

Everywhere we go or look, God has revealed Himself, at least in a general way. Shouldn't that be enough to bring everyone to a complete commitment to God? Sometimes, but not often. They need something else. When an unbeliever views creation; observes a godly example; or witnesses miracles—all of which are evidence of the existence of God—they don't always immediately follow God. Why aren't these evidences enough for pre-Christians to believe in and follow God/His son?

Creation

Why isn't God in creation enough for people to believe? The Scripture makes it clear in Romans 1:18-33 that we have a clear witness of God in creation, so therefore, he is without excuse when it comes to the knowledge of God, His power and nature—no matter his circumstances or where he is found. **The Evidence of God is Revealed Everywhere**

Ps. 19:1; 94:9; 143:5; Job 36:24-42:6.

Ps. 19:1—The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2] Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

The evidence is clear, but...

The Evidence of God is Suppressed

Rom. 1:18-19—18] The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19] since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. **We take the obvious display of God's power and nature in creation and suppress it, because we prefer our own way and sin.**

Maybe what we need is a human example that will reflect God's character and love. Surely then we will follow God!

Godly Examples

The Scripture makes it clear in 2 Corinthians 3:2-3 that Christians are living letters known and read by everybody.

2 Cor. 3:2—You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. 3] You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

This implies that unbelieving men and women can see in our lifestyle what we are really like. Beyond our words, that lifestyle displays what we stand for. However, seeing the gospel lived out in shoe leather is still not all that most people need to believe. Though someone may appreciate the lifestyle of a godly life, he may not understand the motivation behind it. An observer of our Christian life might *overestimate* our value, our experience; he might think more of *us* than he should. Others might *underestimate* what they see in followers of Christ... might see our imperfections, or the fact that we don't seek after the same things others do, and deduce that we have nothing to say.

Miracles

How about an overt and obvious miracle? The Scripture makes it clear in Hebrews 2:4 that God testified to His great salvation by signs, wonders and various miracles.

Heb. 2:4—God also testified.....by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Surely all someone needs is to see a personal miracle in his life to believe and follow God. That is not necessarily so. We certainly need to pray and expect the supernatural miracles of the Holy Spirit in our lives today; miracles have always had a powerful way of getting people's attention and confirming the message. Men and women, however, may rejoice in the miracle and overlook its Source.

John 15:24-25 is a good example. Jesus said, *"If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father. 25] But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.'"* [Psal m 35:19; 69:4]

Even if people did believe in miracles, Scripture reminds us that Satan and his emissaries have the power to perform all kinds of counterfeit miracles—2 Thess. 2:9; Ex. 7:10-12; Mark 13:22. So something else is needed!

Effective Evangelistic Explanations

Let me illustrate the need for effective explanations, as well as what those explanations might consist of, by looking at two examples—one from our culture and one from Scripture.

The story of Helen Keller helps us to see the need for an effective explanation of who God is. Remember, Romans 1:18-20 makes it clear that God's eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. But is that sight possible with a deaf and blind girl like Helen Keller? Many would believe her to be in a separate category, an exception. How would she be able to perceive God by what has been made, when she is deaf and blind? Her story is so helpful.

Helen was unable to communicate until her teacher Ann Sullivan spent months helping her. It was a hard and exhausting process, but Ann finally succeeded and Helen began to converse,

Effective Evangelistic Explanations

Written by Bob Stone

with increasing ability. Ann felt, however, that she needed to do something else for Helen—she wanted to tell Helen about God, and she did. Next came something remarkable. Once Helen understood what was being said, she responded,

"I already know about Him—I just didn't know His name."

Helen Keller's story helps us by illustrating two things: **All people are without excuse; God has revealed Himself to everyone, everywhere—even to those who can't see or hear.**

All people need effective explanations of what they know and perceive before that knowledge is suppressed by their sins, misunderstood or explained away by someone.

We can't expect people to know all they should, or how to respond, unless we take the initiative to tell them God's name, and about who He is.

The second illustration of why we need to explain God is from Acts 14, where a powerful miracle takes place in Lystra, and yet is insufficient by itself to fully explain the God behind it.

8] In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. 9] He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed 10] and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

The people didn't understand the miracle as coming from God.

11] When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" 12] Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13] The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

This is a great illustration of how information without explanation can lead to an improper response. So what do we do when miracles, godly examples and creation are not enough? In this incident the apostle Paul models for us five things that should be understood by everyone who sees a miracle, creation, or a godly example. Notice how Paul first reminds them of something they all *knew*, and how he also explains to them what they *didn't already know* about God.

