

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IN GOD?

by Bill Sunberg

FOCUS

From Dagon of the Philistines to the Pharaoh of the Egyptians, from Bhagwan of the Bhils to the Polynesian Rongo, every ancient society possessed a god. From sun gods, moon gods, and sky gods to the Grandmother Spider of the Southwest American Hopis, not to mention war gods, peace gods, and fertility gods, gods are and have been an everyday fact of life.

But what about the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition? He is not like the tribal gods. You cannot look out your back window and see Him at the top of a totem pole. In fact you cannot see Him at all. The Judeo-Christian tradition claims that its God—the God of the Bible—is the only real God. He has always existed and always will exist. He is the one responsible for the creation of the world. He is interested in me and you and everyone on this planet.

Is He real? Does He exist? Is the God of the Bible merely a human creation, or is He worthy of our beliefs? Is He someone we need to incorporate into our lives, or should we have left Him behind with the rest of the practices that we have dropped over time?

In this lesson we will look at the question of God's existence. We will look into the Scriptures to see what they say about God, and we will examine some of the efforts people have made throughout history to prove His existence. Finally, we will look at several possible responses to the question, "Does God exist?"

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Genesis 28; Exodus 13:17—14:31; Psalm 14:1; Isaiah 52:13—53:12; 2 Timothy 1:12

COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

To claim that today's lesson will prove that God exists and provide the student with definite reasons to believe in Him would be to claim to do something that no one has ever been able to do. Throughout history, the best minds of men and women have addressed the question of whether or not God exists. Some say He does; others that He does not. Where do we then start in our endeavor to answer the question of God's existence?

The Biblical Evidence

Can the Bible Be Used to Prove God Exists?

Whether or not it is possible to use the Bible to prove God exists is a legitimate question as we begin our quest.

For Christians, the Bible is authoritative. It is the Word of God. However, until we are convinced that God exists, we cannot claim that the Bible is His written Word. Without God, the Bible is only a book authored by men. It is no more authoritative than any other historical book.

So admittedly, the Bible may be an unusual place to begin a lesson on the existence of God. But even if you believe that the Bible is not the Word of God, you must admit that it was someone's word. It was at least written by men from many generations spanning hundreds of years. Seen in this light even the skeptic would admit it can at least be appealed to as a historically important document.

Does the Bible Explicitly Prove the Existence of God?

Does the Bible even attempt to prove that God exists? Is there any place on its pages that says, "God exists because . . ." An examination of the Scriptures yields the answer "no" . . . and "yes."

1. Answer No. 1. Surprisingly, not a single passage in the Bible attempts to prove that God exists. Instead, the Bible simply *assumes* that He does. The first chapter of Genesis begins without hesitation, *In the beginning God . . .* From then on, the fact of God's existence is never questioned. Every page of the Bible is about Him, but nowhere is there a place that says, "God exists because . . ."

The reason for this may be that throughout ancient history, everyone believed in a god or gods. (Only "the fool says . . . 'There is no God'" [Psalm 14:1].) The challenge was not to assure people that your god existed but to convince them that your god was the right god. Scripture does not attempt to defend God's existence because no one was asking that question.

2. Answer No. 2: Certainly, no direct and explicit proof of God's existence is recorded in the Bible. However, we observe an interesting phenomenon that comes close to such a proof. On a number of occasions when God communicated directly with people, He prefaced His message with words similar to these: "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

In each case it seems as if God is establishing His credibility with a new generation by identifying himself both with their forefathers and with His past activity among their people.

However, we cannot accept this as a *proof* for God's existence. As we have said, the words of God recorded in the Word of God cannot be used to prove the existence of God to someone who does not believe in God.

Does the Bible Implicitly Prove the Existence of God?

In spite of the fact that no *explicit* proof of God's existence can be found in the Bible, the Bible is not useless in our search for God. The question remains whether or not the Bible proves His existence *implicitly*. In other words, is there anything recorded in the Bible that could not have happened if God were not involved? A miracle? A spectacular military victory? Or perhaps a prophecy fulfilled? Would any one of these lay the question of God's existence to rest? Let's look at two examples.

1. The Crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 13:17—14:31). What an exciting story. A nation, an entire race of people, left Egypt, where they had been held captive for over 400 years. As they were traveling out of the country, they came to the Red Sea, where they claimed that God worked a miracle. He parted the water and the entire nation of Israel with all their possessions walked across on dry ground.

