruities with other faiths are merely accidental or arbitrary. The more one emphasizes an essential core of religion, the less reason there is to take the particularities of a religion with genuine seriousness . . . Rather than a celebration of the world's heterogeneous and particular faiths which might inform and challenge one's religious worldview, we have here a suffocating homogeneity . . ."⁸

Objection 2: "Why should I regard the Bible as God's Word? What about all of the other scriptures?"

⁷ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995) pp. 50,51.

⁸ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Many Gods, Many Lords* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1995) pp. 90,108,109.

In a religiously pluralistic culture, the Bible is seen as one of many scriptures, with none having an exclusive claim to being the authentic word of God.

“Other scriptures” include: Hinduism (*Rig Vedas; Upanishads*); Buddhism (*Pali Canon; Sutras; Tibetan Book of the Dead*); Confucianism (*Analects of Confucius*); Islam (*Quran*); Ba'hai (*Writings of Baha'u'llah*); Mormonism (*Book of Mormon*).

What makes the Bible unique among all the others?

A. Most other “scriptures” don't claim to be revelation from God.

- **In the higher forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, god is not a person who speaks.** As a result, Hindu and Buddhist scriptures don't claim to be communication from God. Likewise, the sacred Chinese books claim no supernatural inspiration or authority, Confucianism being less a religion than a venerable moral tradition.
- **In fact, those religions rooted in the Bible (including Islam and the Christian sects, like Mormonism) are virtually the only ones who claim to have books that are actual revelation from God.**

B. Only the Bible is rooted in history.

- **Why is this so important?** Spiritual truth claims cannot be directly verified. How can we directly verify whether God is personal or impersonal? What the afterlife is like? Whether salvation is by works or by grace? If all we had were the assertion of the scriptures, there would be no way to decide.

But if spiritual truth claims in scripture are tied to events in history that can be verified, we have a basis for taking these claims more seriously. Conversely, if these factual assertions fail to interface accurately with history (an area we can test), why should we trust them in the areas we can't test?

Truth claims in the Bible do interface with history. The Bible, for example, makes predictions about future events that later come true. We can verify that the events happened as predicted and that the predictions were made before the events occurred. God promised to use this method to help us identify his authentic voice:

(Isaiah 41:21,22) "Present your case," the LORD says. "Bring forward your strong arguments," The King of Jacob says. 22 Let them bring forth and declare to us what is going to take place; As for the former events, declare what they were, That we may consider them, and know their outcome; Or announce to us what is coming.

(Isaiah 43:9) All the nations have gathered together In order that the peoples may be assembled. Who among them can declare this And proclaim to us the former things? Let them present their witnesses that they may be justified, Or let them hear and say, "It is true."

- **Isn't the Bible full of undeniable historical errors?** Although it was once confidently assumed that archeology would prove the historical inaccuracy of the Bible, this is far from the case. While we cannot say that archeology *proves* the authority of the Bible, it is fair to say that archeological evidence has provided external confirmation of hundreds of biblical statements. See Christian Ministry 2, week 7 for examples.

Evidence from archaeology:

Old Testament Example: Scholars considered the Genesis account of Abraham (including Sodom and Gomorrah) to be mythological or ahistorical. But Ur was excavated and shown to be a flourishing city around 2000 BC. The Ebla Tablets include some of the kings mentioned in Gen. 14. Tell Mardikh tablets mention Sodom and Gomorrah.

New Testament example: Scholars scoffed at Luke's references to Lysanius as tetrarch of Abilene (Lk. 3:1) because the only Lysanius known from ancient sources was executed in 36 BC—60 years before Luke's reference. But two Greek inscriptions from Abila, northwest of Damascus, now prove there was a "Lysanius the tetrarch" between the years AD 14 and 29.⁹

Evidence from Non-Christian sources of Jesus' miracle ministry:

- **Josephus (Jewish historian, 70AD) called Jesus a "wonder worker."**
- **Teaching of Rabbis (1st & 2nd cent) claimed Jesus did his miracles by sorcery.**
- **Celsus (philosopher/critic of Christianity) also attributed Christ's miracles to sorcery.**

(F. F. Bruce) "Evidence from early Jewish and Gentile writers establishes for those who reject the witness of Christian writings, the historical character of Jesus himself. Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth', but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories."¹⁰

- **Other scriptures are historically inaccurate or do not interface with history at all.**

The eastern scriptures have no interest in history, because according to their world view, this is the world of illusion from which we are to be delivered. Ancient polytheistic religions likewise had no interest in history. Their gods acted only in myths, removed as far as possible from real history.

