

Mission Action

1. Intro

- In 399 BC the Greek philosopher Socrates, was accused of not believing in the cities god's and corrupting the young men of Athens
 - And so a court of 501 citizens set up to try him
 - The vote went against Socrates who was found guilty and sentenced to death
 - Rather than accept the decision of the court, Socrates drank pioson hemlock and died, aged 70
- Socrates was the mentor of a young philosopher Plato who appears to have been at the trial and recorded Socrates final speech known as 'the apology'
- In the opening moments of this speech Socrates claimed that what he was doing was 'defending' himself against false accusations and 'answering' the charges brought by his accusers
- In 1 Peter 3:15, the Apostle Peter calls upon all Christians to '*be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in them*'
- The word he uses for 'answer' is the Greek word *apologia*, which is the word Socrates used and means 'a speech in defence'
 - It's modern anglicised form is *apologetics*
- And when Christian's talk about apologetics they're therefore talking about the same activity as Socrates was engaged in, in 399 BC
- They're
 - 'defending' the gospel
 - 'answering' objections to the gospel
 - 'demonstrating the truth' of what the gospel says
- This morning as we conclude our Mission Minded series, I want to briefly touch on the place of apologetics in being a mission minded Christian
- To do that I want to look at an example from the Bible and see that apologetics ... or giving a defence of your faith is part and parcel of proclaiming the gospel
- Then look at some common objections non-Christians will put forward that ... as Peter says ... Christians ought to 'be ready to give an answer' for the faith they profess

- If you're a Christian here this morning, I pray this will help equip you to be a mission minded follower of Jesus
- If you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, then I pray you will find the things I have to say are helpful in answering some of the questions or objections you might have about the Christian faith ... and as a result helps you to consider the gospel with fresh ears and eyes

- Questions I want to address this morning are
 - How can you be sure God exists
 - Why does God allow suffering?
 - What about other religions?
 - Can I trust the NT?

2. Why Defend the Gospel

- Christians aren't just called to proclaim the gospel ... but the NT shows that Christians are to defend the gospel

- C19th British preacher Charles Spurgeon famously said when it came to defending the gospel ...
 - "How do I defend the gospel? The same way I would defend a lion ... I simply open the cage and let him out"

- This is true ...
- However ... as you read the NT, you see time and again, that when the gospel is proclaimed it inevitably causes opposition
- This is to be expected
 - Jesus says as much in the gospels
 - We read how Peter, John, Paul, James ... all suffered and died for proclaiming the gospel
 - It's not surprising ... because the gospel message is confronting
 - Yes, it's a good news message of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus
 - But for a person to accept the gospel they need to
 - Admit they are sinful
 - They cannot save themselves and they need someone else to save them > which is hugely humbling
 - Get off their throne where they are lord and king of their life and submit to Jesus

- It's not surprising that when people confronted with that they are going to want to
 - Argue against the gospel
 - Try and find holes in it
 - De-bunk it, rubbish it
 - Throw up all sorts of arguments of why it cannot be true ...
- So they don't have to admit all those things and realise they need to turn to Christ

- The Apostle Paul came across this all the time during his missionary journeys
- When Paul would get to a new city, inevitably he would start by visiting the synagogue and sharing the gospel with the Jews of that city
- But he would also go out into the city – to the marketplace or river or somewhere ... in order to reach the gentiles / Greeks with the gospel
- We see him doing this in Athens
 - v16-17 ¹⁶ *While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he **reasoned** in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.*

- He did a similar thing previously at Thessalonica
 - Acts 17:2-4 - *As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he **reasoned** with them from the Scriptures, ³ **explaining** and **proving** that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am **proclaiming** to you is the Christ," he said. ⁴ Some of the Jews were **persuaded** and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.*

- Paul wasn't just proclaiming the gospel
 - He was reasoning, explaining, proving, persuading with his audience – whether Jew or Greek ... he wanted to convince them of the gospel

- The fact Paul was seeking to prove, persuade, and reason with his hearers implies there is debate happening
 - They were arguing with him, proposing different ideas, challenging his assertions
 - It's not just a monologue with no right of reply