Five Central Elements of an Evangelistic Explanation

1. Behind creation there is one living God.

v. 15—*Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and every thing in them.* This a message that needs to be heard in cultures where idols are worshipped, but it is also a message that needs to be carefully communicated in other cultures where creation is attributed to evolution. Let me illustrate.

In some pagan cultures, like the one represented here, it is essential to point out that there is one living God, and not a multitude of relatively powerless, desperate and divided pagan deities or idols.

What ground do we have to stand on? Beyond the Scripture, if Paul's hearers had really observed nature, they would have realized it is not controlled by a conglomerate of separate powers all trying to compete with one another, as envisioned in the pagan pantheon. According to the pagan system, everything had a god. There was a god of water, a god of trees, a god of rocks. Even the processes of the body had gods: there was a god for speech, a god for sex, and a god for life. These gods, like people, were thought to be in competition with one another. It seems obvious, however, that if there were deities in competition with each other, our universe would certainly not be the place it is today—it would be a war zone and in shambles!

Paul is saying, in contrast, "You haven't really seen nature. You haven't noticed, obviously, that nature is as one; it all ties together because it has been made by one living God. It is sustained and held together in harmony, and is constantly being renewed. He declares to them in no uncertain terms, that creation has borne witness to one God.

What do we say to those in America, where the majority of people believe there is a God? What do we say to those (like Helen Keller) who know about Him, but not personally? What is our message, our explanation to those who believe God is inactive, distant and/or accepting of all belief systems?

Our response should be the same as for the pagan cultures. It's important we help others to interpret what they see in creation, by pointing them to the living God who not only shows us His love through His creation, but also can be known personally.

In other words, when you scientifically study the evidence and the problems involved in bringing the universe into existence, the ultimate conclusion is that God is responsible for creation. His "eternal power and Godhead" are put on display in the things He has created.

John MacArthur points out: "Man has a clear and staggering picture of God's invisible qualities in creation. Obviously, we can't know everything about God through the special means of creation, but what is knowable is revealed and known to every man. Man, however, chooses to ignore the evidence. Many scientists have tried to attribute the creation of the universe to the theoretical process of evolution. They have led most people to believe that chance was the cause of the beginning of the universe rather than a personal and a powerful God. However, science is unable to explain how the initial matter and energy came to exist."

Astrophysicist and director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies Robert Jastrow confirms that. He says: "Now we see how the astronomical evidence supports the biblical view of the origin of the world... The essential elements in the astronomical and biblical accounts of Genesis are the same. Consider the enormousness of the problem. Science has proved that the Universe exploded into being at a certain moment. It asks, What cause produced this effect? Who or what put the matter and energy into the Universe? And science cannot answer these questions... For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been there for centuries" (*God and the Astronomers*, New York: Norton, 1978, pp. 14, 114, 116).

To support this, let's take a closer look at some of the Master Designer's creations.

Zoology Migration

—Did you know that some birds navigate by the stars when they migrate? Even if those particular birds are raised inside a building where they have never seen the sky, they can still orient themselves toward home when shown an artificial sky representing a place their species has never been.

Aviation

—Of the five billion birds in America, there are some that fly 500 miles across the Gulf of Mexico. Mallards can fly at 60 miles per hour, eagles at 100 miles per hour, and falcons can dive at 180 miles per hour.

Protection

—The bombardier beetle produces chemicals that mix perfectly and at the right moment explode in the face of the enemy, but the explosion never occurs prematurely and never blows up the beetle.

Meteorology

It may be surprising to people in a temperate climate to hear that there are on the average of 1,800 storms in operation at any one time and that the energy expended in those storms amounts to the almost inconceivable figure of 1,300,000,000 horsepower. Just one storm alone, depositing a rain of 4 inches over 10,000 square miles, would require burning 640,000,000 tons of coal to evaporate enough water for such a rain. To cool again the vapors thus produced and collect them in clouds would take another 800,000,000 horsepower of refrigeration working day and night for 100 days.

The power of God used in supplying the earth with rain is admittedly only an infinitesimal fraction of what His creation power must be. No wonder the psalmist said, "Power belongs unto God" (Ps. 62:11b); Nahum said, "The Lord is... great in power" (1:3a); and Isaiah said, "In the Lord God is everlasting strength" (26:4b).

