

# Tough Questions: Can a Thinking Person be a Christian?

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## Course syllabus

Course web site: [www.covingtoninnovations.com/tough](http://www.covingtoninnovations.com/tough) (may move to church web site later)

- Jan. 8, 2020 The Christian mind: Can a thinking person be a Christian?
- Jan. 15, 2020 How do we know God exists?
- Jan. 22, 2020 Scientific method and the nature of truth
- Jan. 29, 2020 Creation and evolution
- Feb. 5, 2020 Where did the Bible come from, and can we trust it?
- Feb. 12, 2020 Who is Jesus and did He really rise from the dead?
- Feb. 19, 2020 Explaining Christian sexual morality to a non-Christian world
- Feb. 26, 2020 *no class (Ash Wednesday service)*
- Mar. 4, 2020 Can non-Christians go to heaven?

### Recommended reading (this list will be expanded):

Donald Williams, [The Young Christian's Survival Guide](#)

Paul E. Little, [Know Why You Believe](#)

Kreeft and Tacelli, [Handbook of Christian Apologetics](#)

## Can a thinking person be a Christian?

**When I was young, I thought** that as I became more educated, I'd have to either abandon traditional Christianity or start ignoring evidence. As I grew older I learned that:

- a. The claims of Christ survive all the intellectual tests I can put them to;
- b. If they did not, they would not be worth believing.
- c. Very few people have actually become non-Christians because of intellectual arguments. Mostly, they take it on authority that *someone else* has disproved the Gospel... or they fall away from Christ *first* and then look for rational justification. (*Behavior first, then intellect.*)

**It makes no sense to be a semi-Christian**, to just "draw inspiration" from the Gospel without actually believing it.

- a. Why should I "draw inspiration" from Christ rather than somebody else?
- b. Christ didn't present himself as a source of "inspiration." He claimed to be God. Either he *was* God, or he was not a sane man! (Some say he didn't actually claim to be God. Well, his followers certainly thought he did, from a very early stage.)

**So why shouldn't I be a Christian?** Some *non-objections*:

### a. (Non-objection #1): Nonexistence of some kind of God other than what we believe in.

- i. Childish notion of a grandfather sitting on clouds hurling thunderbolts...
- ii. Shapeless, "sophisticated" God with no personal attributes
- iii. Finite, imperfect god like Zeus
- iv. Philosophical arguments about a God who does not reveal himself. Such a God would indeed be undetectable, perhaps even meaningless.

**b. (Non-objection #2) Arguments that all religions are equally good** so that we have no right to make exclusive claims.

i. Christians *don't* claim that other religions are *totally wrong*, only that they are *less complete and less accurate than ours*. It's the atheist who has to believe that almost all the people who have ever lived have been seriously mistaken about one of the things that mattered to them most. (C. S. Lewis)

ii. It *sounds* charitable and fair to say all religions are equally good – until you think about it. What would we think of a geologist who said, "Some people believe the world is round and some believe the world is flat, and I think we should let everyone choose the belief with which he is most comfortable"? Would you say he's an exceptionally wise and tolerant geologist?

iii. If you say *all religions deserve equal protection under the law*, I agree with you – not because I believe all religions are equally true, but because whenever government gets involved in prescribing religion for the people, it's likely to prescribe corrupt religion.

iv. People who say all religions are equally true often mean that *all religions are equally false* – that none of them conveys any factual information about God, that all are just fluff and warm feelings.

### **Has scientific discovery actually made it impossible to believe in Christ?**

a. Do you really think that, in the past, people believed in Christ as Saviour only because they found science inadequate? Exactly what branch of science is He a substitute for?

b. Do you think that people in Biblical times believed in **miracles** only because they didn't know that miracles were "impossible"? Logical fallacy. If they didn't know these things were "impossible" they wouldn't consider them miraculous.

c. "**Chronological snobbery**" – the notion that until recently, everybody was stupid, associated with desire of 20th-century people (often advocates of science) to feel superior.

