

# OpenTheo

## Aren't Some Unbelievers Sincerely Seeking Truth?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether there are scriptural explanations for why people don't think God exists other than that they're "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" and how to make the case for apologetics to a pastor who uses 1 Corinthians 2 to argue against it.

\* Are there scriptural explanations for why some people don't accept the existence of God other than that they're "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" or "fools saying in their hearts there is no God"?

\* How can we make a case for apologetics to a pastor who uses 1 Corinthians 2 to say it isn't necessary and we should only be sharing the simple gospel?

### Transcript

#STRask Aren't Some Unbelievers Thanks for listening to the #STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Koukl. Hello, Greg. Hey, Amos.

Alright, this is the first recording of the morning, so... That's right. So we're pretending to be bright-eyed and cheap. Bushy-tailed.

Although you're good in the morning, I'm a little bit slow. But I'll try to perk up a little bit here. So what do we got? Well, here's a question to wake you up.

This one comes from Graham. I understand that someone can, quote, suppress the truth in unrighteousness or be a quote, fool who has said in his heart that there is no God. I have atheist friends who are sincere searchers for truth and who are not fools.

Are there other scriptural explanations for why some people do not accept the existence of God? Well, I think the verses that he cited are kind of the main ones in this kind of discussion, but I think there's something else that's going on. And I have made this particular point from Scripture in the past and had some really significant pushback by some... Edward Fesser, from Pasadena College, who's a very significant philosopher as a Christian. He's a Thomas, but he was bothered by it.

So I ended up responding to him and he posted it. Was it Randall Rouse? I thought it was Randall Rouse, but maybe you're right. No, it's the guy Pasadena and a Catholic Christian guy, I think.

In any event, here's the way I explained it. There are things that you... People believe that which beliefs they're not always consciously aware of, all right, that influence the way they act in things they say. These are, I think they're called, dispositional beliefs.

To illustrate, I think there are... I think of circumstances and anybody can think in your life where you were finally kind of confronted by someone about an attitude that you seem to display. And maybe you for a long time have resisted that, but in a moment of clarity, you realize deep down inside you really knew the truth of what's been explained to you, but for emotional reasons or whatever you've fought it. This is not an unusual experience in the human condition.

Okay, we suppress consciously things that we know to be true, but we don't like. Okay, and I think that's the category of dispositional beliefs. And so this is a real category, but I think that that notion can help us understand something here.

You have, say, atheists who will say, "I'm not suppressing anything. I actually do not believe in God." And here are the reasons why. I am a seeker of truth.

But of course, when you listen to the reasons that they give, in many cases, and this is descriptive, this is meant to be descriptive, not disparaging, they're really shallow. We deal with these all the time. They're simply shallow beliefs.

In fact, those beliefs, they say they believe in, they don't follow through with on a regular basis when they're not defending turf. I remember the atheists I had a conversation with. What's this? We had a picture.

Oh, Doug, Doug, Doug, yes. And when he's pressing me on his understanding or view of the origin of morality, he's talking about Darwinian evolution, a standard direction to go with that, so they don't have to go to God. But of course, Darwinian evolution can only produce, if it can produce anything like that, it can only produce a relativistic morality.

But of course, atheists object against the God of the Bible as being immoral. And so my question to Doug was, so what you're saying is the depiction of the God of the Bible disagrees with your personal evolution. And he said, "Yes." Well, you can see how trivial that kind of objection turns out to be.

And this is the case on a host of things. So it isn't as if atheists, for example, have a strong case. And rather, I think their case is really weak, but for some reason, they're impressed with it.

And I think, so I'm going to stick with Scripture God's perspective who says, even though

they knew God, they did not honor him as God, but they made an exchange for something else. Or in the Psalms, the fool has said in his heart, there is no God. Now, of course, in that verse, they are saying in their heart, there is no God.

And the Psalmist is saying, that's dumb. And then we can give the reasons why that's the case because God's existence is obvious. That's Romans 1 stuff.

So I'm going to stick with God's assessment here, Romans 1. They're suppressing the truth and unrighteousness. But that doesn't necessarily mean they are consciously aware that they're lying to themselves. And I think that's a critical distinction.

I think they think of themselves that they're seeking for truth, at least on a conscious basis. But then what they'll do is they'll say things that implicitly presume the truth of a theistic worldview, like objective morality, and are not at all consistent with an atheistic worldview. And these moves that they make like that bear testimony.