Could this have happened without God's involvement? Definitely not. Could this convince the staunchest skeptic that God does in fact exist? Probably not. The skeptic, who does not believe in the Bible in the first place, would not normally accept the crossing of the Red Sea as a

It has been said that "there are no atheists in a foxhole in the middle of a war." Is this true? If it is, how does this help us with our investigation of the existence of God?

factual event. Did it ever happen? Is there any other place other than the Bible that records the event? How do we know it was not just a fabricated story to "make God look good"? And even if it did occur, are there not "natural" causes that could have caused a phenomenon like this?

Before we could use the crossing of the Red Sea as an implicit proof of God's existence, we would need to prove that it actually happened and that it was *supernatural*.

2. The Fulfillment of Prophecy (Isaiah 52:13—53:12). For the Christian, one of the powerful proofs of God's involvement in history, and of His existence, is the phenomena of fulfilled prophecy. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, Christians claim to see His birth foretold in the prophets. They even claim to see such details as the fact that He would be born of a virgin and in Bethlehem. At least 19 times in the Book of Matthew alone, references are made to the fulfillment of what was written through the prophets.

How could this have happened? It seems that the only answer is the existence of Someone working in history to cause them to happen. It seems the only answer is the existence of God.

But the skeptic is not convinced. If the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies is such an airtight proof, then why do the Jews still refuse to accept that Jesus was the Messiah? Were the prophecies wrong? Was Jesus not the real Messiah? Or were the prophecies made in such a broad manner that they could be fulfilled in different ways? For the skeptic, there is no guarantee of the involvement of God.

The Classical Proofs

If the Scriptures had left no doubt as to the existence of God, the question, "Why should I believe in God?" would have been laid to rest centuries ago. But men and women have continued to doubt.

To augment the Bible, numerous attempts have been made by Christian scholars and philosophers to construct logical and convincing proofs of God's existence.

The Ontological Proof

Don't let this big word scare you. This proof attempts to prove the *being* of God (*ontos* in Greek) from the *idea* of God. Here is its outline:

1. God is that Being greater than whom nothing can be conceived.
2. But a God existing in fact is greater than a God existing only in idea.
3. Therefore, God *must* be thought of as existing in fact.

This proof is easier to understand when we actually try to do what it says. Imagine the most perfect being you can. When your mind has reached this being at the peak of existence where there cannot be imagined anything greater, you have reached the thought of God. Now consider two possibilities for your imagined being. First, picture your being as only imaginary. Then envision it actually existing. Which of these two would be the greater being—the real one or the imaginary one? The real one, of course. Since God is that being greater than whom nothing can be imagined, then He must be real. This is the ontological argument in a nutshell.

As you might have guessed, it did not take long for someone to challenge this argument. Another scenario was presented that applied this same argument to the idea of the perfect island. Would it be better if this island were only in your imagination or if it really existed? Some say that if the ontological argument were true, then this island—the island greater than which no island could be imagined—must exist. But it does not exist. It is only the creation of your imagination.

The challengers of the ontological argument conclude that we cannot prove the being of God from the idea of God.

The Cosmological Proof

This argument attempts to prove God from the existence of the universe, or the *cosmos*.

The basic argument is centered on the idea that nothing happens without a cause. Everything that exists is contingent on something else, meaning that it comes from or is caused by some other existing thing. In other words, our experience tells us that things do not appear out of nothing. Something or someone causes them to happen or to be. Eventually, however, things must be traced back to a point when nothing existed. However, we would have to say that nothing existed to cause the first thing to exist. Since there are things now existing there must be something that is not contingent, and we call this something God.

Three basic questions are raised in response to this argument. First, why is it necessary that the same thing caused everything? Could not a series of things or beings have been the original cause? Why is the necessary answer to the argument “God”?

The second question asks why the answer to the argument could not be the world itself. Why couldn't the world be eternally existent? Does the world have to be caused by something?

The third question is, “Who says the universe is intelligible or makes sense in the first place?” Maybe the answer to “who caused what” is beyond our capacity to understand.

The Teleological Proof

This argument attempts to prove the existence of God from the evidence of purpose or design in the universe. It

gets its name from the Greek word *telos*, meaning goal or purpose.

