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Who Made You the Experts on What Makes Someone a Christian?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Greg and Amy are illegitimately claiming they're the experts on what makes someone a Christian and a tactic to use with someone who counters any evidence offered by saying that other experts disagree.

* Who made you the experts on what makes someone a Christian?

* What tactic can I use with someone who counters any evidence I offer by saying that other experts disagree with me?

Transcript

Thank you for joining us for the hashtag STRAsk podcast with Greg Koukl. And Amy. And I made me haul.

I let Greg do all the hard things and then I swoop in and... Well, they know that's not true. But nevertheless, we'll let it go and move on. Okay, here's the first question.

It comes from Matthew Taylor. And he also has the Still Unbelievable podcast. Okay, so here's his question.

Who made you the experts of what makes someone a Christian? And just to understand where he's coming from, this was in response to an episode we did on December 19th about how professing Christians can support things that are anti-Christian like LGBTQ and abortion on demand and those sorts of things. So his question is, who made you the experts of what makes someone a Christian? Well, I'm trying to suppress a chuckle here because it's such an odd statement partly because I suspect that Matthew has an opinion about what a Christian actually is. And it's not our opinion.

And so that's why he's challenging us. But if I were to ask him what his view is, I could also ask him this question, who made you the expert on what is a Christian and what isn't a Christian? And by the way, that could be said about any view anyone has. So this is a very, let's just say

uncharitable way of asking the question.

I'm not offended by it. But what it does is it betrays a kind of hostility and a subtle implication that I have no right to say anything about it. You have no right to say anything about that.

We cannot legitimately weigh in with any reason because then we are acting like the self appointed authority on the issue. And like I said, this is a case where sometimes the objection a person levels at Christians can equal or Christianity can equally be leveled at their view who made you the expert. Now, if he had a point of view about what a Christian was, I would not ask that question that way.

I would ask the question, what makes you think that's the correct understanding of what a Christian is? And that's the question that should have been asked of us. But of course, as I recall, we answered that question because the concept of Christian comes from a source. And that is the scripture, the New Testament in particular.

The word Christian was actually applied to Christians, not by Christians, but by people that were probably making fun of them. And this was in Antioch, and this is recorded in the book of Acts where they were first called Christians. Christians called themselves the way and the reason they called themselves the way is because they believed Jesus was the way as he claimed it.

So they became associated with that word the way, but the Christian came in. And what it says there in book of acts is the disciples were first called Christians. In other words, the first use of the word is applied to those who are disciplined followers of Jesus of Nazareth who claimed that he was the way.

And that's why they called themselves the way. Now, if you want to get, in a certain sense, a somewhat technical definition about something, you have to go to the source that talks about those kinds of things. Our source is the New Testament.

And when we look at the way the word is used there, we realize it has theological substance to it. It isn't like a wax nose that can be twisted in any direction. If words were like that, they could be whatever, then they end up meaning nothing.

And so historically then the word Christian has also taken on certain dimensions. We refer to classical Christianity to distinguish it from the kind of amorphous so-called Christianity that seems to be practiced by so many today. This is a recent development, by the way, historically.

And when I say amorphous, it doesn't have boundaries. 75, what, 75% of Americans self-identify as Christians, but they believe things all over the map. And many things that they believe are completely inconsistent with classical Christianity.

So if they reject those things that are characteristic of Christianity and they still want to use the word Christian, then my question is why use that word? I wonder about progressive Christians, because everything that they believe, no, let me back up and put it this way, all of the things

that are foundational to historic Christianity, they seem to reject. Yet they still want to call themselves Christians. Why? And so they're going to have a reason.

They're going to have a definition, but then if they give their definition, it probably would not be helpful for me to say, who made you the expert on that? And by the way, when you and I talk about what a Christian is and indicate that it has to do not only just with theological convictions, but also lifestyle choices, we are not suggesting that we're the experts. We don't want anybody to believe anything based on the authority of our proclamation. You know, we always make an appeal.

We make appeals to the text indicating here's what the text says. Now, if people object to that, that's fine, but then find fault with the text. Or I should say, find fault with us in the way we've used the text instead of just kind of sneering at us and saying, who made you the expert kind of thing.

And so one of the things that I'm not sure if we mentioned this in the December podcast, but what comes to mind. And that is the first Corinthians six verse nine passage where Paul makes it clear that certain people who practice certain behaviors are not Christian as Paul, which includes the sexual things that are kind of in at play in the culture right now, all sorts of things. And he just says, do not be deceived.

People who do these things, a whole range of things, including sexual things will not inherit the kingdom. So I guess I could say who made Paul the expert? Well, God did. By the way, even if you don't accept the divine authority of Paul's words, they still are authoritative given the Christian context.

So if I want to, and we've done this before, talk about what Mormonism teaches, we go back to the Mormon sources and those who speak for Mormonism authoritatively. Now, we don't hold that those are those words are God's words, but we want to respect the authoritative statement so that we reflect the views of Mormonism accurately. The same thing is true about Christianity.

Christianity has a history. It is a thing. It is not anything.

