

For Carole and Those Who Read It:

A Snapshot of Christian Apologetics

By Anselm Asaph Wooden

Once upon a time, there was a young freshman at Illinois Central College who was taking a philosophy of religion class. He was somewhat concerned that his faith would be under attack by this professor who claimed to be a “militant agnostic.” The professor was well-known for his tendency to shred the faith of young Christians who took his classes. The student was well-known for carrying around a duffel bag full of Biblical and theological reference material.¹ Time and time again, the professor made assertions about scripture that were unfounded or demonstrably false. Frequently, the professor spoke from his own ignorance against the ignorance of a great number of nominal Christians. As I sat through Dr. Pearce's class and attended the Student Philosophy Association meetings every week, I became more and more convinced of the Bible's teaching concerning those who deny God's existence.

I want to give you three general guidelines for your defense of the faith in this paper. I will make these guidelines as easy to understand as I can in the brief time I intend to spend writing this. First, I want to remind you of and explain what the Bible says concerning those who deny God's existence, and in the course of this exposition, I hope to provide some guidance as to what faith is and is not. Secondly, we will look as simply and briefly as possible at the three traditional arguments for the existence of God. Lastly, I shall give the standard arguments for the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the focal point of our faith and the most direct approach for witnessing. In my concluding remarks, I hope to provide some clarity on how to proceed.

Let's begin by looking at the first chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans. In Romans 1:16, Paul gives what could be called his thesis statement for the letter. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”² Note this: the gospel is not “I'm a good person, and you can be, too, with a little help from God.” The gospel is that God uses His limitless power to save those who believe. In the following verses, Paul shows why it is necessary for God to use such power.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

(Romans 1:17-25 ESV)

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- 1 Anymore, the wealth of resources for Biblical studies available on the Internet is simply staggering. For example, you can [look at the Old and New Testaments in their original Hebrew and Greek](#) for free.
 - 2 Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

God is furious with mankind. What's more, He has good reason to be. According to Him, not only is it possible to demonstrate the existence of God to people, but it is unnecessary to do so because it has already been done. According to verses eighteen through twenty-one, humanity is fully aware of the existence of God. In verse eighteen, we are told that humanity simply suppresses the truth. In verse nineteen, Paul writes that what can be known about God has already been shown to them by God Himself. In verse twenty, God tells us that He has not only shown people the truth about Himself, but the truth about God has even been seen and understood through creation. As a result, God's Word tells us that no one can claim they had insufficient evidence of the existence of God.

The fundamental human problem is not intellectual. It is primarily moral. People know who God is. They simply refuse to honor God as God. They do not want to acknowledge someone to whom they have a debt they cannot possibly pay. They do not want to owe gratitude to someone greater than themselves. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, they want to be elevated to God's position. Unfortunately, for a great many people, God does not fight this depraved inclination of the human heart. In some cases, God hardly even restrains this wickedness. Indeed, in the saddest of cases, God actually gives people over to it. Man, made in the glorious image of God, trades that glory away to live life for the self.

What we must not forget is that we ourselves were in this situation before the Spirit of God brought us to life. Moreover, we have a tendency to fall back into the old way of life which was in fact the way of death. Despite our ongoing struggle with sin, however, the faith that God has given us cannot be nullified. What is this faith? I want to contrast biblical faith with two false views of faith. First, biblical faith is not an emotional commitment to something that has been proven false intellectually. If someone were to actually prove³ that Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead, then we would be forced to conclude with Paul that our “faith is futile.”⁴ Second, biblical faith is not simply a product of reason or empirical evidence or even a combination of the two. If you were to take all of the rational argumentation and empirical evidence for Christianity together, it would not be enough to convince a hardened skeptic. Rather, biblical faith is trust in the promises of God—a trust that is neither irrational nor ungrounded in historical evidence. However, it is a trust, for the promises cannot be proven definitively as they are yet future in some sense. As it says in Hebrews 11:1, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for,” and in Romans 8:24, “who hopes for what he sees?”⁵

3 Proving something is a very different thing from merely arguing something convincingly. If someone actually proves a thing to be true, that thing must actually be true. Likewise, if something is actually proven false, that thing actually is false. However, someone can argue something convincingly without actually proving anything.