They are tells of the deeper conviction they actually have. This is where the inside out tactic in the 10th anniversary of edition of tactics comes in. There are these truths on the inside that they can't ultimately deny.

And they always come out on the outside, especially when they're not defending turf. Yeah, I I'm looking at this question. And the first thing I want to say is I don't think fool is exactly the same as stupid.

They're not saying this is not about intelligence. This is about foolishness. You can be a very smart person and be foolish.

So it's not an insult to their intelligence. But when you ask, are there other scriptural explanations, I think the easiest one is we're fallen. We're dead in our transgressions.

We're by nature, children of wrath. We the natural man cannot understand the spiritual things. We are in rebellion against God.

We do not want to acknowledge him. That is throughout the New Testament. It's not even just in Romans 1, although Romans 1 is very explicit about that.

But if you do not go into these conversations with an understanding of our spiritual state, you're going to miss out what is going on here, because there is a lot more going on than just arguments. Right. And by the way, toss into that mix that the devil has blinded the eyes of the unbeliever.

And there are actually four verses, I quote, frequently to show the power, the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. He holds them captive to do his will, things like that. So this is another factor that keeps them from a conscious awareness of the rebellion that they're in and the rejection of the obvious, the things that ought to be

obvious to their eyes, things that say Romans 1 depicts.

There's a lot at stake here in accepting the truth about the gospel. You have to humble yourself. You have to admit that you're a sinner.

You have to come before God and die to yourself and follow him. There are a lot of things there that are incentives to not accept him at all. So this, you have to keep this in mind.

One question I like to ask, because I think this will draw out maybe where the real problem is, because I think the real problem is not intellectual, the real problem is they don't like God. I mean, ultimately, the way to bring that out is to say, okay, let's say I convince you that the God of the Bible actually exists. This is true.

And what it says about him is true. And what he requires of us is true. Would you follow him and see what they say? Just a hypothetical thing.

Would you follow this God? Would you love this God? Do you love the God of the Bible? But you just don't believe he's actually real. Because there are certainly books that we read where we love the characters and where we could think, maybe I wish this character were real, but he's not. So just looking at him as a character, what do you think about God? And then maybe you can draw some of this out and start there because that stuff is going on in the background, even if it doesn't come up.

Okay, Greg, ready for the next one? Sure. This one comes from Casey in Michigan. How can we make a case for apologetics to be taught in church to pastors or elders who use 1 Corinthians chapter 2 to say that it is not necessary, and we should only be sharing the simple gospel? All right.

The passage in question is the beginning of the chapter. I presume it's this one. I was with you in weakness.

Well, let me start further up in chapter 2. And when I came to you, brethren, incidentally, when I came to you, brethren, who's at the Corinthians, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except for Jesus Christ and him, crucified. Now just pause for a moment.

Keep in mind the frame of reference here. The frame of reference is the Corinthians and when Paul went to the Corinthians. So what this could be referring to is his pattern with the Corinthians under that set of circumstances, not necessarily his pattern throughout.

In fact, we know it's not his pattern throughout. I'll read some more here in a moment because we have a record of many of his engagements, and that record is in principally in the book of Acts. But let me continue reading.

I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. We know also when you read the book of Acts that he was afraid because I think it was when he was in Corinth the first time that Jesus appeared to him in a vision and said, "Do not be afraid any longer because I have many people in this city." All right. So again, this is, keep in mind, the frame of reference here.

I was with you, Corinthians, in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching when to them, at least arguably, I just want people to open their minds to that possibility because this is a personal letter to a particular group. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and of power so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God.

Now, the presumption here is that Paul was not speaking persuasively for one, and secondly, that wisdom of men is any attempt to give a justification for the views that he was preaching, a rationale, a reason whatsoever. So notice how when people read this text, they are presuming something about the meaning of these words. He doesn't speak in persuasive words is the broad conclusion.

And he doesn't want our faith to rest on the wisdom of men, which means evidences. Notice how that's being read in here, but rather on the power of God. Next, he says, yet we do speak a wisdom among those who are mature, a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away.

We speak God's wisdom and a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages of glory. So it's a wisdom, none of the rules of this world understood. So keep in mind that when he says Greeks, Greeks are looking for wisdom, but those Greeks looking for wisdom, look at the gospel and say, that's dumb.