It is a thing. It has boundaries to it. They're theological and their behavioral who would say, for example, that those Christians in the Third Reich who supported Hitler and the destruction of the Jews were really Christians.

Would Matthew say that? No matter what they said, they believed if they were involved or at least even passively involved with the annihilation of the Jewish people in Germany during the Third Reich. Would he say that was Christian? And if he says it wasn't Christian, would it be fair to say, who made you the expert? See, this is not a useful way to approach the issue. Christianity has to be something in particular or it's nothing.

If it's just whatever you say, whatever words you put into it, then it means literally nothing. But we know that it does mean something because it's an historical group of people that have had

a revelation that they've turned to that we can look at today. That's objectively available publicly to anyone who wants to read it.

So I would say there is a difference between being an expert and being the standard. We're not saying that we are the standard. We're saying that the... Or that we're the experts.

Well, I don't even have so much of a problem as saying an expert and I'll tell you why in a second. I'm not saying that there is an objective standard, the revelation of God about himself and about how we are to live as his people, that's the standard. Now that I think there is some expertise that comes in when you have used your reading comprehension skills to read through it and then summarize what it says.

But I think his problem is that he thinks what we're doing is saying that we are the standard. So we get to just randomly say, this is what makes the question. Who died and made you God's kind of approach.

It's not random at all. We're basing it on something objective, the revelation of God about himself and about how we are supposed to act as his followers, as his people. And you can certainly get better at understanding what the Bible says about that.

You can ignore what it says and go your own way. But now you've gone away from the standard. So anyway, those are my thoughts on that.

Yeah, there's there's no way around this essentially that sooner or later, if you're going to use a term to describe something, it's got to be exclusive while other things that the term does not describe. And so this is true in everything. It's not just true in Christianity.

And by the way, our point here isn't that our theological views are correct. That's something entirely different. What we're saying is that our understanding of what Christianity is is correct because we've gone back to the sources and seen how the sources themselves characterize Christianity, both theologically and behaviorally.

And that's why I mentioned, well, if we were doing an analysis of Mormonism, which we don't hold to, we'd still be under the same obligation and actually make the same point. If somebody said to us, who made you the expert of Mormonism or the authority? I'm not. I'm reading the authorities and this is what they say.

And basically that's our approach. Okay, let's go on to a question from Pat C. And Pat uses a term here. I think may have been a, what do you call it? A typo.

But you know, when you you speak out your question and then your phone types it for you. Oh, I see this, but one of the dictation. Yes, you don't start doing this on me.

Amy, I'm already doing it enough. Okay. So, because he refers to a discussion with an H and W, which I think may supposed to be a JW because I don't know what an H&W is.

Okay, good. Got it. But it doesn't really matter.

I'll just say H&W. If we're wrong, it doesn't really matter. So let me go ahead.

The question is the question. Right. So here's the question.

Every discussion with an H&W goes down the same path. I say X is a fact and provide support. And they say some scientist, scholar, expert says not X is a fact.

I've concluded that they believe that truth, at least when it comes to religion and morality, cannot be known tactic to break through. Well, this is kind of a question regarding formal categories. There's no material categories.

Here's the X is and X is not. I'm not sure the details of what they're talking about. When the Christian is opposed with claims of experts, there is a tactic for that.

And it's called the Rhodes Scholar tactic. And the key to the tactic is that is an understanding that it's not so important. There are exceptions to this, but there's not so important what the expert says is true.

You want to find out the reasons why they think it's true. Their view is true. In this case, it would be a denial of a fact that maybe the Christian might hold to.

So what are the reasons that they do this? It all comes back to the reasons. And this is a carryover of our earlier question. What are the reasons we think Christianity is this way means this? And same thing here.

Well, that is not a fact because this expert says, okay, well, what is the case he makes? Now, think about expert testimony. I mean, this is part of legal proceedings oftentimes, and there's value to that. And sometimes people are in a position of privilege access based on their education to be able to give an expert opinion.

All right. But when the defense calls their expert who testifies on behalf of their defendant, what happens next cross examination? And that means the prosecution then can then cross examine the so-called expert to find out if their expertise or at least the assessment of their expert given their expertise is sound or not. And this is basically what we're doing here.

Well, if if a Christian claims something as a fact, then it's appropriate for them to give the reasons why they think it's a fact back to the earlier discussion. Here is the fact is this is what Christianity entails at least rudimentary in a rudimentary fashion. And foundationally, and here are the reasons why here are the verses that seem to indicate this.

Okay. Now, if we're making some other claim that's being opposed, then we give our reasons. Now, somebody else says, oh, your fact is not a fact.

Okay. Who said that? The scientist? My expert refutes your expert. My expert refutes your

expert.

Okay. But again, that's just formal categories. We got to get to the material substance.

What is it that this person understands that seems to be a refutation? Now, by the way, this is not uncommon for this to happen. And it's not just in theological circles or when it has theological ramifications. It just isn't just between Christians and on Christians.