The Koran is almost entirely assertions of Allah. It has very little historical material and when compared to parallel biblical material it often differs. A study of the Koran

⁹ Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Archeology and the New Testament," *The Expositor's Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 653.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000) p. 119.

finds that Mohammed's references to Judaism are drawn from contemporary Jewish folklore.¹¹

e.g. When the Israelites set up the golden calf in the wilderness they did so at the urging of a Samaritan. But Samaritans did not exist until then.
[Mentioned in Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (Moody Press, Chicago, 1994) p. 549-552.]

The Book of Mormon makes many historical references, but it is also full of historical anachronisms and geographical inaccuracies.¹²

C. Only the Bible provides predictive prophecy. This is a unique means of authenticating its claim to be God's inspired Word.

The Bible actually **anticipates** our need for such unique authentication and provides its own means of authentication via the phenomenon of **fulfilled prophecy**.

(Isaiah 46:9,10) “Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, 10 Declaring the end from the beginning And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’”

The Old Testament prophets made hundreds of predictions about the coming Messiah, most of which were beyond anyone's power to deliberately fulfill, or beyond anyone's desire to fulfill unless they were the Messiah.

Time (Dan. 9:24,25): Over 500 years in advance, Daniel predicted to the year when the messiah would be killed.¹³

Birthplace (Micah 5:2): Of course, Jesus had no control over his place of birth.

Rejected by his people (Isaiah 53): This prophecy is so detailed that prior to the Dead Sea Scrolls, many thought it was a Christian forgery.

Mode of Execution (Ps. 22:1-18): This was predicted several centuries before crucifixion was invented!

What about other “scriptures” and prophecy? In the vast majority, there is no prophecy at all or any comparably unique means of self-authentication.

Muhammad acknowledged that the biblical prophets were confirmed by miraculous signs (*Surahs 3:184; 17:103; 23:45*)—including prophecy, but when he was asked for similar confirmation that his message was from God, he refused (*Surahs 2:118; 4:153; 6:8,9,37*) and regarded the request as impious.¹⁴

¹¹ Josh McDowell, *The Islam Debate*, page 48.

¹² See Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1994) pp. 553-556.

¹³ See Dennis McCallum, *Christianity: The Faith That Makes Sense* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1997) for clear overview of Daniel's prophecy. For more depth, see Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978).

¹⁴ Norman Geisler, In Dean C. Halverson, ed., *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1996), pp. 265, 266.

The predictions of other so-called prophets are unworthy of being compared to the biblical prophets. They usually lack context and the syntax is so general that any specific interpretation is impossible.

Baha'u'llah (the founder of the Baha'i faith) is seen by some as a prophet. He made several predictions that his followers claim have come true. Here's one example:

(Baha'u'llah) "In the days to come, ye will, verily, behold things of which ye have never heard before. Thus hath it been decreed in the Tablets of God, and none can comprehend it except them whose sight is sharp. In like manner, the moment the word expressing my attribute 'The Omniscient' issueth forth from my mouth, every created thing will, according to its capacity and limitations, *be invested with the power to unfold the knowledge of the most marvelous sciences*, and will be empowered to manifest them in the course of time at the bidding of Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Knowing."¹⁵

Baha'is claim that this prophecy predicts the "explosive acceleration of scientific and technological progress"¹⁶ we've seen in the last 150 years. But the prophecy is too general to recognize its fulfillment or to verify that it came true.