That's foolishness. And this is why Paul says later, I was well pleased by the so-called foolishness of the gospel preached to God was well pleased to save those who believe. You want to call it foolishness fine, but Paul doesn't say it's foolishness.

It's foolishness to the perishing. That's what he says. Okay.

So this is if we're just looking inductively for this passage, I don't think you can properly draw the conclusion that there is no persuasive evidences that Paul ever used. That's not what it's speaking. It might be saying, here's the way he approached things with the Corinthians when he first met them.

Now, if somebody wants to disagree with that fine, but there's another line of thinking, we actually possess Paul's, the content of Paul's engagements with people. We look at the book of Acts, for example, and we see Paul before the Sanhedra, before the Pharisees, a couple of different times addressing them. And when we see what he says,

it is obviously, it's obvious that he's speaking persuasively, because in two cases, at least he gives his testimony.

All right. When we see him going in Acts 16, or maybe 17 to the Galatian region, it says there, as was his custom, he was reasoning with them, in this case, from the scripture, because he was talking to Jews, and some were persuaded. Well, if he's reasoning and they persuaded, I think that means he's using persuasive speech.

That's a natural way to take that. And when we see him arguing before the authorities that want him arrested, now he's in custody of the Romans and on his way to Rome, a couple of times there, he's laying this thing out. When he talks to a gripper, I think, he tells him, these things have not been done in a corner.

He says, you believe the prophets, right? I know you do. Why is he appealing to the prophets? Because the prophets prophesied about Jesus, and he's using that as evidence to show that Jesus is the Christ. And then when he's not talking to those familiar with the prophets, let's say in Mars Hill, what does he do? He has an elegant presentation that is deeply persuasive in the way it's formed.

It's a model. He's not quoting the Bible. He's quoting the Epicurean philosophers.

This is on Mars Hill, the sermon regarding the unknown God. And at the end, he declares that God is going to judge the world through a man having, having provided proof by raising him from the dead. Now, there's an argument based on the resurrection.

And that's when they scoffed, but it turned out, though most didn't believe and made fun of him, some were persuaded and followed him. So the point I'm making about chapter two in first Corinthians is even inductively, I think you can make a case that he's not speaking against apologetics. But if he is, this is completely contradicted by the record of his actual preaching that we have multiple times in the book of Acts.

And this is one of those occasions, Amy, where folks have a thing in their mind, and they find the verse that seems to support what they have in their mind. And then they ignore the other passages that contradict their take of that passage. And what they are doing then with that approach is they are implicitly affirming a contradiction in the text.

If Paul is saying he doesn't do that, here it is, we're standing on that, then what we have to ignore the passages where he does the opposite to effect, he persuades people, or just implicitly affirm, well, these other things must be wrong, and therefore the text contradicts itself. So I think the record, especially in the book of Acts, when brought to bear on this question in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, makes it clear that the take that people have on this passage that this is somehow against apologetics is just false. They are misunderstanding what Paul is saying.

Incidentally, I don't know that it's entirely easy to figure out exactly what he's saying

here. That's why I offered some other options. But what you can't do is conclude that what he's saying is contrary to what he actually did.

And that's what this take does. Well, part of what's going on here is simply the fact, and this goes back to our last question, Greg, that the end of this chapter where it says, "A natural man does not accept the things of the spirit of God." In other words, it's not the words that persuade ultimately, it's the spirit who persuades because it's a spiritual problem and the person has to be changed by the spirit in order to hear what they're saying. That doesn't mean you don't say things well or explain things well.

It just means that ultimately it is not your words that ultimately change people's hearts. I actually make this point in chapter 2 of the tactics book. And so here I'm going to say something rather bold.

It might make people sit up. But the simple gospel is not enough to persuade people to become Christians, which is the alternate that's offered in this particular case. How could you say such a thing? Because everybody has had many times they've played shared the simple gospel of people and it never changed their lives.

They just ignored it. What's missing? The thing that's missing is the work of the spirit. The spirit uses the simple gospel, if you will, in its power to change lives.

This is the point that Amy's making. But simple gospel is not the only thing the Holy Spirit uses. He uses a multitude of things.

And so the way I put it, which includes persuasive arguments, which is why we're enjoying to do it. And this is why the disciples did it. And so the way I put it in the story of reality is that without the spirit, nothing works with the spirit, a lot of things work.