- And this is certainly what happens in Athens

- Athens was the philosophy capital of the world
- There were different groups of philosophers there
 - Epicureans > hedonists > lived life for pleasure
 - Stoics > moralists > live a good life > a life of virtue
 - Neither believed in the afterlife and therefore the resurrection would have been laughable
- Also others that worshipped the Greek and Roman gods of the day
- So when Paul goes to the market place to proclaim the gospel and Jesus resurrection from the dead ... they begin to argue with him saying "*What is this babbler trying to say?*"
- Then they bring him to the Areopagus which is a place under the Pantheon where the philosophers of the day met to debate morals, religion and philosophy
- Paul didn't need to be asked twice ... off he went ... giving a defence / an apology of the gospel message he had been proclaiming
- Paul was doing what Peter tells all Christians to do
 - "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have*"
- **Application**
- Every culture hostile to Christianity holds a set of 'common sense' consensus beliefs that automatically make Christianity seem impossible to people
 - Whether C1st Athens or C21st Sydney
 - As a result they believe that Christianity just can't be true
 - There's something / some understanding that's blocking them from seriously listening to or considering the gospel
- As a result ... when the Christians seek to proclaim the gospel they will inevitably face opposition from non-Christian's who have these assumptions about Christianity which makes it hard for them to believe
 - Therefore you need to be able to counter and respond to these objections if people are going to listen afresh to the good news of Jesus
 - That is, you need to address the blockage ... so that the message of the gospel can be heard rather than dismissed
- **Illustration – Women & Jobs**
- Not that long ago, our culture had a very sexist attitude towards women (still does)

- The consequence was, women were considered inferior to men when it came to holding senior positions in the work place
- It was a 'common-sense' mindset of the culture
- Result being ... when a highly qualified female applied for a top job, her qualifications were ignored, because the employer has this preconceived assumption that is blocking him from properly considering her ability to do the job
- Same is true when it comes to the gospel
 - Often Christians will need to counteract those assumptions people have before they are willing to listen to the gospel
 - Once you have helped them to remove the assumption that was blocking the gospel, then you can return to talking about Christ and the good news that comes through him

3. How to Defend the Gospel

How can I know God exist?

- One of the most common objections people will have to Christianity ... is the idea that God just doesn't exist
- As an article in Telegraph said the other day ... God's just a *"Magic Sky Daddy with his bagful of miracles."*
- So if someone asks you "How can I know God exists?" or challenges you to ... "Prove that God exists"
- You could say ...
 - "I can't **prove** that God exists in the scientific sense
 - "But I've got good reasons for knowing God exists"
 - Intricacy and beauty of creation
 - Common morality
 - "But ultimately we can know God exists for the same reasons we have for knowing that human beings stepped on the moon"
 - "Which is people witnessed the life of Jesus and reported it and it was verifiable"
- "he reason I'm confident that God exists is because of Jesus
 - Jesus claim to be God (John 5:18) and his actions bear out that claim
 - He healed the sick > calmed storm > brought the dead back to life > exorcised demons
 - He did what no other human being has ever done

- Then he died and rose again from the dead to prove he is who he says he was
- I'm confident that God exists ... because history tells me he came and revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ
- "Before you dismiss God as the Magic Sky Daddy ... I reckon you need to work out who you think Jesus is
 - If Jesus is not God, then he is either a lunatic or a liar
 - That is,
 - Either he thinks that he is God but he isn't > makes him a lunatic
 - Or he knows that he isn't God but says that he is > makes him a liar
- But if he is ... then that changes everything
- For as CS Lewis once
 - *"Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important."*
- "So to be sure ... why not make an informed decision and read one of the accounts of Jesus' life and see what you make of Jesus"
 - "Why don't we meet up to read it together > give it a try > see what you think"

Why does God allow evil and suffering?

- Probably the biggest objection people have to Christianity relates to the issue of evil and suffering
- Christianity teaches the existence of an all-powerful, all-good, all-loving God
- But how can that belief be reconciled with all the evil and suffering we see each day around the world
 - Either God is all-powerful but not **good** enough to want to end evil and suffering
 - Or he's all-good but not **powerful** enough to bring an end to evil and suffering
 - Either way, the God of the Bible couldn't exist
- For many people, this is not only an intellectual obstacle ... but also an intensely personal problem
 - Because their lives are marred by tragedy, abuse and injustice
 - And so before you get into answering the question, it might be worthwhile asking "why do you ask?"

