

Trust reality

Do you know people who are slightly out of touch with reality? How do people get that way? I suppose you could catalog lots of reasons. Perhaps a lot of them could be lumped under, “Avoiding the uncomfortable.” I just don’t want to deal with my particular problem, so I’ll fool myself into believing that I’m really OK.

- Many addicts sincerely believe they could quit if they wanted to.
- Both men and women absolutely believe that the latest fashion looks good on them.
- Many people have convinced themselves that their problems are either bad luck or the fault of other people or the fault of the government, and have nothing whatever to do with the fact that they can’t hold a job and spend money on cell phones instead of the electric bill.

And why do they stick with this failed world view? I think that many do so because they have no confidence that a solution to their problems exists, or that it is beyond their grasp or intellect or education or training.

I don’t think it is possible to plow through all the misconceptions people have. If you want to get someone back to reality, you have to start at the beginning.

The big question about reality: Is life on earth all there is?

- Is the answer worth the risk? I think so. Even those who live in self-deception know that living in self-deception is pitiful.
- But can we know? That’s what we need to get across to people. Yes, we can.

That is what sets the message of the Bible apart from every other sales pitch in the world. Notice I did not say Christianity. Most of what calls itself Christian conceals self-deception by pretending that it is faith. They take a blind leap at what they think they want, which is no different than the addict or the fashion disaster or the victim mentality – all of them just pretend the world is the way they want it to be.

Jesus put it best, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Reality, at its simplest, sets you free from self-deception. In its fuller sense, the truth allows you to live successfully.

So, this lesson is an overview of evidence, reality, nothing complicated, just facts that

- Reality was created by someone a whole lot bigger than us.
- Many of the facts in the Bible can be verified and none have been shown to be false.
- The Bible has come to us intact, unchanged, since it was written.

A lot of people avoid the Bible because they have been bombarded with a whole lot of nonsense that supposedly comes from there. But, nonsense does not come from the Bible; it comes from people. When we get to know people who have not been impressed by the Christianity they have encountered, we need to have something to say that makes sense. So, the first type of evidence I want to talk about is common sense. These are ideas you might want to remember so that you can respond to legitimate complaints that Christianity doesn’t make sense.

The first common sense idea is that somebody had to kick over the first domino. Even if you believe in evolution and the big bang (which I will talk about later), something had to start it. Somebody had to make the bang. Whatever that was that made this happen is a lot bigger than we are. Knowing what the big guy wants is just common sense. It may be a challenge to wade through all the fakes, but the payoff looks pretty big – being friends with the biggest guy around.

On the evolution question, evolution requires time – lots of time. The most popular guess for the age of the earth is 4.5 billion years. It's in all the textbooks. If you question it, people accuse you of refusing to believe science. But it's the other way around. Those who accept 4.5 billion years as the age of the earth have conveniently overlooked a lot of common sense and science you can do yourself.

Example. Some stuff on earth is radioactive. How fast it decomposes in our time has been measured. There must have been more of it in the past, because we see it constantly decomposing. If you count up all the radioactive stuff in the world and work backwards, you will find that the world would be toxic to living things at the time when some people claim that life began.

Another example. Animal and crop breeding has been done successfully for all of recorded history. We have bred superior corn and soybeans and wheat. We know how to do it. Cattlemen breed certain characteristics in and others out, usually to make cattle produce more meat and be less aggressive. You don't want really big steers with 'roid rage. But once you breed a trait out, it's gone. Shorthorn cattle don't start producing long horned offspring unless there is a hole in the fence. We see genetic diversity shrinking constantly because undesirable traits lose out. Yet, evolutionists want us to throw common sense out the window and believe that genetic diversity has increased constantly and the range of genetic options and genetic complexity have increased exponentially – by chance.

Another example. Language. Every language on earth, not just English, is getting sloppier and simpler. Gone are the days of strict grammar rules. More than half of all verb tenses and pronouns have been discarded. In all of recorded history it has been that way. High Dutch and low Dutch. High German and low German. Swahili is a blend of several languages: Arabic, Persian, German, Portuguese, English, and French. It happened because traders needed to communicate. The modern equivalent is growing in West Africa: pidgin. Yet evolutionists want us to believe that language started out as grunts and gestures that evolved into language. So, language went from really simple to complex. Now it is going downhill every year. Where was the turn-around?

