



Donald J. Johnson

An **Easy-to-Follow Guide** for
Natural Conversations and Effective Apologetics

How to Talk to a
Skeptic



STUDY GUIDE

How to Talk to a Sceptic Study Guide

Introduction and Chapter 1: No Selling Required

Pre-reading Questions

If a spiritual sceptic or seeker came to your town and asked why he or she should become a Christian, what would you tell them? If they went to every church and religious organization in town, what kind of answers do you think they would hear from those places?

Have you ever heard the phrase, "I'm glad you found something that works for you, but I'm not interested." or "It's true for you, and that's fine, but it's not true for me." How would you deal with these counters to the gospel?

Review and Discussion Questions

Looking back over your answers to the pre-reading questions, has this chapter made you think about or adjust your answers at all?

Don suggests that not only is skepticism on the rise, but that our culture is more aggressively anti-Christian. Have you found this to be the case in your experience?

In the introduction, Don mentioned three areas in which people need help. What were they? Do you think one or more of these areas is a particular need in your life?

What does Don mean by skeptic?

What is wrong with the notion of shopping for God?

Worldviews answer the big questions of life. What are some of these questions? (Don listed eight.)

Do you know anyone who dabbles in several religions at once? What is the false belief behind this practice?

What are some of the main differences between understanding religion as a consumer product versus understanding it as a worldview?

What is the most important question we should ask regarding a religion?

Instead of sales pitch, what should the conversation be?

For Further Study

How Now Shall We Live by Charles Colson

Total Truth by Nancy Pearcey

God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics by C.S. Lewis:

The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog by James Sire

Creed or Chaos: Why Christians Must Choose Either Dogma or Disaster by Dorothy Sayers

Chapter 2: The Big Picture

Pre-reading Questions

What does it mean to have faith? How does faith relate to reason and evidence?

How would you deal with the following scenario?:

On a cross-country flight, the person sitting next to you notices that you are reading the Bible (or a Christian book.)

“You don’t really believe all that stuff, do you?” he asks.

“Excuse me?” you reply.

“All that superstition and nonsense about virgin births and people walking on water and raising the dead. I mean, science has proven that God doesn’t exist and that religion is all fairy tales. Nobody can take that seriously any more. Besides, who would want to worship a God who tortures people in hell for no good reason? I dabbled in Christianity a bit when I was young but now I’m an atheist. The whole thing was just too hokey for me. I think Christianity is basically for people who don’t think very deeply.”

Review and Discussion Questions

Looking back over your answers to the pre-reading questions, has this chapter made you think about or adjust your answers at all?

Don lists five reasons we should establish the topic of conversation as a comparison of worldviews. What are they? Do any of these issues strike you as especially important?

Don suggests that we should decline to try to answer the initial objections that skeptics present. Why would this be a difficult thing to do? What attitude would we need to cultivate in order to accomplish this? (One part of the answer might be that we need to get ourselves out of the way. We are there to represent Jesus, not our own interests.)

Discuss the biblical definition of faith. According to Don, faith is very personal. Rather than primarily being an assent to certain propositions, it is trust in a person. This trust is based on evidence. Can you see this principle at play in your relationships with other people? Do you trust someone without having any reason to, or does trust build as you see evidence of their character over time?

In this chapter Don compares the ministry of Jesus to the Exodus. These types of parallels will show up throughout the book, so keep an eye out for them.

Don gave examples from Jesus' ministry and the Exodus to support his claim that God loves to give us evidence. Can you think of other episodes from scripture in which God gave his people evidence to back up his claims?

Can you think of any other instances in the Bible where faith was demanded? What role did evidence play in those episodes? Had God revealed himself in some way before requiring faith?

Has God given you evidence of his trustworthiness in your own life, or do you think he just asks you to trust him blindly?

Why is it important to base your defense of Christianity on more than one piece of evidence?

It is tempting to want a "quick and easy answer" that will definitively make the case for Christianity and convince the skeptic that it is true. Don suggests that reality simply doesn't work that way. Discuss the importance of realizing that people are not input/output machines that will respond to having certain buttons pushed.

Do most unbelievers you know have a well thought out worldview alternative to Christianity? How helpful do you think it would be to get them to think in terms of having to explain and defend their own beliefs rather than just reject those of Christianity?

For Further Study

Christian Apologetics by Douglas Groothuis

Faith and Certitude by Thomas Dubay

Chapter 3: The State of the Doubter's Knowledge

Pre-reading Question

Think about some of the unbelievers in your life; particularly those that are fairly strongly against Christianity.

Why have they rejected the faith?

How much do they know about what Christianity teaches?

What do they think God is like, or supposed to be like? (This question applies even if they don't believe God exists. What is their view of the God that they think Christianity espouses?) Are they mostly wrong or right in their beliefs?

