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HOW DO I RESPOND TO BIBLE CRITICS?

BY ROBERT VELARDE 📅 JANUARY 1, 2009

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Contemporary critics sometimes claim that since the Bible contains so many miracles, it just can't be true. Either these are just made up stories, they argue, or simple people were just tricked.

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While the Bible is the bestselling book in history, it's arguably also the most criticized. There are, of course, different kinds of biblical criticism. Some are considered scholarly disciplines and, at their best, seek to bring to light valuable insights about the biblical manuscripts and their meaning. But more often than not, critics of the Bible are not out to praise it, but to put it down. The next article in this series – “How do I handle Bible difficulties?” – will offer specific tips on dealing with common critical approaches and passages meant to confound Christians. But this article is more about how to go about responding in general to criticisms leveled against the Bible. As such, we'll look at some common criticisms of the Bible and offer an overview of some of the more scholarly objections. Christians believe the Bible contains God's words to us – words that contain ideas related to the nature of God, the nature of Christ, the nature of human beings, the nature of salvation, and more. All of these topics are of great significance. If the Bible is in error in any one of these areas, then the insights of the critics are of supreme importance. But if the Bible is trustworthy in what it says, then we'd do well to heed what it says. What, then, do the critics claim and how can we respond?

What About Miracles?

The first criticism we will address has to do with miracles. Contemporary critics sometimes claim that since the Bible contains so many miracles, it just can't be true. Either these are just made up stories, they argue, or simple people were just tricked. In reality, just one miracle is too much for the modern mind. Why? Unfortunately, much of Western thinking in particular is grounded in naturalism – a worldview that believes that only the physical or material world exists. Based on this perspective, anything supernatural such as a miracle, is immediately suspect. As a result, this sort of critical approach to the Bible immediately casts doubt on key Christian beliefs such as the bodily resurrection of Christ. There are many ways to respond to this sort of critic. It will be helpful to point out that it is the presupposition that naturalism is true that rules out miracles. But if God exists, then miracles are possible. Another approach involves turning the tables, so to speak, and casting doubt on naturalism. What are the reasons the critic believes in naturalism? This is also a helpful time to offer positive arguments for the existence of God. It may also be beneficial to take the resurrection of Christ as a historical example of an event that cannot be explained reasonably by any other means other than by calling it what it was – a miracle.

Is the Bible “full of contradictions?”

Another popular approach of Bible critics is to claim that since the Bible is full of so many contradictions, it just can't be trusted. At this juncture it is often helpful to ask for a specific example of a contradiction. Often, causal critics of the Bible will just claim it is “full of contradictions” as a rhetorical method. In other words, they may not have any specific examples in mind, but are just posturing and hoping no one will challenge them. If the critic does not have a specific example of what they consider a contradiction in the Bible, then politely ask them to offer one, otherwise they are making claims without proof. But what if they do have one or more specific contradictions that they can cite, chapter and verse? This is where it is helpful for the Christian to have a good understanding of what they believe, why they believe it, as well as some general knowledge on interpreting the Bible correctly. See the article in this series, “How do I interpret the Bible?” If a critic points out a specific apparent contradiction and you are not able to resolve it on the spot, be gracious and admit that you don't have an answer right away, but will look into it and get back to the person. The article “How do I handle Bible difficulties?” offers some helpful general tips. Two books that are of great value on the matter of alleged discrepancies in the Bible include *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* by Gleason Archer (Zondervan) and *When Critics Ask* by Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe (Victor). Rest assured, Bible scholars have spent years studying alleged contradictions and discrepancies in the Bible and have offered reasonable answers. There are no

instances of such alleged contradictions that would negate the foundations of Christianity or its essential beliefs.

What About Academic Criticism?

Academic criticism in and of itself is not hostile to Christianity. It is merely a field that studies the biblical texts and tries to interpret them or make sense of them. Such criticism becomes a problem when it casts doubt on the reliability of the Bible. For instance, scholars who question the authorship of the first five books of the Old Testament hold to what is called the *documentary hypothesis*. This calls into question the authorship of portions of the Old Testament traditionally attributed to Moses and instead argues that several authors wrote the text. The end result is usually to weaken the force of what the Bible has to say by claiming that it is not really divinely inspired, but a product of many different people and ideas that don't always agree with one another. Biblically speaking, Christ established the authority of the Old Testament repeatedly not only by often citing specific passages, but by general statements such as Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (NIV). For an introductory response to the documentary hypothesis and other forms of biblical criticism see *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell (Thomas Nelson).

New Testament Mythology?

Another academic criticism of the Bible has to do with the New Testament. These critics claim that the New Testament documents can't really be trusted as true history, but are more like legends or myths. Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), for instance, sought to *demythologize* the New Testament, meaning that since modern people cannot accept the sorts of miracles and supernatural stories contained in the Bible, they must be made relevant. The end result, however, is to cast serious doubt on the biblical record and its claims. But is the New Testament legendary or mythological? Hardly. The Gospels, for instance, record real places, real people, and real events in historical context. They do not read as myths or legends, but as historical records. The New Testament writers were familiar with contemporary myths and knew the difference between what they believed and the myths of their day, prompting Paul the Apostle to warn against "godless myths," for instance (1 Timothy 4:7, NIV; "worldly fables" in the NASB).

"Always Being Ready"

First Peter 3:15 calls every Christian to always be "ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you." This means that we all need to be equipped to some degree to respond to Bible critics. Not everyone is called to be an expert in this field, but we should all be ready to make a defense of the truth of Christ as recorded in Scripture.

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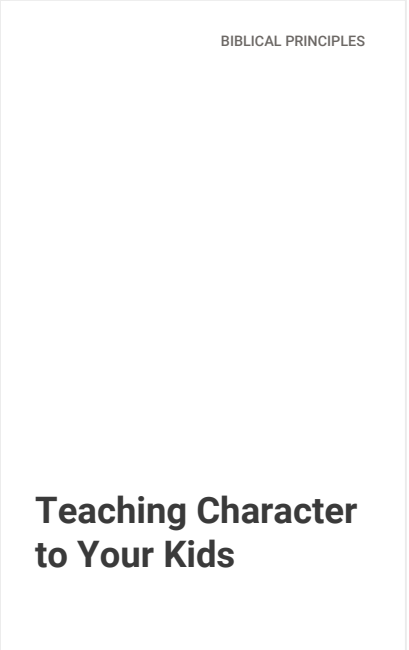
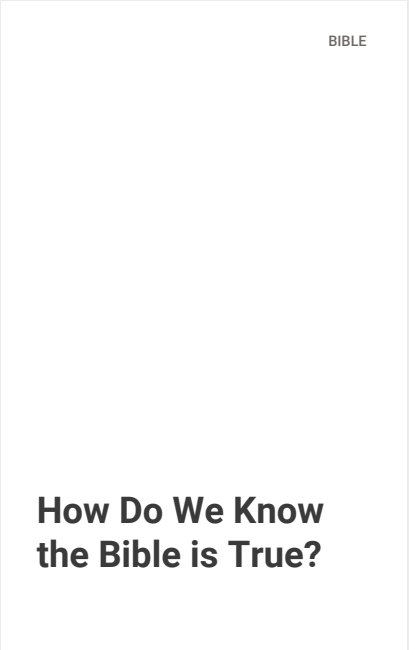
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Robert Velarde is author of "Conversations with C.S. Lewis" (InterVarsity Press), "The Heart of Narnia" (NavPress), and "Inside The Screwtape Letters" (Baker Books). He studied philosophy of religion and apologetics at Denver Seminary and is pursuing graduate studies in philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary.

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