If you want to go into the science so often cited by those who believe in a 4.5 billion year old earth, ask me about it. I can show you the logical holes in their thoroughly unscientific conclusions. To put it bluntly, evolutionary science generates far more miracles than the Bible does. They have huge contradictions to cover, and the only way to get through the problem is to invoke a miracle.

A second kind of evidence: geography. The vast majority of places described in the Bible have been located. That does not apply to places that existed before the Flood. They are long gone. But since Noah, all the places you read about in the Bible are real, at given distances from other places, and were inhabited by the civilizations described at that time. The factual stuff is all real. Of course, most of the small stuff cannot be proven. The Bible says that Elijah went from Mount Carmel to the city of Samaria. We can find the end points and the road between, but Elijah's footprints are gone. A few small locations are just too small to be sure about. Will archeologists find Mokane four thousand years from now?

In the last few centuries, some highly educated people have drawn some unscientific conclusions that looked bad for the Bible. But, God has always had the last laugh.

Kathleen Kenyon, a very famous archeologist, excavated at Jericho in the latter part of the 19th century. She published that she found no evidence of the walls having fallen outward as describe in Joshua. For nearly a century, common knowledge said that the Jericho story was a

myth, an historical fabrication, in other words, a lie. But then, someone decided to re-visit her work. It turned out that she had dug only one trench, about 3 feet wide and 40 feet long. The new guy excavated a few acres. Kathleen Kenyon failed to find the walls fallen outward because she missed the wall. The second guy found it, and the walls did fall outward. But, a century of textbooks are still on library shelves with bad information.

Here's a truism. If a location was a good place for a city once, it is a good place for a city twice. That is why ancient cities are often found to be built on several layers of ruins. The city would be destroyed in war. But, when the smoke cleared, it was still a good place for a city, so they smoothed out the rubble and build another city on top of it. That is why so many ancient cities appear to be built on mounds. It's not a natural hill, but several layers of destruction.

The city of Nineveh, the largest city in the world of its time, the capital of the most power empire in the world, was lost to human knowledge. So, in the 18th century, many drew the conclusion that Nineveh was a mythological city, that it never really existed. But in the middle of the 19th century, it was found and extensively excavated. The British Museum has an entire wing dedicated to it. It even contained wall paintings of battles that are also described in the Old Testament. The Bible was proven to be exactly accurate again. Nineveh, although at a favorable site, was never rebuilt and was, in fact, lost to human consciousness for thousands of years. Nahum and Zephaniah both predicted that it would not be rebuilt, centuries in advance.

The Bible describes an ancient city known as Tyre in Lebanon. But, because no one could find it, the claim was published and believed that it, too, was a myth, until it was found and excavated. Centuries in advance, Ezekiel predicted that the city would be permanently destroyed. It happened in stages. The Babylonians laid siege to it, but lacked a navy to cut off resupply. After 13 years, the Babylonians finally breached the walls, only to find that the population had moved everything to the island in the middle of the harbor. When Alexander came along almost two centuries later, he scraped the old city into the bay in order to build a causeway to the island and conquer it. With no topsoil, farming became impossible. But, the coastal location and harbor were inviting, so it was rebuilt, but the harbor was silting up due to the causeway. Finally, the Moslems destroyed it permanently during the Crusades. It has not been inhabited for six centuries.

The Babylonians rose up against their masters, the Assyrians, and eventually defeated them after about 80 years of war. But before Babylon became an organized political entity, Isaiah predicted that they would rise to conquer the world and then be defeated by the Persians. But, in the time of Isaiah, the Persians were just a warring group of small tribes. On top of that, the utter destruction of Babylon was to be permanent. Isaiah and Jeremiah predicted that their capital city would never again be inhabited. And so it is to this day, although Sadaam Hussein started trying to restore it as a tourist attraction, but he did not accomplish much before the wars began.