### **d. Limits of science**

i. Science deals only with regularities of nature – not historical facts, nor the ultimate purpose or origin of the Universe. You cannot do a scientific experiment to prove that I was born in Valdosta or to find out who shot Kennedy or why the universe exists.

ii. Scientific knowledge consists of conjectures proposed for refutation. "Proof" occurs only in mathematics, not in science. (See any philosophy of science textbook.)

iii. The public (even the scientific public) often romanticizes a scientific theory in a way that a working scientist should never do. To a scientist, evolution is the theory that present-day life forms are the product of (mindless) random variation and natural selection. To many non-scientists (and to some scientists who, outside the laboratory, are looking for something to put their faith in), evolution is a Grand Glorious Process that Explains Our Place in the Universe.

iv. I want to add that *I have considerably more respect for evolutionary biology* than some Christians think I ought to.

The way you find out where a trail of scientific evidence leads is to follow it. The evidence that leads to evolutionary biology is not going to go away. It's God-given – part of His created universe! If we're interpreting it wrong, the only way to find out is to *keep following the trail*. And also keep reading our Bible carefully so that we don't try to defend things that aren't in it.

Here's an analogy. About 100 years ago, astronomers were sure the universe was infinitely old, which contradicts the Biblical teaching that it was created. Today they're sure it's *not* infinitely old, that it had a definite beginning. If, 100 years ago, you had managed to kill off astronomy, you would have prevented the Big Bang from being discovered.

Let's not try to kill off evolutionary biology. At the same time, let's make a *sharp distinction* between a scientific theory and a man-made religion. Some people try to use evolution as a substitute for God. (Cf. the "Darwin fish," which is funny because it makes so little sense.) That won't do!

v. *Science itself originated from, and depends on, a Biblical worldview.*

If you believe that "what's physical is bad, what's spiritual is good," you won't want to get your hands dirty with the physical universe. (There is a gradation from the mystic who doesn't want to tangle with the evils of physical matter, to the rich snob who wants everything physical to be done by the servants!)

If you believe that the flowers and the trees have spirits, you won't want to bother them. "Don't mess with Mother Nature" is a common theme in non-Christian religions.

But if you believe that God created us in His image (so we can share at least a little of His understanding), and put us *in charge* of the earth and its bounty, and that when He created the physical world He pronounced it *good*, then you're in the ideal position to be a scientist!

e. **Skepticism about the Bible** merely because of its age.

i. Part of the American world-view is that *nothing happened before 1776, or maybe 1492*. We easily underestimate how much is known about the ancient past.

ii. We have lots of records of first-century Palestine. Jesus is mentioned (for example) by the Roman historian Tacitus; he is obviously not a legendary figure.

iii. 20th-century archeology has substantiated the Bible far beyond what 19th-century scholars dared to hope. Integrity of Bible is assured by manuscripts that were sent all over the world at an early stage and have (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) been re-gathered. No textual discrepancies of doctrinal importance.

iv. Distinguish: (a) Archeological or historical discoveries; (b) Hypotheses that expect to be confirmed by archeological or historical discoveries; (c) Untestable speculation. The last of these is common in popular books "debunking" Christ, and even in serious (though in my opinion misguided) scholarship.

(N. T. Wright points out that the books debunking Christ do not all say the same thing; they are not following real evidence, so their trail doesn't lead anywhere. But they sell well because lots of people want Christ gotten rid of.)

**What are the basic claims of Christ?**

a. That God exists, created the world, and loves us individually.

- b. That because of sin (our voluntary rebellion), we are separated from God.
- c. That because Christ died for our sins, God can and does offer us undeserved reconciliation.
- d. That we must accept God's mercy for ourselves; it won't be given to us against our will.

### How have Christians dealt with intellectual objections?

a. **"Modernist" or "liberal" Christianity:** Assume that historic Christianity *can't* stand up to modern objections, but Christianity can be reworked into something that does. This is basically a late 19th-century movement but still has plenty of advocates, e.g., Bishop Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, and many popular preachers (esp. in the Northeast).

**NOTE: Undue fear of "liberalism"** is part of the post-2015 climate of opinion, at least outside of academia. Nowadays some people object to any open-mindedness or awareness of differing positions. *We are after TRUTH, not a position on an imagined conservative-to-liberal scale.*

b. **Anti-intellectualism:** Simply reject modern science and scholarship; "evolution is bunk" (maybe astronomy is bunk too); "all you need is your Bible."