Review and Discussion Questions

Look back over your answers to the pre-reading questions. Are your answers based on your assessment, or theirs? In other words, are your answers largely assumptions on your part, or have you actually asked the unbeliever what he or she believes? How much time have you spent discussing that person's views and personal experiences? How does this compare to how much time you have spent discussing your experiences and beliefs or Christian teachings in general? Has this chapter caused you to re-think your answers to the pre-reading questions? If so, what would you adjust?

"The first step to having a fruitful worldview discussion is to find out what the skeptic believes." What two pieces of information do you want to learn from the skeptic?

Why is it important that we ask questions rather than immediately present a defense of Christianity?

We mentioned in chapter 2 that skeptics need more than a quick answer and engaging with them will take an investment of time. How important is building relationships in this process and how can asking questions contribute?

What do you think is the difference between the quarrels Paul talks about in 2 Timothy 2:23 and the legitimate debates that Paul takes part in? (Acts 17:17, for example)

What are some of the dangers of getting in an emotionally charged confrontational discussion?

What character traits will one need to develop and maintain to stay out of heated arguments? What sin is often present when one's goal is to "win" the debate?

C.S. Lewis suggests that skeptics often have genuine doubt that is reasonable in the state of their knowledge. What does he mean by this? Can you think of any examples of this kind of doubt in people that you know or have encountered?

Have you ever got to a point in a conversation where it seems like the two of you are speaking different languages? In other words, each person thinks they are making a clear point, but it seems completely incomprehensible to the other. What part might a lack of questioning play in this problem?

Glossary

Straw-Man Fallacy: “Arguments that attempt to disprove an opponent’s position by presenting it in an unfair, inaccurate light.” (*The Art of Argument* by Aaron Larson and Joel Hodge. Classical Academic Press, 2010) This fallacy occurs when person 1 has position X, but person 2 disregards (or perhaps is ignorant of) certain key points of X and instead presents a position that is only superficially similar to position X and actually constitutes a different position.

For Further Study

Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did by Randy Newman

Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions by Greg Koukl

Chapter 4: Love and the Meaning of Life

Pre-reading Questions

Watch this YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urITBBKTO68> What are the main theological errors on display here? In other words, what does the creator of the film, Mr. Current, have wrong about God and his redemptive plan?

If someone asked you, “Why did God create the world?” what would you say? Could you sum it up in a sentence? In a word?

In this chapter Don talks about the following skit from a children’s ministry curriculum book:

First, choose a kid from the audience that you are sure does not know that much about Christian theology. Have him come to the front of the group and explain that he has been selected to take part in a test. He will be asked a question and if he answers correctly he will receive a bowl of candy (or some other prize of your choosing). However, if he gets the question wrong, he will get a pie in the face. You then ask the child to define substitutionary atonement. When he is unable to answer, start preparing the whip cream in a plate for the big event. However, just before you hit him with it, a person from the audience (someone you have pre-arranged) should jump up and run forward, offering to take the child’s punishment on herself. You then smash the pie into the substitute’s face, explaining that, in the same way, Jesus was our substitute. He took our penalty on the cross.

What do you think is the main point of the skit? Is that an accurate theological point? Does it do a good job of getting that point across?

Review and Discussion Questions

Think back to your answers to the pre-reading questions. Has this chapter caused you to re-think how you would answer them? In what ways?

The culture tends to stereotype Christianity as a religion for simpletons, people who accept silly notions for no good reasons and are ignorant of history and philosophy. At the same time, those who oppose Christianity are often portrayed as knowledgeable and intellectually sophisticated. The truth is exactly the opposite. Christianity has an immense and rich intellectual tradition, and the doctrines of the church have been developed and scrutinized for thousands of years. Conversely, most current anti-Christian thought is actually quite shallow. There is no need to be intimidated by the new atheists or their followers.

Our culture tends to define love as a feeling. In what ways is Don's definition different? What three characteristics does Don ascribe to true love? On what does Don base his understanding of love?

"Love is what reality is all about." What did Don mean by that? Is that a new concept for you and what is your reaction?

How does Don relate love to worship and sacrifice? Discuss Don's example of the husband who over-values football and alcohol. How is this person living a lie?

How does Jesus sum up the commandments in Matthew 22:37-38? How does this make good sense in light of this chapter?

How does dis-ordered love relate to the fall of man? What part does our refusal to sacrifice what we need to sacrifice cause a break in our relationship with God and others?

What is the purpose of a parent asking their kids to sacrifice? How are God's parenting skills on display in the Exodus story?

Why does God equate idolatry with adultery?

Jesus was very clear that the cost of following him is very high. Indeed, some of his teaching comes across as unduly harsh ("I have come to turn a daughter against her mother..."). How does his passage make sense in light of this chapter? Discuss ways in which we can apply this principle in your own situation.

Glossary

Capricious: Characterized by or subject to whim; impulsive and unpredictable. (thefreedictionary.com)

Elmer Gantry: A satirical 1927 novel by Sinclair Lewis about a dishonest, greedy, philandering Baptist minister. The book was intended to be an indictment of fundamentalist religion.

