

On Your Mark . . .

by Frank Harber, from *On Mission*

Recently a man approached me with the following problem: “I know that I am a Christian, nobody can talk me out of it, but I can’t talk anyone else into it! Can you help me?”

Perhaps this Christian thought he was the only one struggling with this problem, but actually the question has been posed to me hundreds of times.

You see, I once was an atheist and was converted to Christ because of an aggressive Christian witness. I had set out to prove that Christianity was not true.

The pastor who triggered this search seemed to have the answers to all my questions. He had a college background in science and gave a compelling defense for the truthfulness of the Bible. This was vital, because I did not believe the Bible to be a divinely inspired book.

The pastor was truly ready with a defense for Christ as Lord and Savior. This made all the difference in the world. He supplied me with books by popular Christian writers such as C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell and Chuck Colson.

Along with answering my questions and supplying me with resources demonstrating the truth of Christianity, he preached the simple gospel to me with great conviction. He challenged me to repent of my sins and commit my life to Jesus Christ. This was vital because becoming a Christian is really not an intellectual question but a willingness question.

I truly believed that Christians were people who followed a religion that was void of proof. I scoffed at the idea of believing in God through faith. It seemed to me utterly foolish to believe in something that cannot be proven.

But this is where I made my mistake. Like many people, I believed that the definition of faith was “believing something that you cannot prove.” Thus, I thought that believing in God was a faith in an invisible nothing. However, the Bible teaches in Hebrews 11:1 that faith is based on the twin pillars of “substance” and “evidence.”

During my investigation, I discovered that there is overwhelming evidence that demonstrates the validity of Christianity. The evidence poured in from all areas of knowledge, including science, history, astronomy, geography, archeology, prophecy and many other areas of empirical evidence.

As I studied Christianity, I also studied the major world religions. The contrast was startling. Every founder of these religions went through a period of searching or uncertainty in his life, except for Jesus. Even as a child, He was able to amaze scholars in the temple with His great wisdom. No one ever spoke or lived as Jesus did.

My true problem was not in my head but in my heart. But because this dedicated Christian pastor I encountered had gone to great lengths to prepare his defense of Christianity, he was able to reach my heart by satisfying the questions of my mind.

What about you? Are you prepared to answer the skeptics and seekers in your world? Do you find yourself longing for opportunities to tell non-Christians why you believe? Or do you secretly hope that no one will ever challenge you to defend your beliefs? Are you ready?

Step into the Light

Christianity does not require unrealistic faith but a reasonable faith. Thus, the Christian faith is not a leap into the darkness but rather a step into the Light.

For many skeptics, it’s this first step that’s the problem. This is because many skeptics demand that absolute proof must precede their faith commitment. Many seekers wish to eradicate all doubt before they will make a decision for Christ.

The requirement of faith cannot be waived. The step of faith is the initial requirement to becoming a Christian. Hebrews 11:6 states: But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he that comes to God must first believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (NKJV).

People who once looked to the church for answers to the great questions of life now look to psychology and other sciences to help them find meaning.

This shift is primarily due to a process called secularization. America has moved from being a Christian nation to a secular entity. This makes the work of evangelism much more difficult. The church has lost its homefield advantage.

This is a generation that has shunned the notion of absolute truth. Truth for them is relative. Each individual has his or her personal truth. This philosophy is one of the defining characteristics of the younger generation dubbed “Generation X.”

The growing tribe of skeptics and atheists is expanding. As the church tries to keep pace with a population that is growing faster than the expansion of the church, how can we prepare to evangelize this new realm of skeptics? Are we ready?

Are you prepared to tell skeptics that Jesus Christ is the supreme truth for mankind?

Hurdles to Finding Faith

Through my citywide evangelism crusades and debates on college campuses, I have identified what I believe are the 10 most common objections to Christianity. To adequately answer them, think about your response to these issues and prepare your answers in advance.

Following are brief descriptions of these hurdles and suggestions for answering them.

Hurdle #1: The Church is filled with hypocrites.

A hypocrite is an actor, a person who pretends to be something but is not. Christ's harshest words were reserved for hypocrites.

The reality is that a small number of people in the Church are hypocrites. This is something that the Church has never denied. There have always been and always will be some hypocrites in the Church.

Throughout history the Church has worked hard to identify and remove hypocrites from its ranks. Such has been the case in recent days with the failings of a few prominent Christian leaders. But rather than congratulating the Church for its integrity, critics have focused on the negative.

The problem is that people focus on individual Christians rather than on Christ Himself. Christ doesn't ask us to follow His followers but to follow Him.

