

# KNOWING & DOING

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## Redeeming a Skeptical Contention: “Why Are Christians So Bad?”

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In the *Washington Post* every now and then, there's an article about a celebrity pastor who has fallen from grace. And so you've probably heard a popular contention against Christianity, which usually goes along these lines: “Why are Christians so bad?” What's so interesting about this contention is that it illustrates something important for evangelism. That is, though many objections to Christianity appear to be purely intellectual or theoretical, often it's the *personal* problems that hinder people from coming to faith.

Take, for example, a book titled *Why I Became an Atheist*.<sup>1</sup> It's written by a former evangelical pastor who lays out his arguments against Christianity. On the surface, it looks very intellectual and philosophical. But it's fascinating that he talks vividly about his own testimony—his personal experience—of how Christians in his church treated him ungraciously. It seems that personal experience, of a lack of grace by Christians, became the greatest obstacle to his own faith.

Similarly many others who bring up this contention against Christianity give deeply personal, rather than intellectual or informational, objections. It's important to remember that we're dealing with people—with emotions, feelings—not robots. When being engaged by skeptics, seekers, and nonbelievers, our goal is not to win an argument or a debate; it's not a battle of brains. Rather, it's about building bridges with people who have these questions and experiences. So here are three quick considerations for how we can redeem this contention against Christianity:



### Response Number 1: “You’re Right”

When we hear someone say, “You Christians ought to be commendable, but you're not,” we can first acknowledge the legitimacy of the contention. In Titus 3:5–8 the apostle Paul reminds us that though we're not saved by works, we are *saved unto good works*. That is, one way that we know we are saved is that our lives are full of good works. So to the skeptic who raises this objection, our response should honestly be, “I know you say you don't believe the Bible, but you're absolutely right, because you're saying exactly what the Bible says.” When we respond this way, we disarm the skeptic. They're expecting us to get defensive. They're not expecting, “You're absolutely right; our lives should abound with good works.” I think that's a starting point for dialogue—and a biblical one.

My insightful friend from MIT is not a believer, but she questions, if the gospel narrative of what God has done in Jesus Christ to redeem the world is true, then why are Christians not intentional about the way they live in the world? She’s echoing the biblical message; the apostle Paul is clear that those who have come to believe in Jesus Christ ought to be “careful to devote themselves to good works” (Titus 3:8).<sup>2</sup> Another good translation would be that Christians ought to be *purposeful* about the way they live. That’s why C.S. Lewis is right when he says that our careless lives as Christians give the world a reason for doubting Christianity.<sup>3</sup> If we, as professing Christians, were more purposeful in the way we live, do you think we would have a greater audience among skeptics?

## Response Number 2: “The Gospel is for Broken People”

Maybe you’re asked, “Why are Christians so bad?” What is a very mistaken assumption about this contention? Again, let’s look at Titus, where Paul says that “we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another,” but God our Savior “saved us” (3:3–4). What is he saying? That we were the worst of the worst. That when you look at God’s track record, He doesn’t seem particularly interested in drawing people to Himself who are “all put together.” Didn’t Jesus say it the best of all? “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”; He came not for those who are healthy, who have no need of a doctor, but for those who are broken and sick (Mark 2:17). No wonder the church is often compared to a hospital. And this is where C.S. Lewis is so helpful.

There’s a section in *Mere Christianity* where Lewis compares a Christian with a non-Christian.<sup>4</sup> He clarifies that both people would have different dispositions due to natural causes, different childhoods, and various life circumstances. So, although a Christian may have a more unkind tongue than a non-Christian, Lewis wants us to ask—and this is key—what would the Christian’s tongue be like if he or she had not become a Christian?

Drawing from Lewis’s example, let’s now imagine you have two men. The first is born in a very healthy household—loving parents, loving siblings, living in a nice house and nice neighborhood, getting to do all the extracurricular activities you can imagine, receiving good schooling, but never becomes a Christian. This man is probably a very functional, well-adjusted person. Now let’s imagine the second man for a moment: this person came from a broken household, never met his father, his mom was always working, he was abused in different ways, he didn’t get to do anything fun, and he is filled with anger. This second man grows up; at the age of twenty-one, he becomes a Christian. At this point, like Lewis, we may ask an important question: When you compare both people on a day-to-day basis, who is going to look more moral? Who’s going to have a better control over his temper? Who’s going to appear more like an exemplar? Obviously the first man. The other guy, the Christian, is not going to look very attractive. Why? Because God seems to be okay with attracting people who are broken, who are very much in need of help, who are subject to temptations. So when seekers and skeptics say, “Why are Christians so bad?” our response can be, “God seems to love people who are very broken.” A response like that corrects the mistaken assumption by highlighting the gospel; the gospel is not for people who are all put together but for people who need help.