Inherit the Wind: A fictionalized account of the 1925 Scopes "Monkey" Trial, in which John T. Scopes was convicted for teaching evolution. *Inherent the Wind* began as a play and was later made into several movies. *Inherit the Wind* portrays a highly misleading account of history, one that portrays the Christians involved as anti-intellectual buffoons. For the true story, see Edward L. Larson's *Summer for the Gods* (Basic Books, 2006).

For Further Study

The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success by Rodney Stark

How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization by Thomas E. Woods

The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism by Edward Feser

God and Ways of Knowing by Jean Danielou

Chapter 5: The Reason for the Rules

Review and Discussion Questions

What is the distinction between the “letter” of a law and the “spirit” of a law? How was the spirit of the law violated in the stories Don told at the beginning of this chapter about Ashly Erickson and Liam Adams?

Why is it wrong to use the “letter” of the law as a checklist for measuring holiness?

Don offers two reasons why people so often use God’s rules in the wrong way. What are they?

Do you find a tendency to do either of these things in your own life?

Do you have any experience with groups that focus on the external keeping of the law at the expense of the spirit? How did that make you feel?

Misusing the rules in the first way Don mentioned tends to result in guilt and frustration on one hand, and self-righteousness on the other. Those that keep the rules look down on those who don’t, while those that don’t (or are unable to, for whatever reason) feel guilty and continually frustrated. Either way, the end result is an unhealthy group of people.

Review the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. In what ways is the expert of the law misusing the rules in trying to justify his own sinfulness?

Can you think of other examples of how people interpret the rules so as to be able to “keep” them?

Don argues that the law is pedagogical, protective, and punitive. What does this mean? Can you think of other examples from the Bible or your own experience that show how a particular law accomplishes these goals?

Don claims that holiness is not about doing, it is about being – being like Christ. What is the difference between being and doing?

Discuss how Don and his wife use rules as a means to an end with their children, rather than an end in and of themselves. Can you think of other rules for children that parents use to build character?

Jesus exhibits his approach to the rules very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount. There he corrects several misconceptions held by the religious leaders of his day, of which Don cites two. Read Matthew 5 to 7 and discuss other examples Jesus offers. Look for the words, “You have heard it said...but I tell you....”

What did Don mean with this statement? “The rules are for children, for the immature. When one grows up, the law is no longer needed?” How does this relate to Paul’s view of the law?

What is the principle of accommodation? How did Don relate his experience with inner-city youth to the way God has dealt with different cultures historically? How does this apply to the issue of divorce and the apparent discrepancy between Moses and Jesus on this topic?

For Further Study

The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought by Stephen D. Benin

A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New by G.K. Beale

Chapter 6: What Jesus Meant by that Whole “Born Again” Thing

Pre-reading Questions

You are out with your kids (or grandkids, nephews and nieces, etc.) one day at a park when you meet an acquaintance there with her kids. She sits down next to you to watch the children play and in the course of the ensuing conversation surprises you with this question: “I was talking with my brother-in-law the other day and he’s recently got involved with religion. He told me that he even got “saved.” You go to church, right? Can you tell me what that means?”

How would you answer that question? Have you thought much about your theology of salvation and how to explain it? Can you think of any images or allegories that help you illustrate your beliefs in this area?

Later in the conversation, the woman presents this question: “Here’s what I don’t get. I’m a fairly good person. I help out at a homeless shelter and work very hard to make sure my kids are taken care of. However, I know lots of so-called Christians who are basically jerks. They are lazy and irresponsible and just not nice people. How could God let them into heaven ahead of me?”

How would you answer that question?

Review and Discussion Questions

Think back to your answers to the pre-reading questions. Has this chapter caused you to re-think how you would answer them? In what ways?

Why didn’t Don pursue a life of radical righteousness and intimacy with God? What part did his theology of salvation play in this?

How do “weak” Christians present an obstacle to belief for skeptics? Have you experienced this with unbelievers in your life?

In this section Don emphasizes the difference between viewing salvation as a one-time legal transaction in which people are declared saved and salvation as the creation of new life whereby people are made new. This is the important point to make with a skeptic. You do not need to delve into all of the theology contained in this chapter (or any of the chapters in section 2) with the skeptic unless he or she seems open to and interested in such a discussion. The theology is intended to provide a deeper understanding of the main points; Don isn’t implying that you need to explain all of it to the skeptic.

In what ways are Adam, Noah, and Moses similar? How are their stories similar? What does that teach us about the meaning of their lives and God's ways of dealing with sin?

How does Don link the situation of the Israelites in Egypt and the human family before the flood? How does that apply to our own situation?

What are some of the similarities between Moses and Jesus? Does this help make sense of the doctrine of Jesus as fully God, fully man?

Don argues in this chapter that God is interested in more than just legally declaring us "righteous." Rather, he wants to actually make us righteous. Discuss how Paul uses this "new creation" theme and what practical consequences he draws from it.