Though not all Christians are hypocrites, all Christians are sinners. In fact, admitting that one is a sinner is a prerequisite to belonging to the Church. Public acknowledgment of one's sinful condition is necessary for membership. Though hypocrisy is a sin, being a sinner does not necessarily make someone guilty of hypocrisy. The terms "sinner" and "hypocrite" are not synonymous.

Although Christians represent Christ and can do so poorly or well, the real question is not are there hypocrites in the Church, but rather, was Christ a hypocrite? If it can be proven that Christ was a hypocrite, then the whole structure of Christianity falls into ruin. The scriptures present Jesus as nothing less than perfect. Jesus' disciples testified that Jesus was without sin (1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5). Christ Himself challenged others to prove that He had ever sinned (John 8:46). The scriptures present a perfect Christ for imperfect humans. Jesus was not a hypocrite. It is illogical to reject Christianity for something that Christ Himself denounced!

Resources: *I'm Glad You Asked*, Kenneth Boa and Larry Moody; *Reasons for Faith*, John Gerstner; *Answering the Tough Ones*, David Dewitt.

Hurdle #2: What about the atrocities committed by Christians?

Some contend that nothing good has ever come from Christianity. They charge Christianity with many horrible crimes including religious wars, the crusades, burning witches, the inquisition and, for some, the holocaust.

The issue of atrocities is simply an extension of the question of hypocrites. So-called Christians who did not practice true Christianity have perpetrated much evil. These people were Christian in name only.

Focusing on their atrocities is really a smoke screen to avoid the real issue. Christianity has far more positive achievements than negative influences. Christianity has been instrumental in the formation of countless hospitals, schools, colleges, orphanages, relief agencies and charity agencies. No other organization in history can compare in achievements to the Christian Church.

Resources: *Reasons for Believing*, Frank Harber; *7 Myths About Christianity*, Dale and Sandy Larson.

Hurdle #3: Christianity is a crutch for the weak.

Karl Marx said, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." Critics such as Marx have charged that religion is simply invented by humans; that religion is an invention designed for people who are incapable of coping with the pressures of life; that to these weaker people, religion is an emotional crutch.

Such critics assume that Christianity is subjective primarily because it provides emotional comfort. Some respond that they do not feel a need for this type of emotional comfort as though that fact falsifies Christianity. Such individuals often claim to be "stronger," because they are brave enough to face life without a crutch. Because they are not addicted to religion, they are free to live outside the repressive rules of religion.

To imply that non-religious people do not need crutches is misleading. Dependence on drugs, alcohol, tobacco, sex, money, power and material possessions demonstrates some people's need for crutches. Atheism can become a crutch for those addicted to a lifestyle contrary to God's standards of morality.

Rather than being weak, Christians are strong—not because they depend on themselves but on Christ.

Everyone needs a crutch. The question is what will we lean upon? Christianity provides what atheism never can: spiritual fulfillment, peace and forgiveness.

Resources: *Know Why You Believe*, Paul Little; *Defending Your Faith*, Dan Story; *Reason to Believe*, R. C. Sproul.

Hurdle #4: Jesus can't be the only way to God.

Jesus claimed that He was the only way to God (John 14:6). Such a claim is either totally true or totally false. Some have sought to give allegiance to Christianity, and yet they ignore Jesus' claim to be the only Savior. Critics argue that it is narrow-minded to insist Jesus is the only way to God.

If Christianity is true, then we must accept the teachings of Jesus Who demands our total allegiance. If one believes the claims of Jesus to be true, then the issue is settled.

Resources: *Is Jesus the Only Savior?*, Ronald Nash; *Jesus Under Fire*, Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, ed.; *The World's Religions*, Sir Norman Anderson.

Hurdle #5: What really matters is sincerity.

Some would argue that even if a person's religion is false, what really matters is his or her sincerity. This notion is based on the mistaken belief that God is pleased by "religion." However, the Bible teaches that non-Christian religions are direct rebellion against God.

Sincerity does not determine truth. One can be sincerely convinced of the truth and be sincerely wrong.

Sincerity does not somehow give validity to false religion. Sincerity is never an adequate substitute for the truth. Many evil men such as Hitler were very sincere in their beliefs. God judges mankind based upon truth, and that truth is Jesus Christ.

Resources: *True for You, But Not for Me*, Paul Copan; *Relativism*, Francis Beckwith and Greg Koukl; *Christianity on the Offense*, Dan Story.

Hurdle #6: What about those who have never heard?

Some would say, "If Christ is the only way to God, what about those who have not heard?" This question is usually an argument posed by those who are trying to rationalize their own rejection of Christ. Such questions sometimes imply that God is somehow not compassionate because He has imposed His plan of salvation upon mankind. Often such inquirers seem to imply that they are more compassionate than God!