4 1 Corinthians 15:17. The chapter as a whole speaks of the necessity of the resurrection, which may be a good refresher.

5 The structure of this paragraph owes much to the article “What is Faith?” written by John Roberson, a friend of mine who studied philosophy down Texas. Anyone who is interested in obtaining a copy of the article may procure one from

It is now time for a whirlwind tour of the classical arguments for the existence of God. I will start with the [teleological argument](#). This is the one with which you're probably already the most familiar. This is the argument from order and purpose, from the Greek *τελος*, meaning “purpose”, “goal”, or “end”. It's at the core of the Intelligent Design argument. Perhaps the simplest expression of it is the watchmaker analogy. If you were walking around in the desert and found a watch sitting there, what would you make of the watch? With all of the moving parts working together to keep the watch functioning as a reliable instrument for telling time, would you conclude that it came together randomly? Surely, you would conclude that an object of such complexity and purpose had a designer. Likewise, with the complexity of life and the universe that you can see around you, it comes naturally to conclude that there is some designer behind this. Now, Christian, be careful, for the advent of evolutionary theory has made this argument much less convincing without further argumentation than it was in times past, but the purpose of this paper is not to argue. I am only at this point seeking to give you a starting point. Perhaps I will run through some potential objections and counter-arguments in a later addendum to this paper, but for now, try to think of what intellectual objections an unbeliever might have to this argument. The wikipedia article hyperlinked above will be of great assistance.

The second of the three main classical arguments is the [cosmological argument](#). This is the argument from causation. Everything we see in the universe (and almost everything we don't see) is contingent. That is, everything we see in the universe is caused by something else. You are the product of your mother and father, and they are likewise the products of their parents, and they theirs, and so forth. The world is full of causes and effects, and with many causes being effects of some other cause and many effects being causes of some other effect. However, we know of nothing that is completely independent of another cause. This is problematic. There are a great deal of causal chains in the world, but where do they all end? If anything exists now, something must have always existed, for otherwise we would have the absurdity of either an infinite regress or of self-creation. There are only four possible explanations of an entity. First, it could be an illusion. Few of you are likely to encounter someone who would make this claim of the universe, so I mention it only in passing. The second option is that it was created by another. This will lead to an [infinite regress](#) if employed exclusively as an explanation. The third possibility is that it was self-created. Self-creation is a logical fallacy. For something to create itself, it would have to exist before it existed, which is absolute nonsense. Finally, there is the possibility that an entity might be self-existent. Such an entity has the power of being, the power of existence, within itself. This is quite different from self-creation. There, a thing creates itself. Here, the entity exists eternally. This is God. Once more, I have to urge caution

in the use of this argument. I will likely now be forced by my own conscience to add to this paper at a later date. Be that as it may, for now, I shall have to defer discussing the anticipated rebuttals. As with the teleological argument, you can sample them in the wikipedia article hyperlinked above.

The last of the three standard classical arguments for the existence of God is the ontological argument. This is the most airtight argument for the existence of God, but it is also the one that no one ever really likes. Most people feel somehow cheated by it, and many object that it is defining God into existence. I hope to show you how this is an invalid objection by explaining the different levels or modes of existence while explaining a little bit about the nature of God. There are any number of entities that cannot possibly exist in the world around us because they are logically contradictory. The standard example is that of a square circle.⁶ First, we have an idea of a square. An image of a square comes to mind. We also have an idea of a circle. An image of a circle comes to mind. However, when we try to join these two ideas together into one, it seems (and indeed logically is) impossible. The existence of a square circle is an impossibility. We now have an idea of a square circle in our minds, so the idea of a square circle exists in our minds, but the square circle itself does not and cannot possibly exist. It is an impossible entity.