Discuss the Scott Hahn quote that ends the chapter. Has this chapter given you a deeper appreciation of what it means to be a child of God? What affect might that have in your own life?

For Further Study

The Bible and the Liturgy by Jean Danielou

The Mission of God by Christopher J.H. Wright

Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament by Christopher J.H. Wright

Chapter 7: Why Hell is Fair and Heaven Won't Be Boring

Pre-reading Questions

Don opens this chapter with the following story about one man's inability to reconcile the existence of Hell with a loving God. How would you handle it?

My conversation partner was becoming agitated. I had been trying to explain that God's goal for mankind is to draw us into the life of the Trinity to live with him in loving relationship for eternity. In other words, I was presenting some of the material we covered in the previous three chapters of this book. The skeptic was not buying it. "How can you call God loving?" he exclaimed. "Would you call me loving if I locked my daughter in a dungeon and tortured her for not doing her homework? Would you call me loving if I imprisoned my wife in a room and then tormented her day and night for burning the toast?"

Later, Don talks about a Starbucks campaign that printed this quote on their Venti cups: "Heaven is totally overrated. It seems boring. Clouds, listening to people play the harp. It should be somewhere you can't wait to go, like a luxury hotel. Maybe blue skies and soft music were enough to keep people in line in the 17th century, but heaven has to step it up a bit. They're basically getting by because they only have to be better than hell." Let's say you sit down with your friend for coffee and, upon reading the cup, he bursts out laughing and says, "Well, that about sums it up, doesn't it?" What is your response?

Discussion Questions

Think back over your answers to the pre-reading questions. Would you now adjust your answers? If so, in what way?

What was wrong with the analogies used by Don's caller? How does the theme of capriciousness show itself here again?

How is hell ultimately the result of our own choices?

How does that relate to punishment?

Don quotes Peter Kreeft, who suggests that "it may be that the very love of God for the sinner constitutes the sinner's torture in hell." What examples does Kreeft use to back up this idea? Does that make sense in light of your experience?

How is God's judgment different from justice handed down in human courts?

What is the difference between punishment and coercion and how is clarifying that difference helpful when discussing hell with skeptics?

In regard to the analogy of the children dying of thirst in the desert, notice again that Don emphasizes that the various doctrines of Christianity are not arbitrary constructs of a whim-following God. They are about reality as it is, and the natural consequences of living contrary to reality.

How is sin a form of insanity?

In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, a character named Grushenka tells a parable that nicely illustrates this condition and sums up some of the themes we have covered so far:

Once upon a time there was a peasant woman and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God; "She once pulled up an onion in her garden," said he, "and gave it to a beggar woman." And God answered: "You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise, but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is." The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. "Come," said he, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her right out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. "I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours." As soon as she said that, the onion broke. And the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day. So the angel wept and went away.

You can find the video of Immanuel Kelly on the X-Factor here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W86jlvG54o>

Discuss how the lyrics of the song he sings ring false given his life situation and the facts of history.

How does our mandate to take care of the earth fit in with the theme of new creation we discussed in chapter 4?

Why is it so dangerous that people think Heaven is going to be boring?

How does our experience of time (as opposed to the way time is measured) help us better understand the notion of "eternity" and why Heaven won't feel like forever?

For Further Study

The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis

Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis

Heaven by Randy Alcorn

The God Who Loves You: Love Divine, All Loves Excelling by Peter Kreeft

Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics by Peter Kreeft

Eschatology - Death and Eternal Life by Joseph Ratzinger

Chapter 8: How to Think About the Bible

Pre-reading Questions

How do you think God reveals himself to humans? Is there more than one way? If so, what are they, and how do they differ from each other?

Do you generally think of the Bible as a book authored by man or by God? In what ways is it similar to other books? In what ways is it different?

Consider this passage from Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Harris takes a shot at the Bible by suggesting that if it really was written by an omniscient deity surely it would make perfectly accurate predictions about human events. You would expect it to contain a passage such as "In the latter half of the twentieth century, humankind will develop a globally linked system of computers – the principles of which I set forth in Leviticus – and this system shall be called the Internet." The Bible contains nothing like this. In fact, it does not contain a single sentence that could not have been written by a man or woman living in the first century. This should trouble you. (p. 60)

Does this trouble you? Why or why not?

Dan Barker, a former pastor turned atheist, argues that the Bible is full of discrepancies. For example, he thinks that the Bible claims that Jesus taught peace in some instances, but war in others:

Was Jesus peaceable?

John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you."

Acts 10:36 "The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ."

Luke 2:14 " . . . on earth peace, good will toward men."

vs.

Matthew 10:34 "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household."

Luke 22:36 "Then said he unto them, . . . he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one."

How would you deal with this objection?

Review and Discussion Questions

Think back over the pre-reading questions. Has this chapter caused you to rethink your answer in any way?

Describe the Biblicist view of scripture.