- Grieving with them, praying with / for them
- Empathising with them and your own desire to know the answer to this question

- Firstly ... we need acknowledge that some suffering that has nothing to do with God because it is caused directly by us or others
 - It's humans who get drunk and drive cars, who are faithful to their spouses, who start wars, who sexually abuse children
- But suffering does happen in the world that's not anyone's fault ... it's just the result of living in a fallen world¹
 - Sometimes God uses suffering to wake people up
 - Sometimes he uses suffering to strengthen his people²
 - Often we just don't know why God allows evil and suffering

- For many, people that will be very unsatisfactory and they will still say
 - "well you haven't given me a satisfactory answer for the problem of evil and suffering"

- What you can say to such a person is ...
 - "If you have a God who is great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in this world ... then you have to at the same moment a God who is great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know"
 - "You can't have it both ways"
 - "Don't you think it's possible that God has good reasons for allowing evil and suffering that you and I in our puny, immortal, limited minds can never know, understand or see?"

- Second thing you can say to such a person is
 - Even though we don't know the reasons why God allows suffering to continue ... we know he can't be indifferent or uncaring
 - Because the Christian God (unlike the gods of all other religions) takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself
 - He knows what suffering is like > he experienced it himself
 - On the cross Jesus came suffered for us ... in order to end suffering

¹ Contrast John 5:14 and John 9:3; See also Romans 8:18-25

² Rom 5:3-5; 1 Peter 1:6ff

- It's actually through his suffering that he enables a new creation to take place in which there will be no suffering, no more pain, no more tears, no more death (Rev 21:4)
- You see ... at the cross of Christ you have God allowing something that from our human perspective was evil
 - For Christ was innocent ... and he died painfully and tragically at the hands of angry and corrupt men
 - Yet he three days later, he rose again to prove he is the Son of God and his death did pay the debt for our sin
- Now from God's perspective, this was a good thing
 - And because Jesus rose from the dead you and I know there is life after death for those who follow him
 - That guarantee of eternity makes the pains of life seem a bit more bearable
- Finally, if the person you are talking to still has issues with evil and suffering and the existence of God ... you can ask the question of them
 - "How does your non-Christian worldview account for the problem of evil and suffering in the world?"
 - "What explanation can atheism give for this?"
 - "I know a Christian response doesn't answer everything as well as I'd like it to, either emotionally or intellectually, but a Christian understanding of suffering and evil is much more satisfying than 'such is life'
- **What about other religions?**
- What about other religions?
 - What about all those Hindu's and Buddhists and Sikhs?
 - There's millions of people around the world that have other religious beliefs who have seemingly encountered God and live their lives with sincere faith in something other than Christianity
- Despite all of this, Christianity insist that only those who believe in Christ go to heaven—that their religion is the only one that is 'right' and true
- If you're a non-Christian, you'll hear that claim and think
 - "How can you say that? That's pretty arrogant. You're being so intolerant of other worldviews and other religions"
- You may follow it up with
 - "No one should insist their view of God better than all the rest. Every religion is equally valid."

- To say all religions are the same could only be true if
 - there is no God at all, or
 - God is an impersonal force that doesn't care what your doctrinal beliefs about him are
- In addition, the person who asserts all religions are equally valid is assuming a very particular view of God which they are pushing as better than the rest!
- This is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical, since they are doing the very thing they are forbidding you to do
- To say "all religions are equally valid" is an exclusive truth claim that is being intolerant of others who share their faith
- So you could say to your enquiring friend
 - C - "you seem upset about the exclusive claims Christianity makes of Jesus being the only way to know God?"
 - NC - "I sure am, you Christians are so intolerant of others. You can't just say Christianity is the only way"
 - C - "Do you realise you are being intolerant?"
 - NC - "What?"
 - C - "By insisting that all religions are valid, you are being intolerant of my intolerance."
- Now it is important to clarify that issue here is not one of sincerity
 - No one would question the sincerity people's beliefs
 - It is possible, however, to be very sincere, but to also be wrong
 - This happens all the time!
 - So many times I sincerely believe something is right, will assert it as true to Liana until I'm black and blue in the face ... only in the course of time to be proven wrong
- Sincerity of belief doesn't make it right
- Nor is it good enough to buy the modern idea of tolerance ... assuming that God is good natured person who's open to everyone no matter what they believe
- While it might be nice to say that all religions lead to heaven it is just not possible
 - All the worlds religions contradict each other religions at fundamental points
 - For example