Astronomy

The earth

—Our planet is 25,000 miles in circumference and, weighing 6 septillion 588 sextillion tons,

Effective Evangelistic Explanations

Written by Bob Stone

hangs in space. Spinning at 1,000 miles per hour with perfect precision so that time is kept to the split second, the earth careens through space around the sun in an orbit of 580 million miles at over 1,000 miles per minute.

Comets

—The head of a comet may be from 10,000 to 1,000,000 miles long and the tail as long as 100,000,000 miles; it travels at a speed of 350 miles per second. Now, where is the force for all of this?

The sun

—If you could convert the energy the sun gives off into horsepower, you would wind up with 500 million, million, billion horsepower, as each second it burns up to 4 million tons of matter.

The Milky Way

—If you were to travel across the galaxy in which our solar system is located, at the speed of 186,000 miles per second, it would take you 125,000 years to cross the Milky Way. Yet it's amazing to think that our galaxy is only one of millions.

(The Wrath of God, John MacArthur, Word of Grace Pub., pp. 37-39.) In summary, creation says that God has given an amazing witness of Himself and is pointing people to Himself—the one true God of creation who loves us.

1. **The one living God permits us free choice, and therefore God allows evil.**
v. 16—*In the past, he let all nations go their own way.* The problem of evil among us forms the basis of constant arguments from those who say, "If your God is such a loving God, why does He permit suffering? Why does He allow evil, and injustice, and war?" (See [Hard Questions](#).) The people of Acts 14 were quite aware of the arguments, and they argued the same way as people do today. Paul answers by saying, "What you must know is that God, in generations past, allowed all the nations to walk in their own way." In other words, (as we have already said), he gave them free will. In order to permit free will, however, He must allow evil. That is Paul's argument, and it is unanswerable.

Some today would say, "Why doesn't God stop all the wars and injustices?" Well, He could, but if He did, He would take away our freedom of choice, and that is the one thing we don't want to surrender. The greatest dignity of humanity is the power to

choose between two possible routes. God has given us that power, and He will not take it away. There are limits set on evil, however.

2. The living God is good and will not allow evil to go too far

—vv. 16-17.

16] In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 17] Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

God does not allow evil to engulf humanity and wipe us off the face of the earth (as unrestrained human evil would surely do in a few months' time). He has restrained it, and in its midst—despite rejection and rebellion against Him by the people He loves—God has shown His kindness...

- by giving rain
- by the fruit and harvest
- by providing plenty of food
- by providing joy and happiness throughout life—vv. 16-17.

That is the God Paul preached about. What a marvelous declaration of who He is, having given us all these things and thus a testimony of Himself—v. 17. Notice, His kindness is seen in the rain, crops, food and joy. The next time it rains on the good and bad, it's a testimony. The produce department of our grocery store is a testimony. Any store full of food is a testimony of His kindness! The laughter and joy of relationships is a testimony. God's seasonal provision for all mankind is His testimony. What a privilege to see the testimony of the Lord's kindness. He gives joy and provision even to those who don't follow Him.

- **This living God can be known if we will repent and follow/turn to Him!**

vv. 14-15—But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15] Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn

Effective Evangelistic Explanations

Written by Bob Stone

from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and every thing in them.

Here is the heart of an effective evangelistic explanation, what every evangelistic explanation must include, at a minimum. We all need to learn or hear these basic essentials, or there might be misunderstanding, ignorance, or manipulation of the facts. The very basics of the good news are:

Repent and follow Jesus!

Repent: Turn from your idols, from your sin, from all your explanations that disallow God (or leave Him distant and inactive in your life); and turn to the God of creation (v. 15c). **Follow/turn to** the living creator God (v. 15d).

How is that possible? There is only one way to God—through Jesus Christ, God's son—John 14:6. Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." If we turn to Jesus, what does He call us to? The heart of what Jesus said was, "Follow Me," not just "follow My example," or even "do the sorts of things that I do." The essence of His message was that each of us should follow Him *personally*—Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21; Mark 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21; Luke 5:27; 9:23,59,61; 14:27; 18:22; John 1:43; 10:27; 12:26; 21:19,22.

John 10:27—My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

John 12:26—Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Matt. 16:24—Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

He'll bless us with crops in season...

He'll provide us with plenty of food...

He'll fill our hearts with joy...

So what does it mean to be a Christian? A Christian is someone who follows Jesus.