In 700 BC, Isaiah predicted the name of the first king of Persia, and that he would conquer Babylon and permit the Israelites to return to their homeland. When Isaiah wrote this, the Israelites lived in Israel, Persia was not a country yet, and Babylon was a slave state to Assyria. That king of Persia, Cyrus, would not be born for more than another century.

Jeremiah, a century in advance, predicted the exact length of time that Israel would be enslaved to Babylon.

Quite often, ethnic groups blend together. Perhaps one conquers the other, perhaps they just intermarry. But, the ethnic character lives on. Take, for example, the Native American. Few full-blooded Native Americans exist, but their culture is well represented. The same is true of the Scots and the Welsh. Armenians, Mayans, and Germans. But the Ammonites and

Moabites did not fare so well. Jeremiah and Amos both predicted that these two nations would not be remembered among the nations. Before the time of Jesus, both groups were entirely gone. Their culture cannot even be reconstructed.

Another group is the Philistines. Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah predicted their utter destruction centuries in advance. No trace of their culture remained by the time of Jesus.

A lot of wars are described in the Bible. In most cases, wars involve more than one country. The other country wrote about that war, too.

In the time of Hezekiah, around 700 BC, the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem. But, mysteriously, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers died overnight. The Bible records it. The King of Assyria had to retreat back to his capital, Nineveh. He told the same story. They recorded the story, but they didn't believe him. His sons killed him and took the throne. The Egyptians had been on their way to Jerusalem to attack the Assyrians in the open field and came upon nothing but dead soldiers. They attributed the deaths to their own gods. But, the fact remains that all three cultures recorded the same miraculous event: 185,000 soldiers died mysteriously in one night.

The Bible records that Jehu, king of the Northern Kingdom, paid tribute to Assyria. A monument to that effect, the Black Obelisk of Shalmanezar III, describes that event and has a carving of that tribute being delivered.

The prophet Daniel was also the first Prime Minister of Persia. His tomb is in Susa where he is honored by Iranians for that reason.

Moving to something a little more modern, Jesus, when He was on earth, drew large crowds. The Roman governor kept track of such things because several revolts had arisen from similar beginnings in just the previous few decades. The governor had Jesus watched. Italians attended all of Jesus' public presentations and took notes. Like all good bureaucrats, the governor filed reports with the home office. And, like all good central governments, they filed it all in the national archives. Up until 410 AD, those reports were available for public scrutiny. But, then the Huns sacked Rome and burned the library. But, people did read those reports and wrote about them. People who were watching Jesus for political reasons, who had no interest in religion, recorded His miracles.

When Jesus was executed, it got dark from noon until three in the afternoon. Millions of people noticed. For centuries afterwards, scientists debated what might have caused it. The Jewish scholars tried to explain it away as an eclipse. The Christians easily refuted them by explaining that the feast of Passover always happened on the day of the full moon, so a solar eclipse is not geometrically possible.

And, one last odd fact, just because people will ask, a common misconception about the Bible involves dinosaurs. Dinosaurs are not mentioned in the Bible for a very good reason. The word, dinosaur, was invented in 1841 to describe the animal that was represented by a huge set of bones that had been discovered in that time. The writers of the Bible described some outrageous creatures – but Moses could not call anything a dinosaur in Genesis because the word was not invented for another 3300 years – and Moses wrote in Hebrew, not English..

Moving along to type three of the evidences you can use to break people out of mindless religion, the reliability of the Bible as we have it.

Here's the story about the Old Testament. The Old Testament was assembled slowly over a period of 1000 years, from Moses in 1446 BC at Mount Sinai, to Malachi in Israel in the middle 400's BC. After the time of Moses, how did they decide what to include with the obviously inspired first five books? A class of people developed who made it their job to check

out potential candidates. Whatever was put forward as a supposed message from God was held in escrow, so to speak, by a group known as the Sons of the Prophets. They preserved the writing while they checked it out. The writer had to have some sort of proof that he spoke for God. A lot of it had to do with predictions. If a supposed prophet missed even one prediction, the Sons of the Prophets hunted him down and killed him and burned his writings. If the fake prophet was already dead, they still burned the writings, but they also dug up his body and burned it, too. They were careful.