The world is a complex mechanism. The miracle of birth, the tilt of the earth on its axis, the ecological food chain, the passing of the seasons, the complexity of the human body, and an endless list of awesome facts seem to point to the existence of an intelligent mind who designed them. If we were to find a watch sitting on a rock, we would not likely think that such a complex machine was the result of an accident of nature! A watch must have a watchmaker and the world must have a designer. This designer must be God.

The classic critique of the teleological argument is that our universe is made up of a finite number of elements. Given unlimited time, those elements will go through every possible combination. Even if there is only one possible combination necessary to sustain life, eventually it might happen. Therefore, the awesome facts around us which seem to imply a designer could be just as feasibly the result of the slow but persistent workings of chance.

The Moral Proof

The moral argument for God's existence is thought by some to be the most convincing of all the classical proofs. It works like this. If we are the products of a chance combination of inhuman elements and the end result of a long evolutionary chain, why do we have a conscience, why can we reason, and where did the elements of justice and love come from? Can all these be the product of organic elements randomly linked together? The ideas of evolution and chance existence could almost be believed if plants and animals were the zenith of existence. But humans are a distinct kind of creature. What is the source of this sense of morality?

The moral argument for God's existence claims that the only explanation for the moral quality in humans is the presence of a supreme moral being, God.

There are some objections to this argument. What about people in history like Adolf Hitler? If people have a moral quality instilled within them from a supreme being, how could Hitler have done what he did?

Couldn't this so-called sense of morality be a result of humanity's self-interest? After all, you have a better chance to survive if you outlaw murder.

And even if it is necessary for a supreme being to be the source of human morality, it cannot be proven that this being is the infinite, omnipotent, creative, loving God of the Bible.

The Proof from Experience

A final proof we will look at is the proof of experience. Moses met God in a burning bush. Elijah experienced God in a gentle whisper. Martin Luther encountered Him in the middle of a field during a storm, and John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed. Even today churches across the world are filled with people who claim to have experienced a relationship with God. For them the refrain,

“You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!” is proof enough.

This proof is very convincing . . . for the one who has had the experience. For anyone else it is too subjective and cannot be accepted as unquestionable fact.

Two Negative Proofs

Just as people have attempted to prove that God exists throughout history in numerous ways, some have attempted to disprove Him. In a sense, they have constructed reasons why not to believe in God.

The Sociological Theory of Religion

This theory draws upon the modern tendency to believe in the power of society to mold and shape the minds of its members for either good or evil. It suggests that the gods that people worship are actually created unconsciously by society in order to exercise control over people’s behavior.

A number of criticisms have been offered in response to this theory, two of which we will mention here. First, how does this theory account for the moral creativity of the Old Testament prophet? Picture Elijah on Mount Carmel, standing against a nation of people led by a wicked king and 450 prophets of Baal. If God was a being fabricated by society as a whole, why was Elijah’s idea of God different from everyone else’s? Why does the Bible record that his prayer was answered instead of the prayer of the majority?

The second criticism is that the sociological theory fails to explain the fact that the Church has historically prospered in the face of persecution. If the Church could survive when going against the grain of society, then the source of their “religious feeling” must be something other than society.

The Freudian Theory of Religion

According to this theory, religious beliefs are the fulfillment of the oldest illusions and wishes of humankind. They are a defense against the powerful forces of life, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, disease, and inevitable death. Humankind could not face the idea that these unexplainable forces were uncontrollable because this left them with a feeling of helplessness, so they ascribed them to a supernatural being. By pleasing this being and, therefore, influencing it, people could also control the powerful forces of life.

Freud called religion a “universal obsessional neurosis of humanity” which could be outgrown when people learn to face the world without relying on the illusion of a supreme being.

A major problem with both of these views of religion is that they start with the assumption that God does not exist and then try to explain the phenomenon of religion in the absence of God. If your assumption is that God does not exist, then your arguments cannot “prove” that God does not exist. To think they can is circular reasoning.

Our Response to the Evidence

So, the “evidence” is in. We have looked at the biblical case for God’s existence. We have looked at the classical proofs—results of human attempts to prove that God exists. We even looked at some negative proofs—what others have said in an attempt to put the idea of God to rest. We have done all the looking we can do. It is time now to respond to the evidence and take a position.

Position One: The Agnostic

The agnostic is one who claims that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists. He *may* exist. He may *not*. There just is not enough evidence to know for sure. After examining the possibility of God’s existence, the agnostic must throw his or her hands up in the air and exclaim, “I honestly just don’t know!”