It's not just the simple preaching of the gospel, Amy. And just to clarify, God doesn't say apart from the gospel, even if he uses other things to communicate the gospel rather than just saying the simple words of the gospel. And on that note, when he talks about at the beginning of the chapter, let's see, I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Well, that is the core message. And the core message of Christianity is a very simple message. However, that's what apologetics is doing.

It is talking about Jesus and Him crucified. It's explaining who He is. It's giving evidence for who He is.

It's giving evidence for Him, his crucifixion and his resurrection. So all in that way, apologetics falls under that same category of thinking about Christ and Him crucified. That's what it's all directed towards.

So I think it can be included in that, even in that idea of I'm only knowing Christ and Him crucified. Because what Paul is saying here is, that's the end he's shooting for. Yes.

What people are doing are adding other things to the gospel. Apologetics isn't adding things to the gospel. It's explaining the gospel and it's arguing for the gospel.

Yes. And it's removing barriers that people might have to. So if we give the cosmological argument, teleological argument, the moral argument for the existence of God, it's to persuade them that God exists, which is part of the larger Christian worldview, which focuses in on the redemptive work of Christ.

That's where we're moving towards. It isn't just to persuade them of a primer, Aristotle's prime mover or something like that. That's not enough.

We agree. But it is, in many cases, a necessary step to get to that goal, that final telos that end that Paul is talking about here. We have to remove the, and by the way, that's what he was doing on Mars Hill.

I notice all the idols. You have idols to all these gods, even to an unknown God. Okay.

So what you worship in ignorance, I proclaim to you openly and off he goes. And so he's using this polytheistic environment with a reference to the unknown God as a tool to eventually get to the gospel. And incidentally, I'm trying to think of where the so-called good news is in the Mars Hill presentation, because he doesn't get into a lot of soteriology there.

He talks about judgment, but a call to them to abandon the foolish commitment to idols made of stone and wood and whatever, because God can't be contained in those things with made with human hands. So it is an interesting apologetic that he uses to get to his statement about judgment and the, and implicitly the rescue that's available through Christ. And just again, what it looks like Paul is against here is an adding of things that men make up in their own wisdom to the gospel, to people who add rules, to people who add other aspects that are not true.

And what he says is, you cannot come up with the gospel on your own. God has revealed the gospel and that's the gospel that we preach. And you can preach that true gospel revealed by God by explaining it through apologetics.

By the way, this happens a lot even within the Christian circles where people will say, well, here I'm dealing with hell or I'm dealing with the exclusivity of Christ. So you're dealing with something like that that is somewhat politically incorrect. And they say, well, that just doesn't make sense to me, even as a Christian.

That doesn't make sense to me. God would do that kind of thing. Here's the kind of thing that God would probably do.



And so then they construct a distorted message of the gospel, not because they're finding it in Scripture, but rather because the things that seem to be clear in Scripture don't seem right. They don't seem fair. They don't seem like this is the kind of thing that my concept of God would do.

And that's to me an example of what you're talking about, of adding more things according to their wisdom instead of letting the truth of God's word inform them. And that's exactly the thing that apologetics prevents because it helps you to think clearly about what God has already revealed. We need to think clearly about that revelation.

And that's what apologetics does. I recently wrote a solid ground just and realized we keep adding an add but almost done that had to do with what about the what's the fate of the unavangelized. And in that I at the very outset, I acknowledge there's a temptation to want to adjust because gee, it just seems so harsh.

If we say Jesus is the only way and what about those people never heard and it's a legitimate question, it needs to be answered. But after all, only God knows. God knows their heart, which to which I say, yes, you're right.

Only God knows. God knows their heart. And that's why we need to go to God to see what God said about the fate of the unavangelized.

That's how we know it. And when we go to the text to see what the text says, it's not that hard. It's clear.

And the reasons for it are clear in the text. And this is what I build on so people can check that out. But the point is this is where man's wisdom, our wisdom, is sometimes in, invade against God's wisdom to make the gospel kinder and gentler in our mind.

Well, I'm glad you closed with that thought. Great. Because that is actually a preview for the next episode because our very next question will be on that topic.

Okay, great. So all of you, we hope to see you next time. Thanks for listening.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cokel for Stand to Reason.

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