Review the examples that Jim Merritt of infidels.org uses to try to illustrate that the Bible is contradictory. In what ways does he misinterpret scripture? How does Merritt understand the term “WORD OF GOD” and how does this definition affect his interpretation of the Bible?

What is the difference between a supposed “external” biblical contradiction and a supposed “internal” contradiction?

What are the two types of revelation?

What are some examples of general revelation?

The fact that everyone on earth has some knowledge of God should give us a certain amount of confidence when interacting with unbelievers? We know that we are not starting from completely from scratch. They have some knowledge, although it certainly may be suppressed. There is a foundation upon which for us to build.

God’s special revelation consists of both words and actions. Don suggests two reasons for this. What are they?

In getting to know God, “Actions help us understand the words, and words help us make sense of the actions.” What does Don mean by this? Don provides some examples of this principle from redemption history, but he also notes that all human communication functions this way. Think about how you interact with the various people in your life. Do you rely on just words to communicate? Or just actions? Think of some examples of everyday communication that involves both words and actions.

What is the difference between knowing *about* someone, and actually *knowing* someone? How does this apply to God’s purposes in revelation? In other words, what is God’s goal in revealing himself to us, and how does this goal dictate the type of revelation that God uses?

In what ways is Jesus the fullness of God’s self-revelation?

The biblicist view of scripture says that the Bible is either divine or it is human, but it can’t be both. In many ways this position is similar to the view that Jesus is either God or he is human, but he can’t be both, a position that has been the source of heresy since the beginning of the Church. The orthodox view of Jesus, of course, is that he was fully God and fully man. Jesus is God fully incarnate. The orthodox view of the Bible is similarly incarnational: it is fully from God, but also fully from man.

Don suggests that the Bible is tool, not an end in and of itself. What should be the ultimate end of Bible study?

How does the Biblicist position actually tend to keep God at a distance?

What is the literal sense of scripture? How is finding the literal sense different than interpreting every verse “literally?”

Because God’s revelation is incarnational, the Bible has a very human element. What is the danger of trying to interpret the text without accounting for its down-to-earth dimension? In other words, why must we seek to understand the culture and language in which it was originally written? What are some of the dangers of simply trying to read “with an open heart” but without scholarship?

What is the spiritual sense of scripture?

The spiritual sense of scripture can be divided into three levels. Briefly review and discuss each one. Do you or your church tend to emphasize one of these over the others?

What is wrong with asking “What does this text mean to you?”

Why is it possible to connect the various events in the history of redemption together in order to know God better? Why is it important not to try and connect just the words of God’s revelation?

How do biblicists, in their zeal to protect the honor of God’s word, actually undermine it and keep people from Jesus?

Glossary

False Dichotomy: this is a logical fallacy in which particular options are presented as the only viable choices, while in reality there is at least one more viable option that should also be considered.

Deism: for the purposes of this chapter, deism connotes a philosophy that believes God exists and created the world but does not interact with it in any sort of intimate way on a day to day basis. The god of deism is distant and impersonal.

For Further Study

Divine Constitution on Divine Revelation

C.S. Lewis on Scripture: His Thoughts on the Nature of Biblical Inspiration, The Role of Revelation and the Question of Inerrancy by Michael J. Christensen

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church by The Pontifical Biblical Commission.

The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture by Christian Smith

Chapter 9: The God Hypothesis

Review and Discussion Questions

What are the 3 or 4 main plot points of the story of the world according to Christianity? Do you feel confident, at this stage of the book, that you could tell that story to an unbeliever?

Notice that Don's "conversations" may last months or even years. The model presented in this book is not generally intended to be completed in one 20 minute subway ride, although the principles can apply in that situation. Rather, it is meant to be implemented through the course of building a relationship with a person, no matter how long that takes.

This section is on apologetics. This topic makes many people uncomfortable because they don't enjoy debating. Fair enough; as Don suggests, many conversations never get to this point and that's OK. Even if you just clarify the Christian worldview and get the skeptic to think about the big questions of life a bit, that is a big step forward. Debate is not necessary. However, apologetics is important for more than just trying to win converts; apologetics also strengthens the faith of believers, offering intellectual support for our beliefs. As such, Don suggests that you try to tackle this section even if you are not a big fan of philosophy and debate.

Why is it a mistake to disregard apologetics altogether? Discuss some of the biblical examples of apologetics being put to use.

What is worldview hypothesis and evaluation? Does using the term "hypothesis" mean that we are unsure about what we believe?

Don suggests that the model of apologetics in this book is not intended to offer "100% proof" of the truth of Christianity to the skeptic. Does this make it less worthwhile, do you think?

What does it mean that a worldview should have explanatory power? Don illustrates the principle of inference to the best explanation using an everyday example from his backyard. Can you think of any other examples from your own experience?

What is the difference between accounting for the data with a "just-so" story and explaining it using other pieces of data that are already well supported?

We have argued that a worldview is more likely to be true if it has explanatory power. What are some other criteria we can use to evaluate worldviews?