All of the entities we see around us are possible. These entities are not only possible but also actual. They actually exist. For example, my bed and my laptop actually exist. They are both possible and actual, but I could imagine a world in which they did not exist. It's not like there's something about them that's so amazing that they necessarily exist. There are many other things that are merely possible. In other words, although there is nothing about these things that is logically contradictory such that they could not possibly exist, they don't happen to actually exist in reality. They exist only as concepts within our own minds. For example, I'm imagining a unicorn right now. It's not real, but I can imagine it. My laptop, then, is an actual entity, but a unicorn is a merely possible entity.

What about God? Into which category does God fall? Who or what is God, anyway? Although a great deal could be said in response to this question, allow me to suggest a very simple definition of the infinitude of God. God is the greatest conceivable Being. God is an Entity greater than any other entity imaginable. God is superior in every way to everything. This is speaking purely conceptually. Our working definition of God is that He is the greatest conceivable Being. It follows, then, that God could certainly not be a logically impossible entity. It is better to exist than not to exist. However, putting Him on the same level as merely possible entities or even the actual entities in the world around us does not do His superlative essence justice. Rather, God is the only necessary Entity.

⁶ In standard Euclidean geometry, an object cannot be both a square and a circle at the same time because of the way they are defined. This is not necessarily true if you play with the rules of geometry.

Thus far, the argument has not actually argued for anything more than a definition of God. I haven't actually been making an argument up to this point for God's existence. Rather than saying something like, "God must exist because..." I've said, "When I talk about God, this is what I mean. This is what my idea of God is like." Now, we come to the argument. If this is what we mean by God, the person who denies the existence of God is uttering a logical contradiction. Someone who says that God does not exist is saying that God is on the same level as a square circle or a unicorn, which is the same as saying that the greatest conceivable Being is akin to an impossible or merely possible entity, which is the same as saying the greatest conceivable Being is not the greatest conceivable Being. In other words, someone who denies the existence of God is saying something as nonsensical as someone who says that square circles exist. It is not that we have defined God into existence anymore than we have defined a square circle out of existence; it is that we have recognized the impossibility of conceiving of this Being as non-existent, just as we recognize the impossibility of conceiving of a square circle as existent.

I doubt if anyone has ever been converted by this argument, but even those who are otherwise dogmatic atheists struggle with this one. David Hume, for example, the famous eighteenth-century skeptic, is said to have once been going about his usual daily activities when he suddenly threw his papers up in the air in a moment of realization, shouting something to the effect that the ontological argument works after all. He later changed his mind, of course, but there are still some (the philosophy professor I mentioned in my introduction for one, despite his occasional atheism) who find the argument to be very powerful. Immanuel Kant put forth the most common counterargument, but as I have presented the case, his objection does not seem to apply. Existence is not predicated. Necessity is predicated, as opposed to actuality, mere possibility, or impossibility. This is probably thoroughly confusing you, however. As I'm already going to return at some point to reply to the common objections to the other two arguments (the cosmological and teleological arguments), I will do the same with this one. The biggest problem with this argument, however, is that we are poor judges of what is great. Thus, people can have all kinds of false ideas about what God is like from this argument because He is defined as the greatest conceivable Being.⁷

That's enough about the ontological argument, though. I want to move on to my third and final point: the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the most critical point, in fact, because of all of the world's religions, Christianity is preeminently historical. There is a sense in which no

⁷ The ontological argument was hinted at before they wrote on it, but its two most famous proponents were Rene Descartes and St. Anselm of Canterbury. Within the context of his writing, Descartes' form of the argument seems to be more of an explanation of how he knows God exists than an attempt to convince others. Anselm, on the other hand, was very aggressive, for the basic premise of his argument was that "the fool has said in his heart there is no God."