This grows out of the American frontier experience. We've been alone on the frontier with nothing but our Bibles for 200 years. We've lost touch with our own intellectual heritage.

This approach leaves us entirely unable to communicate with the modern world. We would not be carrying out the Great Commission.

It also *dishonors God* by refusing to use the minds and the knowledge He has given us.

c. **"Christianity-in-a-bubble":** Keep your faith separate from the rest of your intellectual life. This approach sometimes jumps off from neo-orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth who revolted against modernism by asserting (correctly) that the Gospel does not make sense unless you accept it as the whole package.

Unfortunately, if you go too far, you end up with anti-intellectualism with a college degree. You still end up with a compartmentalized mind, assuming that *faith is not rationally explainable or justifiable*. Thus your faith does not connect with anything outside it. *This has been popular with evangelical churches.*

Remember that the term "leap of faith" comes from an existentialist philosopher (Kierkegaard), not the Bible; and "ya gotta believe" is either Yogi Berra or Peter Pan, not Jesus.

(Non-Christians would *like* us to keep our faith in a bubble, especially to keep it from affecting our politics! But we have a name for people who don't let their faith influence their actions. We call them *hypocrites*.)

d. **The traditional approach** of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, C. S. Lewis, and the unbroken 2000-year tradition of Christian scholarship: *Relate Christian faith to all areas of knowledge*, not by force-fitting, but by letting Christian revelation shed light on everything else.

i. **Truth does not conflict with truth:** We should not be afraid of seeking knowledge from *any* legitimate source (science, archeology, whatever), because "all truth is God's truth." When there appears to be a conflict, it is because we do not yet know enough, and we should seek further knowledge.

ii. **The claims of Christ are rationally defensible** – not *provable*, perhaps, but certainly *explainable* and *not disprovable*. (I Peter 3:15, "always be ready to explain your faith...") We cannot make people Christians by rational argument, but we can clear away objections.

**The rational defense of the Christian faith, and the study of its relation to other areas of knowledge, is called *apologetics* (from Greek *apologia* "defense, explanation").**

### **So what's a Christian to do?**

- a. Be intellectually responsible; understand your faith to a level proportional to your general education. (Some people want me to tell them they can *ignore* large areas of science or philosophy. No!)
- b. Know how to answer objections. I don't mean rattle off "answers" from a memorized list. I mean take the objections seriously, think about them, deal with them honestly. Don't give the impression that we object to people thinking for themselves. And we're not playing "stump the quiz kid."
- c. Understand that we cannot argue people into accepting Christ. Don't let witnessing turn into a battle of wits. Always make it clear that the confrontation is between the inquiring person and the evidence, not between them and us.
- d. Remember that intellectual objections may only be a cover for objections of another kind.
  - i. Moral objections (person is tied to a lifestyle that conflicts with Christian morality)
  - ii. Superficial dislike of Christians
  - iii. Fear of having to serve God
- e. Adopt an appropriate style of witness. We know what to say to people who pay lip-service to the Bible without knowing what is really in it. Dealing with non-Christians requires a different approach; *know your mission field*.

**Only as a forgiven sinner can you take the side of good without hypocrisy.**

### **Preview of something that will come up repeatedly:**

#### **A change in intellectual climate in my lifetime**

**Modernism (1950s)** – the expectation that everything old should be replaced with something new and scientific. Science is the most prestigious intellectual activity. "Prescientific" people were ignorant and superstitious.

**Postmodernism (2000s)** – a reaction against modernism, first in the arts, then in all areas of intellectual activity. Key assumption: We do not know anything with certainty; you have a right to believe whatever you want, but you don't have a right to "impose" your beliefs on others. There is no objective reality.

Anything from before our outside these movements is often called **premodern**, but premodernism is not a movement – just a catch-all name for everything else.

**As postmodernism replaces modernism**, we have ended up having a *different set of arguments* with people who think Christianity is not intellectually tenable. We will go into this...