I’d like to suggest this: It’s one thing for us to simply respond appropriately—knowing what to say—but it’s another thing to believe it in a way that is able to build bridges with non-Christians—doing what we say. A lot of times when non-Christians, skeptics, and seekers contend, “Why are Christians so bad?” they’re saying this because they detect that professing Christians think they’re better than non-Christians. But the amazing thing about the gospel—the more you grow in it, the more acquainted you become with your sinfulness; simultaneously, therefore, you become that much more of a compassionate person. Haven’t you met much older, wiser Christians who seem to spend more and more time confessing their sins? Is it because they’re sinning more? Or is it because they’re more mature in the gospel and have come to perceive and understand their sins? Look at the one of the Puritan greats, Jonathan Edwards, who observed that whenever he saw sin in others, it provided an occasion for him to repent of his own sins. Have you reached that point in your spiritual growth or journey where you really believe what Paul says—that “we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray” (Titus 3:3)? The more you understand your depravity in light of God’s grace, the better you’re able to engage non-Christians because you’re not weirded out by their contentions. What’s more, they’re able to sense that you’re not weirded out. Is there a part of

you that can say, “Hey, I know you think that Christians are supposed to be really good people, but our starting point is pretty low, and we need much grace”? If so, *that* is what begins to build bridges with skeptics, because they sense you’re not better than they are; they sense you’re both on equal ground.

### Response Number 3: “There Is Someone Who Is Good”

The last thing we’ll consider is how the gospel uniquely addresses what I call *the concern under the concern*—also known as presuppositional apologetics. We’re talking about the underlying concern that is really driving this contention. Listen carefully, and you can hear it: When people say, “Christians are bad. They’re not commendable. They’re hypocrites,” what they’re really saying is, “I don’t want a hypocrite. I want something or someone I can really believe in and trust.” That’s the concern under the concern.

Imagine asking someone, “What is the one thing you want more than anything else?” You may receive superficial answers—for material things, for stuff. But have you considered that their underlying answer is really about security—for something they can trust in and thereby be secure? When you begin to hear this kind of concern under the surface, that’s when the gospel can uniquely address the skeptic’s contention—because the gospel’s response is to demonstrate that there is Someone they can trust.

In the Bible, we have this tremendous tension. On the one hand, you have a God who wants to love His people. He wants to bless His people. He wants them to prosper, and so forth. He’s infinitely committed to them. On the other hand, in the Bible, you have a God who is deeply committed to justice. He’s not indifferent to the fact that He makes stipulations, but people don’t keep the rules. He’s a God who is deeply committed to doing the right thing. And so the question in the Bible is, how can God remain both loving and just at the same time? How can God be proven to be someone we can trust in and feel secure about—someone who will do the right thing and who will also love us? The gospel’s answer is that there is a God who sends His Son Jesus, who dies in our place, who takes our sins upon Himself to satisfy God’s justice, so that we could be loved and cherished by God. So to the person who’s had bad experiences with Christians, our response with the gospel is, “Yes, as Christians, we’re going to fail you; people will fail you; societies will fail you; companies will fail you; churches will fail you. And yet there is a covenant-keeping God in the Bible who will never fail you, who is so committed to justice that He gives His Son for justice to be satisfied, and who is so committed to loving you that it cost Him His Son.”

When people are saying, “Christians are so bad,” our response should be, “You’re pretty right about that. We’re trying. But you know what? We have a God who is faithful even when we are faithless; let me tell you about the gospel.” That is how the gospel uniquely addresses the concern under the concern.

Let me end with this challenge: All of this doesn’t connect with people until they feel it and touch it. This is why Jesus’ ministry in the Bible is described as being one of word and deed—*knowing and doing*. So as much as we must speak the truth, defend the truth, and proclaim the truth, consider what would happen if we became covenant-keeping people. Consider asking: Have I kept my promises? Am I being faithful? Am I being sacrificial? As we live out a yes, can we imagine that the original question, “Why are Christians so bad?” might change?

My non-Christian friends who have committed Christians in their lives seem to be more challenged to believe the gospel—than to disbelieve it. And that’s how the good news of Jesus Christ calls us to transform and to redeem this popular contention against Christianity. We are to live such good lives that those around us—even if they don’t agree with us, even if they think what we think is silly—will be confounded by their own doubts, because we Christians are covenant keepers like the God we worship.





I’m emphasizing this because we focus so much on the arguments and on the knowledge. But what would happen if we became a people whose lives were so commendable, so covenant keeping, so praiseworthy that skeptics would say, “I have issues with your worldview, but my biggest problem is that your life is commendable, and it seems to point me to Someone beyond just the two of us”? ❖

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He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—by what I call ‘good infection’.  
Every Christian is to become a little Christ.

*C.S. Lewis*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Loftus, *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Scriptural quotations are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 208.  
Ibid., 209–211.

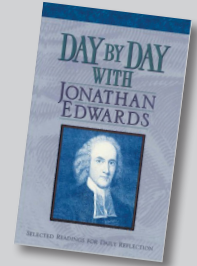


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## RECOMMENDED READING

Randall J. Pederson, *Day by Day with Jonathan Edwards: Selected Readings for Daily Reflection* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2015)

This thoughtful collection of sermons offers readers a thoughtful and meditative daily devotional. Compiled from both published and unpublished writings by Jonathan Edwards, readers will learn from his pen how the Christian life should be lived. Includes an Introduction.



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