- Other religions says, "I obey; therefore I am accepted." Christianity says, "I'm accepted, therefore I obey."
 - Some believe in one God, some have many god, some have no gods, some have Jesus, some reject Jesus
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- The issue is
 - not "who is right?"
 - The issue is ...
 - "Has god revealed himself? If so how?"
 - "Is there a religion where God has shown himself to mankind in some tangible way"
 - Christian's claim that God has revealed himself in an irrefutable way - that is in the person of Jesus who is God in the flesh
 - No other religion can claim that
 - No other religion has God
 - humbling himself,
 - becoming a man,
 - performing amazing miracles for all to see,
 - dying for those he created
 - rising from the dead and being witnessed by many
 - No other religion has anything to validate it as true like Christianity does
 - Another thing you could say when your friends says
 - "I just can't believe that you think Christianity is the only way"
 - "I can't believe there is another way that works"
 - "Why not?"
 - "I can't see how anyone can get to heaven without Jesus!"
 - "Surely you agree most people have done enough good to get to heaven?"
 - "No actually I don't. Do you know anyone that has kept all God's commandments?"
 - "Well ... no. Nobody's perfect"
 - "Exactly! And because nobody's perfect, nobody can get to heaven no matter how religious they are. The only way anyone can get to heaven is if someone pays the way – and that's what Jesus did"
 - **Can I trust the New Testament**
 - Another objection many will have when it comes to engaging with the gospel is the reliability of the Bible

- Many people will say that the Bible is filled with teaching that spiritually and morally enriches us. But other than that you just can't take it seriously or trust it to be true

- There could be any number of questions lying behind this question
- Some will say
 - NC - "The New Testament is written by biased reporters"
 - C - "Yeah you're right. They were biased ... but then again we are all biased about the things we are passionate about aren't we? Even journalists who are meant to report the facts are biased"
 - C - "The question is not whether we should dismiss the NT because of bias, but is it historically reliable?"
 - C - "Did you know there are numerous non-Christian sources that point to the historicity of Jesus?"
 - NC - "No"
 - C - "Jewish historian Josephus talked about Jesus living around the time of Pontius Pilate who did lots of miracles > that Pilate condemned him to the cross and that he was seen alive again"
 - C - "Roman historian Tacitus recorded that Jesus lived during the time of Pontius Pilate as well. And there were others too"

- Enquiring friend might say ...
 - "Okay, so I concede Jesus was a real person in history ... how can you be sure what is written in the Bible is true?"
 - C - "well the fact that there are multiple accounts of Jesus life
 - Matthew and John > disciples > completely independent of each other
 - Luke > not a disciple > a doctor > investigated everything for himself and wrote an account of Jesus life for a friend of his
 - Mark > Non-biblical sources tell us he wrote down all the things Peter taught about Jesus
 - Paul > religious leader who hated Christians and tried to kill them but was converted ... and he wrote down his own account too
 - C - so the account of Jesus life was not just made up by one person. There multiple accounts that all agree with each other - which is pretty amazing when you think about it

- NC - "Well maybe what was written down then was accurate, but surely all the stories have been added to and exaggerated over the years and the original has been lost in translation? A bit like a 2000 year game of Chinese whispers?"

- C – “well, actually, we have 1000s and 1000’s of copies and fragments of the NT that we are able to piece together with greater accuracy than ever before what the original writers wrote”
- “Way more, and way older than the documents we have that tell us about Caesars Gallic Wars for instance”
- C - “Have you ever read the NT or one of the accounts of Jesus life?”
- NC – “Oh, I’ve read bits and pieces and seen the movies and stuff.”
- C – “So you’ve never really read it?”
- NC – “No, not really?”
- C – “Don’t you think it would intellectually wrong to dismiss the Bible without actually having a proper look at what it says?”
- NC – “Yeah probably”
- C - “How about you read a bit with me? We’ll see what it says, you can ask me any question you like, and you can see for yourself?”

4. Conclusion

- As you seek to
 - Defend and proclaim and promote and live out the gospel
- Don’t fret about having all the right words or thinking it all depends on you
- Listen to what the Apostle Paul said about himself when he first went to Corinth
 - *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.³*
- Even in our weakness and fumbling words, God will do his work in others through his Spirit
- As he does ... pray those you speak to will come to know the true and living God and so share in all the hope and salvation of eternity

PRAY

³ 1 Corinthians 2:1-5