Why is it important that you establish some facts on which you can both agree as a starting point?

Don presents some a list of facts in his initial “package” of data points that he thinks are best explained by the Christian worldview. What are some others? Which ones (either from this list or your own) do you think are the strongest? Which would you feel most comfortable presenting?

What does Don mean when he says that he doesn’t want to put up “intellectual roadblocks” in the way of skeptics? How does he apply this principle to the question of the age of the universe? Can you think of other issues that we should be avoid being dogmatic about with skeptics?

What is Don’s goal for the following chapters?

Note that the following chapters will direct you to guide the conversation (loosely) along the following steps:

1. Present and clarify the Data
2. Hear the Skeptic’s Explanation of the Data
3. Offer the Christian Explanation of the Data
4. Evaluate the Various Explanations

The order is not meant to be set in stone. It is simply a flexible guide, to be adjusted depending on the situation.

For Further Study

Christian Apologetics by Douglas Groothuis

Handbook of Christian Apologetics by Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli

Reasonable Faith by William Lane Craig

Tactics by Greg Koukl

Chapter 10: Christianity and Pagan Myths

Pre-reading Questions

Consider the following scenario: While driving with a co-worker, you pass these billboards. He nods enthusiastically and says, “Yup, that sums it up, doesn’t it?” How would you respond?

37 Million Americans know MYTHS when they see them.

What myths do you see?

americanatheists Since 1963 atheists.org



Review and Discussion Questions

Sum up the basic argument of the “Jesus is just another myth” position. Have you encountered this anywhere?

What is one of the major false assumptions people make when comparing other belief systems to Christianity?

Just because there are parallels between pagan myths and the gospels does not mean that there are as many parallels as some skeptics suggest. Although Don has argued for building on the similarities between various pagan stories and Christianity, it can also be helpful in certain instances to clarify exactly where the differences lie. For example, the Da Vinci Code asserted that the pagan deity Mithras was called the Son of God and the Light of the World, was born on Dec. 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then was resurrected in three days. This is false, and it is fine to point that out. We shouldn't try to assert that there are no similarities, but we don't need to accept that the systems are entirely parallel either.

What are some of the parallels Don suggests between the gospels and pagan myths? Can you think of others (perhaps from contemporary movies or popular stories in today's culture)?

The fact that Jesus fulfills pagan myths can actually be used evangelistically to show how our culture's mythical stories and heroes point to Jesus. For instance, we can point out why Luke Skywalker, Frodo, and Indiana Jones are such great characters: because they reflect and point to Christ.

Don lists several historical figures whose life was characterized by "mythical" qualities. How is Don using the word myth here? How is this different than the way the culture generally uses the term? Can you think of other men and women in history whose lives seemed to be right out of a movie script?

According to the "Jesus is just another myth" theory, what were the gospel writers trying to convey? How does the fact that they portrayed Jesus as the Jewish Messiah make this position untenable?

What does Don mean by stating that the pagan myths were "not completely imaginary?" What does Don argue is the source of at least some parts of the ancient stories?

What does Don mean when he says that Christianity is a different kind of thing altogether from the pagan myths? Think about shadow and reality. The shadow points to the solid, but the solid is not just a "Greater" shadow. It is a whole different thing.

C.S. Lewis says that Christianity is "myth become fact." What does he mean? How, in Lewis' reckoning, is Christianity different than the pagan myths?

How does Christianity "fulfill" the pagan myths?

Don lists three instances in which pagan myths can be a very negative force with a culture rather than a positive on which to build. What are they? Do you think any of these problems is particularly prevalent in our own culture?

Why does the naturalistic worldview have a hard time explaining the fact that pagan myths across all cultures are very similar? How do these parallels offer even more support for a Christian worldview?

For Further Study

The Romance of Religion by Dwight Longenecker

The Everlasting Man by G.K. Chesterton

Jesus and the Religions of Man by David Marshall

The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion by Mircea Eliade

Eternity in their Hearts: Startling Evidence of Belief in the One True God in Hundreds of Cultures Throughout the World by Don Richardson

The Weight of Glory by C.S. Lewis

Chapter 11: The World is Not Enough

Pre-reading Questions

Are you completely satisfied with your life? If not, what do you think is missing? In other words, what would you need to be fulfilled and totally content?

Do you have what you would call an “experiential” relationship with God? If so, describe what that means to you. How often do you speak about that aspect of your life with others? How often do you talk about what God is doing in your life with unbelievers? Why or why not?

Review and Discussion Questions

Think back over the pre-reading questions? Has this chapter caused you to re-consider your approach to this subject?

Do you relate with the writers (Ilya Shapiro and Gregg Easterbrook) at the beginning of the chapter? Do you spend much time thinking about the fact that we are all, at least somewhat, dissatisfied? Why or why not?

What does Don include in the category of personal and experiential evidences for God? What would be some other examples of experiential evidence?

Don suggests two reasons why we should focus experiential types of evidence. What are they?