Objection #3: "Why should I accept your interpretation of the Bible? Everyone has their own interpretation."

See the lecture notes on the web for Christian Ministry 2, week 1 (hermeneutics).

Objection #4: "How can your religion consign people to hell if they have never even heard about Christ?"

There are two distinct issues in this objection:

God's judgment of *all* people.

The justice of God's judgment.

A. Will God condemn all those who have never heard the Gospel?

While the Bible insists that all people are saved only through Jesus Christ (John 14:6), it does not say that people can only be saved *if* they hear about Jesus Christ.

(C.S. Lewis) " . . . God has not told us what his arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no person can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him."¹⁷

¹⁵ Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings*, p. 142.

¹⁶ Gary L. Matthews, *Every Eye Shall See* (Stonehaven Press, 1999) p. 46.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, New York: Touchstone, 1996) p. 65.

- *The Bible clearly teaches that God is just.*

(Psalm 89:14) "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you."

In **Genesis 18:25**, Abraham rightly asserts **"Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"**

There are many implications of justice, but one of them is that one is held responsible only for information which he has received—not for information which he has not received. Paul upholds this principle with regard to sin in Romans 4:15 when he says, "...where there is no law there is no transgression."

- The Bible also teaches that *God gives a significant amount of revelation about himself to the person "without the Bible."*

Paul declares in **Romans 1:18-20** that God has "made it evident" to such people not only that he exists, but also that he has certain attributes: namely, tremendous power and creative intelligence. These attributes have been revealed "through what has been made"—through the order of the external universe.

Paul says in **Romans 2:14,15** that people without access to special revelation ("the Gentiles who do not have the Law") also know that God is a morally righteous Being. They know this because of the moral conscience, which he has instilled in each person. These passages make two important points.

- *The amount of light is considerable.* God reveals to the unevangelized that he is powerful and personal (because he is intelligent and righteous). Man's conscience also convicts him that he has violated God's righteous character (Romans 2:15). Responding to this light properly would mean humbly coming before God asking for mercy. Thus, though the MEANS of man's forgiveness is not revealed through general revelation, the NEED for it is revealed.
- The point of Paul's argument in Romans 1 and 2 is that these people have been given enough light to be justly condemned. But it would seem to follow (because of God's justice) that *this would also be enough light to be saved-if people respond to it properly*. Notice Paul says it is enough information that they are "without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

Another biblical fact is relevant to this question.

- **Old Testament believers were saved by their faith before the Jesus came.**

Hebrews 11 lists many Old Testament figures who fit this description. Old Testament Jews had access to special revelation, but they had no clear understanding of God's plan of salvation, because the fact that the Messiah must die for our forgiveness was not clearly revealed (Luke 24:44-47; 1 Peter 1:10-12). Furthermore, some of the Old Testament people who were saved (like Melchizedek and Job) had little or no access to the special revelation to Abraham.

Another possibility is that

- **God may judge based on his knowledge of how people would have responded had they heard the message.**

Conclusion: If the “person without the Bible” responds properly, as defined above, to the light God has given him, he would be saved by grace through faith by asking God for mercy. He will be saved only through the death of Christ, because “no man comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). In this way, the unevangelized person today is much like the Jew before the time of Christ: he is justified before God by responding in faith to the light, which he has. For an extensive discussion of this question, see Donald Richardson’s book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*.

Two important qualifications need to be mentioned at this point.

Qualification 1: Does this mean any unevangelized person who is a devout follower of his religion will be saved?

By no means. Most world religions are animistic, polytheistic, or pantheistic. But Romans 1 teaches that the truly open person will recognize that there is one God who is intelligent and personal, and that worshipping other god(s) is therefore an act of willful rebellion. Again, virtually all world religions teach a "works" approach to the deity—that the acceptance of the deity is attained by human effort through good works and/or ritual observance. But Romans 2:14,15 teaches that humans instinctively know that they are morally guilty before God and therefore have no claim on God's acceptance based on their own effort (works or ritual). Therefore, those who respond to God's general revelation by casting themselves on his mercy will be at odds with crucial elements in their native religious setting. Missionaries have reported many such people who responded quickly to their message of the one true God and his way of salvation.