Effective Evangelistic Explanations

Written by Bob Stone

Everything Christians believe is centered around following and obeying Him with our whole hearts. Verse 17 shows us the rewards of following and obeying Jesus.

God promises to do even more for Jesus' followers. This verse and related passages help us compile quite an amazing list of provision/blessings/gifts. Not only has He given us human life, but He will fill us with *His* life and assure us of an abundant one, too—John 10:10.

Not only will He supply us with crops in their season, but because He made heaven and earth and sea and every thing in them, He will give us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

He'll give us refreshing rain...

According to Psalm 1, He will give us success in whatever He calls us to do (v.3ff).

He'll show kindness...

Not only will He give us rain, but will provide us with streams of living water flowing from within us—John 7:38. Not only will He furnish us with plenty of food (just what we need), but give us freedom from worry about our food and our clothes—Matt. 6:25-33.

Not only will He supply us with joy, but will deliver to us fullness of joy and true happiness—John 15:11; 1 Peter 1:8; Matt. 5:3-12. That's just a partial list of God's provision for His followers.

In summary, our God requires more of us than just a knowledge of His existence—v. 15b. The necessity to repent and follow Jesus is the essence of what we should share.

- **We should be careful to always point people to the real Provider.**

Paul communicates clearly that the living God deserves credit for all good things in us and this world—vv. 14, 18a, 19-20.

14] But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 18] Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. 19] Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. 20] But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

It's easy to let our testimony become the focal point of what we say to others. While it's appropriate to share our story, it is not the only testimony we should be giving. We cannot take credit for what has happened to us, or through us—no matter how hard people might try to give it! Make sure it comes through loud and clear that the One you are testifying about is primarily the Lord Jesus Christ.

Application:

If you are studying this page and have not made a commitment to follow Jesus, I want to make it very clear that you are surrounded—in this world, this nation, this state, this county, this church—by imperfect followers of Jesus. If you follow us around very long, we will fail and tick you off. Our story is really God's testimony of what He has done and continues to do in us. We are not finished products.

You are not going to see perfect individuals attending Hillcrest Chapel. What you will see are followers of Jesus. **He** is the big deal. **He** is the One we serve and **He** is the One we want to point everyone's attention to. It's His good news to all of us through the Apostle Paul that we are *...to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and every thing in them.*

A word of warning to all followers of the Lord: The people around us may honor us, or they may quickly turn on us—vv. 19-20. We should be prepared for both. We should be prepared to

suffer *and* rejoice for following Him!

Conclusion:

What will it take to bring a person from a general knowledge of God as seen in creation, to a personal relationship with Him? What information needs to accompany the display of God as seen in a miracle? What needs to go hand in hand with a godly example?

In review, the five central elements of an evangelistic explanation are:

1. Behind creation there is one living God—v. 15.
2. The one living God permits us free choice, and therefore God allows evil—v. 16.
3. The living God is good and will not allow evil to go too far—vv. 16-17.
4. This living God can be known, and He wants us to be His children—vv. 14-15.
5. We should be careful to always point people to the real Provider. Paul communicates clearly the living God deserves credit for all good things in us and this world—vv. 14,18a,19-20.

Application

Questions:

1. Did a miracle, an answer to prayer, a godly example, or what you saw in creation affect your faith? Give one specific example.
2. Why do you believe scientists don't attribute creation to one living God?
3. Why is it wise to use creation as a means to speak about God with a person who has no knowledge of the Scripture? How is that different from how you would share Christ with a Jew

Effective Evangelistic Explanations

Written by Bob Stone

who has extensive knowledge of the Old Testament? What are some principles that should guide how you share Christ with a non-Christian?

4. What impresses you most about the fact that God has given you a free will?

5. How do you explain to others the presence of evil in this world? What is your usual response when you hear about some atrocity or crime where innocent people are abused, maimed or killed? Have you ever counseled someone who has been mistreated by an evil person?

6. What are some examples of the goodness of God that have come out of an evil situation?

7. Starting with creation, describe how you would explain to a person who God is and how we can know Him as our Lord and Savior.

8. Why is it important to keep in mind who you are and who God is when you share Christ with someone? Share examples of some of the temptations we face when we share Christ with another person.

9. Pick a group of people from your present life, i.e., coworkers, students, family members, associates, etc. Keeping their unique perspective in mind, what is the best way to share Christ with them? What would be your evangelistic explanation to this particular group? Why is it important to study cultures, people and situations, and pre-think how you might share Christ in these contexts?