Do you know any “practicing deists?” Why do you think they are not experiencing God more fully?

Why would now be a good time to bring in stories about what God has done in your life, as opposed to earlier in the conversation?

What important clarifications does Don make in defining what he means by metaphysical restlessness? Do you think he is right that everyone in the world experiences this to some degree?

Why are two reasons that a skeptic might not admit that they experience this restlessness? How should we respond in these cases? What are some clues from our culture that provide further evidence that everyone longs for more?

Why are temporal goods necessarily unfulfilling, at least in an ultimate sense? Have you ever fallen into the trap of trying to find ultimate fulfillment in temporal things? If you are comfortable doing so, discuss some examples from your own experience.

What is the Christian explanation for metaphysical restlessness? How does this relate to the fall? How does it relate to humankind’s sordid history?

Don quotes several theologians in the section subtitled “A Desire for God.” They all make essentially the same point, while at the same time offering a variety of perspectives. Do any of these authors more strongly resonate with you?

Do you have a story of finding peace and contentment through a relationship with Jesus? Does it involve unloading “earthly vanities?” (Share as time and group needs permit.)

Don makes two points in dealing with the “Santa Claus objection” to the Christian explanation of longing. First, he again points out that there is a difference between proving God exists using a syllogism and using inference to the best explanation to support a Christian worldview. This is an important distinction to remember when talking with skeptics because they often will resort to saying, “Well, that doesn’t prove anything!” That is correct, but beside the point. As we discussed earlier, this model of apologetics is not about 100% logical proof of an abstract concept, but rather about getting to know God through inferring his presence and action from what we experience every day.

What is the difference between natural desire and artificial desires? Why is it important to distinguish between them when discussing metaphysical restlessness? Into which category does C.S. Lewis place our desire for Paradise? Do you think he is justified in doing so? Why or why not?

The question of how to explain and deal with our longing for something more has produced some of the more serious and enduring philosophies and religions in the history of the world. Briefly summarize the main point of the three that Don discusses in this chapter.

What is wrong with the idea that you can create your own meaning in life?

Al Gore presented his fight against global warming in existentialist terms. Can you think of other movements in our culture that claim to offer a chance at meaning and purpose?

What do Stoicism and Existentialism have in common? Where do they differ?

How much control over ourselves do you think we can exert using just our will? Where does the Stoic philosophy fall short in understanding human longings?

How does Don suggest that we interact with adherents to Eastern ideas who claim to believe that all distinctions are an illusion?

Can you think of some other important distinctions in the world that would have to be understood as illusory within the Eastern worldviews?

Trying to have a rational conversation with an adherent of Eastern religions can be frustrating because, at their root, these worldviews deny rationality. Trying to reason with someone who doesn't accept the validity of reason is almost always going to be difficult. However, I encourage you to persevere, because, although they deny rationality, humans, in fact, are not irrational. Reasoning with people can still be effective, even if they don't want it to be.

Discuss any part of the conclusion to this chapter that struck you as important and interesting.

How might we use Isaiah 55:1-3 in an evangelistic conversation?

Notice that we are continuing to plainly present the good news of Jesus (the gospel), but not in a preachy or condescending way. Rather, it is simply a natural part of the conversation. This topic even provides a good opportunity to present the skeptic with an invitation from God!

For Further Study

Peter Kreeft, *The God Who Loves You*

Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and Your Experience of the Supernatural*

Reasonable Faith by William Lane Craig

The Good Life: Seeking Purpose, Meaning, and Truth in Your Life by Charles Colson and Harold Fickett,

Christianity for Modern Pagans by Peter Kreeft

Chapter 12: Up Close and Personal with God

Pre-reading Questions

For you personally, what gives you the most confidence that God is real and that Christianity is true? By that I mean, when it comes right down to it, what would you point to in order to complete this sentence: "I know that God is real and Jesus is alive today because of this: _____"

Have you ever experienced what you consider to be miraculous or supernatural? If so, have you talked much about it with other people? Why or why not?

Review and Discussion

Think back over the pre-reading questions and discuss them with your group. Do your answers line up with Don's basic argument in this chapter? Has this chapter caused you to re-think any of your answers or your approach to the subject?

In discussing the pre-reading questions, were you surprised by the number of people in your group who have had supernatural experiences? Was it more or less than you expected? If it was more or less, why do you think there was a difference between your expectations and reality?

Don suggests that most people who have a strong faith base their confidence in God on experiences they have had with him. Is this your impression as well? Do the people you know who have had very meaningful encounters with God talk about it much? Why or why not, do you think?

Why was the church staff member who was miraculously healed misguided in thinking that being quiet about his story was a sign of humility? (For teacher or side-note, could guide the discussion to the fact that celebrating God, by its very nature, produces humility, it doesn't engender it. In that respect it is like prayer. The only issue here would be one's focus: If you are looking at yourself rather than at God in your celebration or prayer, then you are, indeed, self-righteous, but then what we have is neither celebration nor prayer – it is focus on self, not God.