other religion even needs to be historical, for all of the others are fundamentally centered on a system of morality or a path to enlightenment. An ethical code, whether that of Islam or even many modern varieties of Judaism, does not require a historical backdrop, and the paths to enlightenment usually involve the realization that reality is some kind of illusion, so they would actually be quite set against any historical claims of the normal sort. Against these sorts of religions, which require man to do something—usually a great many things—in order to reach God, Christianity stands in blinding contrast, for it gives us not a list of rules to follow or some secret knowledge to seek, but points us to a God who came down to us, a God-Man who lived a perfect life and died a horrible death in order to reconcile us to God—and it all happened beginning in the time of Caesar Augustus. In other words, it tells us not something that we must do, but rather something that has been done for us in real history. Since the focus of Christianity is on Christ, the question of the historicity of His Person and work is absolutely critical. As a result, Christianity is the only world religion that can be proven false on its most critical point: as mentioned above, if Christ is not raised from the dead, our faith is futile.

Christianity is presently the world's largest religion, although Islam is closing that gap. Ever since its inception, it has been a key player in Western ideology, and that arguably dominant since it was legalized by Constantine.⁸ Where did it come from? There are some conspiracy theorists out there who will deny there ever was a historical Jesus and probably some who likewise deny that Peter or Paul are real historical figures, but they are few and far between in our day—especially among historians. Most, in fact, will grant that, apart from the miracles, a great deal (and, if the miracles are thrown out, perhaps all) of what's recorded in the New Testament is historical, although many dispute the fine details. Certainly, Luke is regarded as one of the most detailed and thorough historians of the ancient world. We don't need an inerrant Bible to establish the veracity of Christian truth claims. All we need is a generally historically reliable Bible.

Paul was unquestionably one of the most important catalysts for the early growth of Christianity. This does not seem strange to us, but it would have seemed truly bizarre to anyone who lived in the first century. After all, Paul was once Saul, the man whose zeal for persecuting the Church seemed to know no limit. What was it that changed Saul to Paul, the man whose writings have so strongly shaped Christian theology and, as a result, Western culture for the past two thousand years? According to Paul's own account in Acts, it was the appearance of Jesus Christ to him on the road to Damascus. As a result of this encounter and the resulting blindness, healing, and investigation of the

⁸ [The Edict of Milan](#) in 313 did not make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, contrary to popular belief derived primarily from *The DaVinci Code* and similar sources. In fact, all it did was grant religious freedom and return property stolen from the church by the government. It was friendly to Christianity, but it did not require conversions. The previous Edict of Nicomedia (311) had granted toleration of Christianity, but it was not as friendly in its language.

Old Testament prophecies and contemporary witness, Paul was thoroughly convinced of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can see this in his attestation to the resurrection and its central place in his ministry when he says to the Church in Corinth:

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

(1 Corinthians 15:3-8 ESV)

The cross loomed larger in Paul's mind than arguably anyone else in the history of the Church, but Christ's resurrection was every bit as central to Paul's teaching as Christ's crucifixion. Certainly, Paul was convinced that Christ had risen from the dead or else he was merely a deceiver. The second option may appeal to a great many people who do not like what Paul has to say on any number of controversial issues, but that is actually precisely the point. Very few people liked what Paul had to say, his former associates in the Sanhedrin least of all. Paul gained nothing and lost everything by his conversion if Christianity is not true, and for him to be a deceiver, he would have to be aware of this fact. In other words, what possible motivation would Paul have had to endure the sufferings to which he was subjected⁹ if he did not believe that what he was teaching people was true? Here, some would level the charge of insanity, which might explain a few things, but stops somewhat short of explaining the five hundred brothers to whom Christ appeared at one time-- not to mention the behavior of the other apostles, Peter leastwise.

Peter was always the first to put his foot in his mouth whenever the situation required such. He was eager and zealous throughout Christ's ministry prior to the crucifixion. When the time for the trial came, however, Peter abandoned Christ with the cursings our Lord had predicted. Peter was crushed by the death of Jesus, and he fell into resignation and despair with the rest of the disciples. Indeed, they huddled together in private residences to mourn; even after the initial discovery of the empty tomb, they seemed quite unable to grasp the concept of a crucified and resurrected Messiah. It might even be argued that right up until Pentecost, the very people who had spent the most time with Jesus were still fairly content to stay behind closed doors with this information.