The lostness of humankind is why on mission Christians are seeking to evangelize the whole world. No alternate plan of salvation is available for those who do not hear the gospel.

An important biblical principle to understand is that no one has ever remained lost who wanted to be found. Just as God sent Philip to the seeking Ethiopian, Jesus promises that all who seek shall find.

Resources: *Christ Among Other gods*, Erwin W. Lutzer; *What About Those Who Have Never Heard*, Ronald Nash; *Answers to Tough Questions*, Josh McDowell and Don Stewart.

Hurdle #7: The Bible is filled with errors.

Because the Bible is the Word of God and God cannot lie (Isaiah 55:10-11; John 17:17; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 4:12), the scriptures are totally trustworthy and free from any mixture of error. God's Word is described as "the word of truth" (2 Corinthians 6:7; Colossians 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:15; James 1:18). Inerrancy is not a theory about the Bible; it is the teaching of scripture itself.

What most people claim as errors in the Bible are not errors but difficulties. People think they have stumbled upon apparent inconsistencies when they have not taken the time to find out all the facts or made an in-depth study of the scripture.

It must be understood that neither lack of understanding nor an unresolved difficulty constitutes an error. Many Bible questions have been answered as new discoveries have been made in fields such as language, history, archeology and other sciences.

Regardless of the kind of difficulty found, not a single irreconcilable error can be found in the pages of scripture.

Resources: *Ready with an Answer*, John Ankerberg and John Weldon; *Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Vol. 1*, Josh McDowell; *When Critics Ask*, Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe.

Hurdle #8: Why is there evil?

The thrust of this charge is that the presence of evil disproves the existence of God. But is the presence of evil consistent with the God of the scriptures? Consider:

- God did not originate evil. Sin entered the world through Adam's disobedience.
- Evil is necessary for a free world. Free will gives possibility to wrong choice.
- There is an important reason God hesitates to stop evil. Just as parents often allow their children to make mistakes and suffer, God acts in a parental fashion with His creation.
- Not all suffering is bad. As a shepherd may break and then mend the leg of a wandering lamb, so God sometimes uses discipline for instruction.

- God has the solution for evil. Jesus accomplished the ultimate defeat of evil, but just as we don't yet have eternal bodies, evil has yet to be removed from the world.

Resources: *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, P. Kreeft and R. Tacelli; *The Roots of Evil*, Norman Geisler.

Hurdle #9: Why is there suffering?

Many hold that pain is evidence against God's existence. However, pain can be used for good and bad purposes. Not all pain is bad. Pain is an essential mechanism for survival. Without pain, the body is stripped of vital protection.

Pain is an important signal to warn of even greater danger.

Suffering is a signal. It can also be a spiritual signal, which reminds us of the fragile balance of life and of our own mortality. C.S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*, notes that suffering "removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul." Lewis writes, "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Some suffering actually helps to bring greater good. This is best seen in the suffering of Christ. On the cross, God took His own medicine. Jesus traveled down the road of pain, suffering, loneliness and death—a road that led to the cross. Christ is not just a Savior; He is our suffering Savior. The cross is the ultimate example of innocent suffering.

At the heart of this issue is the underlying challenge that God is not fair. The problem lies in the fact that society holds pleasure as its chief goal in life. This philosophy is known as hedonism. To those who live by this philosophy, suffering in any form is offensive. To say that God is not fair is a extremely dangerous charge.

If God gave us what we deserve, we would be in big trouble. It would be foolish to ask God for justice; what we need is mercy. If we received justice, all of us would be destroyed. God's mercy and grace are so taken for granted that suffering and pain shock us.

Resources: *In Defense of the Faith*, Dave Hunt; *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis; *Making Sense out of Suffering*, Peter Kreeft.

Hurdle #10: Why would a loving God send people to hell?

God hates evil. God has defeated evil, and the day will soon come when evil will cease. Evil and suffering are temporary; all pain will one day be eliminated. Though evil is very real, it is also very temporary.

The day God deals with evil, He will deal with all evil. This is the promise of the coming perfect world. In the meantime, God is striving for as many people as possible to be saved. The sad fact is that many will make the decision not to be a part of God's heaven. God will not send them to hell, they will send themselves.

For God to force people to go to heaven against their wishes would not be heaven—it would be hell. Atheist Jean-Paul Sartre noted that the gates of hell are locked from the inside by the free choice of men.

Resources: *Why I Believe*, D. James Kennedy; *Crucial Questions About Hell*, Ajith Fernando; *Knowing the Truth about Heaven and Hell*, Harry Blaimires.