Position Two: The Atheist

An atheist is one who does not believe in the existence of God. There is no one reason for the position of atheism except that they all agree that God, a supernatural intelligent being, does not exist. To believe in such a being would render our reason and our senses impotent. No other area of life, even for the Christian, calls for such an abandonment of our rationality.

Position Three: The Thoughtless Christian

This is indeed a dangerous, yet common position. Many Christians—especially those who have grown up in the Church—never take the time or make the effort to think through what they believe. If ever asked why they believe in God, they are unable to answer beyond a frown, a shrug of the shoulders, and a one word response, “Because.” For them the question of God’s existence is not even a proper question for anyone, and especially the Christian, to ask or to contemplate.

The danger of this position is not in its lack of sincerity, for such people are often very sincere in their belief. The danger is in their lack of understanding. If they ever find themselves in a situation where their faith is seriously challenged, they have little defense.

Position Four: The Thoughtful Christian

The final position is that of one who has taken the time to think through why he or she believes in God. His or her beliefs are *convictions* and not just *assumptions*.

How do we become “thoughtful Christians”? First, thoughtful Christians are *not afraid to ask tough questions of their faith*. They are always asking, “What do I believe?” “Why do I believe it?” and “What does it mean?”

Second, we become thoughtful Christians by *testing what we believe in the laboratory of life*. Such beliefs are validated when they stand up in the midst of the daily routines and pressures of life.

Finally, thoughtful Christians *do not shy away from opposing views*. Once they have asked tough questions and tested what they believe in their daily life, they are confi-

dent that it will stand up against any skeptical analysis. Along with Paul, they can assuredly say, *I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day* (2 Timothy 1:12).

The Bottom Line

Now that we have spent considerable time researching the various arguments for and against the existence of God and have outlined some of the positions that an individual

can take on the issue, it is time to come back to one of our original statements. No matter how long or how hard we look over the evidence, in the final analysis we will have to say that believing in God is a stance built on faith. That is not to dismiss the rational side of our makeup and say that we must check our brains outside the doors of the church. That is to say that to believe in something, while *not* in contradiction to the “evidence,” does not depend on the evidence for full satisfaction. To believe is more than a decision of the head; it must be a response of the heart.

IN-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today’s subject.

1. Why Do I Believe in God?

Pass out a piece of paper and a pencil to everyone in the class. Have each class member respond in a sentence or two to this question: **Why do I believe in God?** Give them ample time to think through their response and put it on paper. Then go around the room and allow everyone to share their responses.

2. Convince a Skeptic

Begin the class session by dividing into small groups. Ask the groups to imagine that a new young adult is visiting your class today. As you begin discussing the topic of the existence of God, this visitor suddenly stands up and exclaims that this question has haunted him for years. He has come to the conclusion that there is no way to prove there is a God. He challenges your class to convince him of God’s existence. If you cannot, he resolutely states that he will have no choice but to leave this class setting today and become an atheist.

It is not important to have every group share their conclusions. The important part of this activity is to get the class thinking about the lesson. But if time permits, allow most of the groups to share their answers.

3. Is God a God?

Read the Focus at the beginning of the lesson, which

talks about ancient societies and their gods. Then read the first statement below. After reading it, give the class time to indicate whether they agree or disagree. If they agree, they should stand up. If they disagree with the statement, they should remain in their seats. After everyone has committed themselves to a response—and even if all responses are the same—ask a few class members to share the reasons for the position they took.

Continue in the same way with each succeeding statement, each time asking those who agree to *change* their position (from sitting to standing or from standing to sitting) and those who disagree to remain where they are.

The statements are:

1. Ancient societies have much in common with modern societies.
2. The attitudes of past societies toward their gods is equivalent to the attitude of modern societies toward God.
3. Our God is just a modern version of tribal gods.
4. We can learn much from studying about different religions.
5. Believing in God is harder now than it was in biblical times.

PRESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today’s topic.

1. Discussion Groups

Divide your class into small groups. Give each group copies of the *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A*, which summarizes the classic proofs for and against the existence of God.

Instruct each group to read through the proofs and answer the following questions:

1. **Which is the most powerful proof for the existence of God?**
2. **What makes it better than the others?**

3. **Would it convince a skeptic to believe in God?**
4. **Which is the more powerful proof against the existence of God?**
5. **What makes it better than the other one?**
6. **Does God exist?**
7. **How do you know?**

After the groups have had time to discuss, have one member from each group report their conclusions to the whole class.