Second, they were the most careful copiers in all of world history. They had a system. One guy read, others wrote it down. When they finished a panel of a scroll, they set to the checking process. They assigned a number value to each letter (A = 1, B = 2, and so on). They added the letters across and wrote the number in the margin. They added the letters down the columns and wrote the number in the margin. Then they added the two diagonals. If all the numbers checked out with the master list, they went on. If not, they scraped off the problem and did it again. It was a long and very expensive process. But, as an example of how good they were, two copies of Isaiah that are almost 2000 years different in age have a total of 17 differences, all in the spelling of names which changed over time. There are a couple of places in the Old Testament that are a little iffy, but not because of copying. There are some figures of speech that are strange to us, but that is about it.

The New Testament, however, is a whole different animal. It was written over a period of only 20 years by eight different people in different places. They did not get to compare notes with each other and get their stories straight. So, the very fact that they all tell the same details is remarkable.

So how did it all get collected up? No one knows. But, there is a Table of Contents from about 115 AD that has all the same books we have in the same order. That list also contains one extra book, the Shepherd of Hermas, which was soon discarded when people realized that the author did not claim to speak for God. It was just good advice from a faithful person. So, all the books of the New Testament were collected up by some unknown process – but they were collected by people who knew the authors personally. Those collectors saw the miracles themselves, and knew the character of the individual writers.

When persecution of Christianity ended in the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, the list of books in the New Testament was already two centuries old. Constantine wanted to do something nice for his favorite citizens, so he had ten copies made, two of which certainly still exist in museums, and maybe two more (but the second two may be first-generation copies). Constantine did not decide what should go in the New Testament, he just commissioned the copying of what was already two centuries old.

But what if there had been copying errors in that two centuries? The early Christians did not have the money to keep a stable of high-dollar copyists. The copies were by amateurs.

But, we have an advantage over the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a lot older, so comments and quotes from preachers and religious writers are extremely few. War, slavery, disease, and decay all take their toll on the availability of old books. Because the New Testament is so much closer to us in time and because it was spread out over a much larger geographic area, we have a whole lot more essays available in which the New Testament is quoted – thousands of them. You can reconstruct the entire New Testament from quotes written down by people who knew the apostles personally.

That's how we can be certain that what we have as the Greek text is actually what the inspired writers wrote. Although the copies are not so exact as were produced for the Old

Testament, we can figure out what is the original by comparing all the quotes and all the copies. This process has improved in the last few hundred years. For example, if you read a King James version or a New King James, you will see marginal notes that say that certain phrases are not in the more modern accounts. That is because the King James Version was translated from a copy from the 1300's, and it had some errors – not many and none that make a doctrinal difference, but some. Archeology has improved the quality for our time, but it also shows that the copying process was really effective anyway. You can visit all those old copies in various museums. I have a list if you want to see it. You won't be allowed to play with it because they would crumble, but you can get high quality photographs and compile your own New Testament if you are so inclined.

As a comparison, the writings of William Shakespeare are from right about 1600, 1500 years newer than the New Testament. Shakespeare was considered a really good writer in his own time, and has been considered such ever since, so his writings have been preserved well. Yet, there are thousands of places in his poetry where literary people are not sure which word is original and which is a substitution by a copyist. The writings of much older famous people like Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato, are much more corrupt. The Koran is a total disaster, and it is from at least 600 years after Jesus. There are several official versions of the Koran because no one is able to track backwards to anything close to an original. The Bible is, by far, the best attested book in the world.

But what about those “extra” books that are advertised on TV? Has “the church” suppressed the writings they didn't like? First, “the church” had nothing to do with the assembling of the New Testament. People who knew the writers and saw the evidence gathered up what we have. There was no central organization at all in those days. By the time a central organization arose, the text was already set. Those “extra” books have been excluded for good reasons. First, they were written long after the supposed authors were dead. The Gospel of Thomas is a good example. Thomas was dead before 100 AD. The Gospel of Thomas was written in the 300's, yet claims to be from Thomas. If the claim of authorship is blatantly false, would you trust the rest?