You know, in the whole evolution debate, there are two massively different schools that are both committed to a materialistic explanation. But the details of that explanation of development, biological development are very different. You have the classical Darwinist, the Darwinian fundamentalist, if you part of the term, like Richard Dawkins, and then you have the punctuated equilibrium crowd like Stephen Jay Gould, the late Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard, the paleontologist.

So these, they are very, very different. In fact, they were always at each other's throats, except for when they ganged up together against the Christians, right? In fact, because the punctuated equilibrium crowd held the view that there were quicks, kind of jerks in biological development, which is against the standard Darwinian thing, they characterized this tongue in cheek as evolution by jerks, which was how they saw the guys who held the view, like Gould, because there was so much animosity. So the point is, there are things where there's controversy, where you have different points of view, and then it becomes a matter of looking carefully at both sides and seeing which side seems better justified.

I don't know how else to say it. And the same thing is true here. There may be claims of experts about, say, the resurrection.

Okay. And what John Dominic Crosson or some of his buddies in the Jesus seminar, who's the other fellow I can't remember the same in that category, and I'd say, well, Jesus body wasn't in the grave. It was thrown into a pile and it rotted there, like all the other bodies from crucifixion.

That's why the issue of the empty tomb wasn't an issue. Jesus wasn't in the tomb to begin with. Is he an expert? Yeah, he's an expert.

But then you have to weigh his opinion against what written evidence that we have contrary to his view. And do we give his view, Crosson's view, more weight as an expert of the kinds of things that generally happened during the time? Or do we give more weight to the documents that record that in this specific case, something different happened? So that's going to be a matter of judgment, and you do your best. So that there's going to be contradictions between people's views regarding the facts is inevitable.

The question is, what are the reasons for either claim and what set of reasons seems to be the best all things considered in the circumstances? And that's why it doesn't follow that truth can't be known just because they disagree. We're not trapped by other people's opinions. We have to ask for the reasons.

And so maybe that's just something you could say to them, well, you're able to reason too. You don't have to just go along with to pick someone you're going to go along with. That seems rather foolish to me.

And we don't have to do that. We can actually look at the reasons. Now, there may be something else going on here also for why they would think religion and morality can't be known.

Maybe they think there's no standard that we can appeal to because that would be a problem. If we didn't have a standard of revelation, then it would be hard to know exactly what's going on. Well, in their case, there is dispute about standards regarding knowledge because what you've just described, that religious ideas and moral ideas can't be known is an enlightenment concept because of the materialistic philosophical viewpoint that came out.

If science can't, if it can't be verified by science, this is called verificationism, that can't be verified by science, then it can't be known. In fact, verificationism would say not only can it not be known, it's not even a meaningful question. It's nonsense if it can't be verified in a scientific way.

Now, this is an old philosophy. It has died in philosophical circles for good reason because it turns out to be self-refuting and other problems. But it's just obvious that we know more things about the world than science is capable of teaching us.

In fact, we have to know a whole host of things before we can even employ science to do its work. So the ability to know things goes far beyond this and it just seems to me, given the fact that we know so many other things that science does not speak to or it has no way of speaking to, then those are the kinds of things that we can employ to answer religious questions or say moral or ethical questions. We've argued this way.

My whole life as an apologist, the book on relativism back in 1998 with me and Frank Beckwith, my first book, that same thing. We're trading on other ways of knowing that are sound and reliable and we always use all the time. And I don't want it to sound like I'm saying that we just assert that there is an objective standard that we're going to appeal to in God's revelation.

I'm not even saying that. I'm just saying because you don't have to stop there. I'm just saying maybe that's the problem.

They don't think there's one. So you have to start back earlier. Why do we think there's a God? Why do we think this is his revelation? Why do we think, you know, what has he done in history and how do we know about these things? You can, you don't have to start with the revelation.

You can start back earlier. But I think of you just emphasize the fact that, no, you can actually think through these things and people have been doing that for thousands of years. Thinking about these kinds of questions.

And then, you know, it's, he does say, assuming Pat is a male here. Sorry, Pat, if you're a woman. But he does say that he provides support.

So he is providing support. So you're just going to have to push on the fact that you can't just appeal to an expert without using the support for that. I just finished a solid ground that is coming out March 1st.

I suspect this will be before March or when this broadcast is released. And, and that's our, it's called the invisible man and I'm making an argument for the existence of the soul. And in that piece, there, I make the case that there are ways that we know things other than science.

In fact, science is not well equipped at all to, to invade on this matter. And, but that doesn't mean we're at a loss. We can't know.

And so I suggest, I recommend that people for the subject matter itself, but also for the epistemology that's there that it teaches us that we can know things beyond the scientific realm. And in fact, we, this is true. I mean, we all, the, the counter example or the examples of this is just abound every single day.

You know, so we don't have to restrict it by scientific knowledge. Well, thank you, Matthew and Pat. We appreciate hearing from me.

You can send us your question on X with the hashtag SDR. Ask or just go to our website at str.org. Look for our podcast page for hashtag SDR. Ask and you'll find a link there so you can submit your own question.

We look forward to hearing from you. This is Amy Hall and Greg Coco for Stan to reason.