Qualification 2: If people can be saved apart from hearing the gospel, are evangelism and missions necessary?

Yes!

Concluding that evangelism and missions are unnecessary would render Christ's commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) pointless. We say they are necessary there is evidently a general correspondence between the amount of light given and the number of people who repent and are saved.

Jesus teaches this principle in Matthew 11:20-24. He says that Tyre, Sidon and Sodom would have repented if they had received the light that Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida had received.

This principle is also readily observed in history. While probably some Africans responded properly to the light of general revelation and were thus saved, clearly they were a small minority in unevangelized Africa judging by the paganism which pervaded Africa in the mid 1800's. It is no coincidence

that today, after 150 years of missionary activity, almost 50% of Black Africans are evangelical Christians.

Therefore, *the number of people who get saved through general revelation is probably very small*, and this fact preserves the strategic importance of Jesus' mission mandate.

Furthermore, *people who get saved by responding to general revelation have fewer spiritual resources available to them* than individuals who hear and respond to the gospel. They would be like the “disciples” that Paul met in Acts 19:1-6. These men were evidently saved, but did not receive the Holy Spirit until Paul explained the gospel to them. The gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, as well as the other New Covenant ministries of the Holy Spirit, may be given only to those who have heard and responded to the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

B. Is there justice in God's judgment?

We think, "It just doesn't seem fair for God to judge people and sentence them to hell." I don't like the idea, and neither does God (**Eze. 18:23,32**)—but consider these points:

- **Can we trust our ability to judge what is fair for ourselves?**

People tend to think that what they do is not very bad and does not deserve much punishment. Most prisoners believe that they are sentenced too severely. Because of our imperfect criminal justice system, some of them probably are—but it is highly unlikely that most of them are. Children demonstrate that this is an inborn attitude. This is why we don't let children or criminals choose their own punishments; they tend to go too soft on themselves. But God's judgment is perfect. He knows all the factors, every mitigating circumstance—and on that day he will demonstrate that he has been absolutely fair in his judgment.

- Furthermore, the alternative to this—**universalism**—is **definitely not fair**.

Is it fair for people to never be called to account for their actions? Is it fair that wicked people and not the righteous God have the last word on evil (STALIN: safe to the end, clenched fist at the end)? Is it fair for repentant people to spend eternity with an unrepentant STALIN? Is it fair for God to allow this world to go on for so long if he will send everyone to heaven? If people can't make a decision about where to spend eternity during this life, what is the point? If there is no ultimate accountability for our lives, then what is the difference between heaven and hell?

- **Finally, this objection assumes that we have a proper moral standard by which to evaluate whether God's judgment is fair or unfair. Do we?**

Most Americans believe that if there is a hell, only really bad people will go there. But there is a fatal flaw in this belief. How bad is bad enough? If Mother Theresa is good enough to go to heaven, and if Stalin is bad enough to go to hell, should we draw the line exactly halfway between them? What if you were one sin on Stalin's side of that line (that bad thought you had about your mother when you were ten years old)? Is

this fair? No matter where you draw the line in this scenario, you always have the same dilemma. The Bible rejects this answer for one simple reason: it draws the line at God's moral perfection (Jas. 2:10; Matt. 5:48; Rom. 11:32 For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.). It makes perfect sense, and God is certainly within his rights to draw it here. However, it is really bad news because it means all of us—Stalin, Mother Theresa, you, me—are under God's judgment. But the good news is that God has offered to take the rap for all of us. He says he has come in the Person of Jesus to bear God's judgment for us on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). Now the way is open for all of us to escape God's judgment—if we put our trust in his payment. That's news you won't find anywhere but in Christianity.

Learn more about common objections to Christianity from the Xenos Central Teaching series by the same title, available on our website (<http://www.xenos.org/teachings/topical/objections/>) or at the Xenos Study Center.