Notice that religious charlatans defame the name of God and keep people from the kingdom. Not only do they do harm directly, but they keep good Christians silent.

What does Don mean when he claims that Christians often "play by the skeptic's rules" in their approach to talking about supernatural experiences?

In your opinion, how strong a role does the prevailing secular/materialist culture play in keeping Christians quiet about their experiences of God? Discuss how it might also keep people from looking for an experience of God as well as keeping them from recognizing one when it happens.

What is the principle of the "credible witness" and how should we employ it in sharing our experiences?

What is a “self-authenticating” experience, and why are such experiences basically useless in evangelism? (Here you can talk about the difference between the Mormon view of experience and the orthodox Christian view.)

How should a Christian go about interpreting his or her experiences? To what standards must these interpretations submit, particularly if they are to have evangelistic strength?

Have you ever had God speak to you through scripture in the way Don described in his story of being encouraged by Proverbs 23? Do you know anyone else who has?

Don listed 5 reasons that people might be unwilling to share their experiences with others in support of a Christian worldview. Can you think of others?

Don shared stories of divine protection, provision, and control over events. Discuss whether you find these stories credible evidences for the Christian worldview. Have you experienced anything similar, and did it strengthen your faith?

What is the “problem of evil objection” and how is it usually used to rebut stories about God’s intervention in our lives? How does Don suggest we deal with it?

There are only two alternative options for explaining what seems to be divine control over our lives. What are they? Which one do you think is more popular among people you know? Why, do you think?

The data of “providence” offers another good example of why we need to keep a “cumulative case” always in mind when discussing evidences for Christianity. By itself, supernatural experiences do not generally get us to Jesus, but combined with other pieces of data, they provide strong support. And certainly, some experiences are more directly Christian than others, such as visions of Jesus. Also, supernatural experiences often happen in a context that points toward Christianity. For example, if you pray to Jesus and something happens (as in my story of the boy at camp) that points toward Christianity. We weren’t praying to Zeus or Mohammed, etc.

Why did Nietzsche have to talk about chance as a person? Does his worldview strike you as honest and open-minded?

For Further Study

Miracles by Craig Keener

Confessions by Augustine

In Search of a Confident Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trusting in God by J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler

Chapter 13: Hypocrisy, Sex, and Other Causes of Skepticism

Review and Discussion Questions

Do you sometimes feel as if discussing your faith is a waste of time because the person doesn't actually care about the truth anyway? Some people just won't be swayed by argument. Has this chapter helped you better deal with that situation? In what ways?

Have you interacted with people such as the college student in Frank Turek's story? Have you had any success in talking with them about Jesus? Why or why not, do you think?

Discuss the two reasons that Don offers for focusing on the intellectual aspects of skepticism, even if there are many more factors at play. Can you think of others reasons?

Discuss each of the first five reasons Don offers for why skeptics reject God.

- Do you think any of these are more prevalent in our society than others? Why?
- Are some more powerful than others? Why?
- Have you experienced any of these issues in your own life, and did it cause doubt to arise?
- Have you witnessed these affects in people you know? What do you think is most helpful in these situations?

Why does Don think that immorality is in a category of its own as far as causing skepticism?

What did G.K. Chesterton mean when he wrote that the only sin is to call a green leaf gray?

Why is denying that there is any purpose or order in the universe a very handy way to justify sin?

- Do you think this fact plays any part in our "culture war" battles over issues such as the origin of the universe?

What is the biblical connection between immorality and poor thinking? How do they work together in a vicious cycle?

One objection some people have to this chapter is that they don't think the meaning of sex is obvious. Please read the footnotes in this chapter, as I address this issue briefly.

Why does sexual sin cause more people to reject God than, for example, alcoholism?

How does sex reveal the meaning of life?

How does human sexuality offer insight into the very life of the Trinity?

How does sex help us to participate in that life?

One of the more common refrains from those who object to Christian sexual morality is this: “But we truly love each other – what can be wrong with that?” The Christian answer is: “No, you do not.” According to the definition of love we have offered in this book, sexual immorality can never be truly loving. The partners in the immoral sexual act are always using each other, at least to some degree, and withholding themselves from the other, at least in some aspect of their existence. Therefore it is not love.

How does sexual immorality degrade the sex act and keep it from being (and revealing) all that it is supposed to?

How do abortion and homosexuality “constitute an affront to the foundations of morality?”

For Further Study

Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body by Pope John Paul II

Purity: The Mystery of Christian Sexuality by Dietrich Von Hildebrand

The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief by James Spiegel

Love and Responsibility by Karol Wojtyla

Chapter 14 Telling the World Its Story

Review and Discussion Questions

Why does Don think we should be confident when stepping into the marketplace of ideas as Christians?

We have the story that people need to make sense of their lives. What aspect of Western culture makes this a somewhat unique time in history in that regard?

In what ways has this book encouraged and equipped you to talk about Jesus with the skeptics in your life?