Certainly, when Peter wrote that they did not follow cleverly devised myths when they preached the gospel, it was true, for nothing could be less clever in their age than the gospel as it has come down to us. Do some research on the practices of crucifixion, and you will see what a scandal it is that this was done to God. Beyond that, there are all sorts of things that would have made the

⁹ See 2 Corinthians 11. Becoming one of Christianity's first missionaries was not a white collar job with benefits. It meant trial after trial. Who would go through these things in order to tell a lie? If we do not assume the impossibility of miracles at the outset, it seems far more reasonable to say that at least Paul believed what he preached.

resurrection quite dubious to a first-century audience that we don't really mind. For example, the first witnesses were women, a gender which had little respect and no legal voice in themselves. What kind of weight could be given to the story of the resurrection in the Ancient Near-Eastern mindset when its initial witnesses were women? If they made it up, why did the disciples paint themselves in such negative terms? Granted, they needed to make their story believable, but did they need to bring up again and again how ignorant and cowardly (particularly after the crucifixion) they were throughout the gospel narratives? Moreover, in the Greek world, death was liberation from the shell of our bodies which traps and can contaminate our souls; a bodily resurrection would be a frustrating return to that prison. In spite of this, the center of Christianity is the death, burial, and *bodily resurrection* of Jesus Christ, and the promise of the gospel is that we ourselves will be given new bodies like Christ's.¹⁰

I have not presented the evidence in the most systematic and thorough manner. As a matter of fact, this treatment is meager and amateur.¹¹ Nevertheless, I trust it will be enough to spur you on to further research and encourage you in your faith. Allow me to reemphasize that faith is necessary. Our faith is not against reason, for there are many strong arguments that support the truth of Christianity. Neither is our faith rationalistic. Rather, our faith rests between the opposite poles of rationalism and irrational fideism: we have a reasonable faith. One description of faith I have found particular helpful is that faith is “reason gone courageous.”¹² Faith does not have all of the evidence before it, but faith trusts that when all of the facts are finally brought to light, it will be justified in its prior belief. This faith is not something we conjure up within ourselves or others. Faith is a gift from God, and while we must be honest, knowledgeable, and bold about what we believe, the weight of saving our friends, family members, classmates, professors, and co-workers does not rest on our shoulders. Instead, that weight was borne by God Himself on a cross outside of Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago. Indeed, it is still borne by God as He brings people to life today in the application of the work accomplished on that cross. My prayer for you is that, as you rest in the work that God Himself has done, you would find yourself part of the work He is doing in the lives of those around you.

10 1 Corinthians 15:35-49. The view that matter is evil was called “Gnosticism,” and it was a big competitor with Christianity for some. It was Gnosticism that produced the so-called “gospels” of Thomas, Judas, and Mary. For more comprehensive coverage of factors that would have discounted Christianity in its original culture, see [this article](#).

11 I strongly recommend to you that you begin reading a book length treatment of apologetics. There are several resources available out there. In fact, most libraries will have copies of *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel or *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. A short, easy-to-read book by R.C. Sproul answering some basic objections to Christianity called *Reason to Believe* was actually one of the things that kick-started my continued obsession with theology and apologetics. I also recommend that you pick only one at first so that you don't overwhelm yourself and become discouraged because of it. I think I read *Reason to Believe* twice before much of it stuck in my head, so don't give up!

12 I can't recall the name of the one who said it at this moment, but Philip Yancey mentions him in his book *Reaching for the Invisible God*. I'll have to find it later. One of the benefits of not writing this sort of thing professionally or academically is that I don't have to have it all together here. Just remember: if something I said sounds smart, I probably got it from someone else. I try not to steal ideas, but sometimes I don't know where I'm getting them anymore.