Secondly, I have read all of the famous extra books. There is a distinct difference in quality. Those extra books are just bad writing. Better put, they are a bad joke. I cannot understand why anyone ever accepted them.

One set of books, called the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals, was considered authoritative for several centuries, then rejected. It was during a period of poor scholarship. We call it the Dark Ages. The bishop of Rome wanted control over other bishops and the kings of Europe, but the Bible is a little weak on that point. So, an enterprising monk in Spain composed several documents, including Paul's letter to the church at Madrid. He even aged the parchment chemically to make it look old. Then he “discovered” it in his monastery. He wrote into it a paragraph that made the pope head of all bishops and the kings of the earth with the authority to appoint or dismiss, not to mention tax. But, as the Middle Ages dawned and scholarship revived, an anachronism was noticed. Church leaders of the second century were cited as quoting people who lived in the fourth century.

But, back to the New Testament. We can trust the Greek text of the New Testament. What about our English translations? Every major translation has been done by well-meaning and very well-trained people. Usually, they translate in groups so they can catch personal biases. But, moving an idea from one language to another is difficult. Languages do not match up word for

word, so there are always hard choices to make about which English word to use in a particular place. The translators do a very good job.

But... Language changes. English has changed a lot in the last 400 years. So, new translations are necessary so that the English is understandable by the common English reader. In addition, every group of translators has their own biases, the things they have always believed. So, those things come across. The translators of the King James Version were under a political mandate to not start a religious civil war, so they had to invent new words, like baptism, because if they translated it as immerse they would all be killed. In the New International Version, the vast majority of the translators were Calvinists. So, they changed the word “flesh” to “sinful nature.” Over the last 400 years, translators have changed more and more of the passages that refer to the “faith of Jesus,” and changed it to “faith in Jesus” because they do not believe that Jesus had choices.

What can we do about that? Can we trust modern translations? Must we be fluent in Greek and Hebrew to be able to know what God expects of us? No. The tools to unravel the few failings of the translators are commonly available to us and easy to use. It just takes some work – as does anything worth doing.

If we want to be free, we must deal with reality, not self-deception. The Bible has proved itself to be an accurate description of reality. Our reality must incorporate the primary importance of our eternal part; the physical is temporary.

The Bible establishes a purpose for existence. The universe was created as an incubator for faith. But for trust in God to have any meaning, God had to make a world that gives us a clear choice. There’s enough physically pleasant stuff to make pursuit of comfort an attractive option. But, there’s enough physically unpleasant stuff to make us want something better. It comes down to a choice. We can try to swim upstream in search of a satisfying life that no one before us seems to have found, or we can trust God that He has the ability to carry through on His promises of a satisfying life here and a better one later. God promises, if we will evaluate the evidence and sign on, that He will grant us the superhuman ability to grow good character, satisfying relationships, and a positive outlook all during this life. Then, after this world is gone, we will join those of like interests and live securely, forever.

But, like it says at the bottom of all those retirement investment papers, you are responsible for gathering and checking out all the evidence before making a decision. You probably already know how it feels to be snowed by a good salesman and regret that purchase for a long, long time. Know what you are getting into. Be convinced, then go with the best deal. God is not afraid of competition and will not look down on you for checking out His claims. He knows that no one can beat His offer if all the facts are known.

When you are convinced, then make the commitment, sign on the dotted line. We don’t do it with a contract and lawyers, but through baptism, in which I swear that I will consider my body as reserved for godly purposes, that I will be a walking celebration of forgiveness, that I am dedicated to a miraculous unity with fellow believers, and that I am prepared to be transformed into the image of Jesus. On His side of the contract, God promises that He has already bought out my debt to justice, has given me the power to develop Jesus’ character and the mindset to handle the bad experiences of life, and have absolute liberty.

If you have evaluated the evidence and decided to sign on, Jesus invites you to make that desire known as we stand and while we sing.