2. Debate

A few weeks before you present this lesson, ask four class members to take part in a debate over this statement: “God exists.” Provide both teams with copies of the Commentary above, but also encourage them to do additional research on their own.

To begin, post the thesis on the chalk/marker board so everyone can see the topic of the debate. Organize the debate as follows:

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| Affirmative Presentation 1 | 4 minutes |
| Negative Presentation 1 | 4 minutes |
| Affirmative Presentation 2 | 4 minutes |
| Negative Presentation 2 | 4 minutes |
| Affirmative Rebuttal 1 | 3 minutes |
| Negative Rebuttal 1 | 3 minutes |
| Affirmative Rebuttal 2 | |
| and Closing Remarks | 2 minutes |
| Negative Rebuttal 2 | |
| and Closing Remarks | 2 minutes |

Conclude this activity with questions from the class.

3. Lecture/Discussion

Using the Commentary material, present a 20- to 25-minute presentation of the scriptural and nonscriptural proofs of God’s existence. It would be helpful to display *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A* on an overhead projector during your lecture. After your presentation, lead a class discussion. Have them evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each proof. You may want to appoint a group of “devil’s advocates” to try to criticize each proof. This will help bring out the weaknesses of the proofs and will challenge the rest of the class to discover and respond with their strengths.

4. Optional Positions

Begin your presentation with a *brief* summary of the scriptural view of God and of the proofs for and against

God’s existence from *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1A*.

Before class, assign a different one of the theological positions listed below to four different students. Have them prepare a short but convincing argument that “proves” that their position is the right one. This presentation needs to be informative but also packed with emotion. The presenters need to feel their position is right and feel a strong desire to convince your class. You may want to copy the section of the Commentary that explains their position to give them some “ammunition.”

1. THE AGNOSTIC

“It is impossible to know whether God exists or not.”

2. THE ATHEIST

“God, as a supernatural intelligent being, does not exist.”

3. THE THOUGHTLESS CHRISTIAN

“Of course God exists. Why would you even have the audacity to ask?”

4. THE THOUGHTFUL CHRISTIAN

“Based on the Bible, my own thoughts, the witness of many others whom I respect, and my experience, I believe that God exists.”

As the four students present their arguments, have the rest of the class write comments on their handouts about each of the positions presented. They will use these comments after the presentations to ask questions and to be involved in discussion. After the presentations and before the discussion, have your class vote on which presentation was most convincing.

Enhance the discussion using the following questions:

- **Why would someone choose the various positions?**
- **Do you know someone who has chosen each one?**
- **In light of the evidence, which is the best position to adopt?**

SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give students an opportunity to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. Why Do I Believe in God?

If you opened class with your group writing responses to the question, “Why do I believe in God?” ask them to re-read what they wrote. Have them reflect upon their answers and decide whether or not they would still answer in that way. If they would like, they can add to their answer or write a completely new one.

The emphasis of this activity is to encourage your class members to be thoughtful Christians. Challenge them to know what they believe about the existence of God and why they believe it.

2. Living Proof

John Wesley once said that the only way to convince

the world of the validity of the gospel is “to out-live them, out-love them, and out-die them.” Only as we surpass the world in the depth and quality of our life and love, only as the graceful peace of even our death outshines that of those in the world can we convince the world that there is something to the claims of the gospel. The same is true for the question, “Why should I believe in God?” No theological argument or logical proof will fully convince anyone who is unwilling to believe that God exists. Only if they can see the presence of God in our lives in a way that makes a distinct difference will they be convinced.

Close the class session by asking your class to brainstorm ways that their lives can be living proof that God

exists. List these on a chalk/marker board. Close by challenging your class to put their ideas into action and become living proofs of the existence of God.

3. Hymn of Assurance

Perhaps for some of your group this discussion on the existence of God has been somewhat disconcerting. Some may not have seriously considered such a weighty question in this kind of setting before. Your purpose is not to leave your students in a confused or hopeless state of mind as

they leave class. Hopefully, they will have been encouraged by seeing that their faith can take the most direct kinds of questioning without losing any credibility.

To help reinforce this feeling of assurance in their belief in God, select a well-known and traditional hymn that speaks of God. (A good choice is Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.") Note that our decision to believe in God has been reinforced over the centuries by millions of other Christians.

Sing the selected hymn with confidence, hope, and joy.

Use *INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters* to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

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