

Let Students See what skeptics see

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In a few short months high school seniors will be putting the finishing touches on their final projects and semester exams as they prepare to graduate. Every parent and teacher hopes and prays that the education those students received in high school will help prepare them for the next stage of their life. Christian parents and teachers especially hope that their students' faith is equipped to face questions and challenges they have not yet encountered. All of them will face new kinds of challenges.

How can we help equip them? Some of us may want to keep them under our care until they are older. Yet we recognize when it is time to graduate, they must go further out into the world under God's grace. Can we prepare them for every challenge to their faith? Perhaps not. They may face challenges we never imagined. But perhaps we *can* let them see *some* challenges while still under our care, allow them to wrestle with them a bit, and help them find the confidence to face those challenges – confidence God gives through his Word.

Some of the greatest challenges our kids will face are direct attacks against their faith and against the Word of God upon which their faith is built. For example, many atheists and skeptics try to deny the possibility of Jesus' resurrection.¹ And why wouldn't they? If Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christianity fails (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). How do we prepare them for such attacks? First and always, we connect them to the powerful Word of God through which the Holy Spirit promises to preserve and strengthen their faith. We also encourage them to make frequent use of the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of their doubts and the strength-

¹ For example, see what skeptics say about the resurrection of Jesus on RationalWiki, a website advancing the views of skeptics.
https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Resurrection_of_Jesus (accessed 11-10-19)

ening of their faith. Those means of grace are the Holy Spirit's promised means to keep us in the one true faith.

In addition to that, perhaps we can help our students by letting them practice wrestling with those skeptical challenges so that they are reminded that their faith is not dumb nor irrational to the point that there is no reasonable response to skeptics' claims.

In the Senior Christian Doctrine and Practice class at my high school we were studying the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I asked the students to read the account in each gospel and note differences between those accounts. I wanted them to see what skeptics see –that there are significant differences between the resurrection accounts in terms of the number and names of women present and the number of angels present. This is a stumbling block for many skeptics and something students may not have previously considered. For one assignment, students were asked to find and respond to an article written by a skeptic who doubts the resurrection. Many students found it comforting to answer the skeptics' questions with reasonable arguments –not for a strengthening of their faith but to understand that there are reasonable responses to the skeptics' doubts.

For example, one student wrote: “Some say that the disciples lied about the resurrection, but why would they do that? They had nothing to gain from pledging allegiance to a dead guy. Caesar was considered divine, and saying that someone else was [divine] would be dangerous for them, so why would they just make it up?” The apostle Paul used that same line of reasoning when he said,

Why do we live in danger every hour? Day by day I face death, as surely as I boast about you, brothers, in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild animals in Ephesus with human motives, what good did it do me? If the dead are not raised, then “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (1 Corinthians 15:30-32 EHV).

Using that line of reasoning certainly didn't strengthen that student's faith, but it seemed to bolster her confidence that she is not irrational

for believing in the miracle of the resurrection, and that it makes sense that Paul would be willing to suffer and die if the resurrection of Christ really happened.

In the very same class, we have a young skeptic woman who responded to the assignment in this way: “Even if the Bible is God’s Word, it very well could have been tampered with throughout the ages.” The vast number of biblical manuscripts—so precise in spite of all the variants—could silence her argument similar to how Jesus silenced the chief priests in Matthew 21:23-27. If the Bible has been tampered with so much throughout the ages, why do so many wide-spread manuscripts all say the same thing? Students can, with some guidance, provide reasonable explanations to what skeptics say about the resurrection. These apologetic explanations could open the door to more gospel witnessing with the skeptics they encounter.

Caution is in order. It would be improper for me to say to the first student after her statement, “See, doesn’t that just make your faith stronger knowing that it wouldn’t make sense for Paul to lie about Jesus’ resurrection?” God reveals that, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17 EHV). God does not say “Faith comes from hearing the message, but only if the message makes sense.” The gospel message in the means of grace will strengthen the student’s faith, not the rationality of an argument.

Similarly, with the second student it would be improper for me to assume that if she sees how much manuscript evidence exists, she’ll believe what the manuscripts say. Again, God reveals that,

However, an unspiritual person does not accept the truths taught by God’s Spirit, because they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually evaluated. (1 Corinthians 2:14 EHV).

The manuscript evidence may open the door for the student to consider the biblical claims, but only the gospel itself will create faith in her heart to believe it.

What about when Scripture itself is challenged? Pastors and teachers alike may have wrestled with the thought: *Since we don't have the original manuscripts written by God's inspired writers, we don't know whether the Bible we have today is God's Word or not.* We may even be well prepared to respond to such a statement. While we are familiar with that objection to the trustworthy nature of the Bible, our students may not be. They may not even encounter that challenge until they leave high school. That can pose a risk to someone who isn't prepared to respond to that challenge because they've never thought of it.

That is, unless, we allow them to see what the skeptics see. We can readily admit that it is true, we don't have the original manuscripts of the Bible. That might initially trouble our students, but with a little guidance they can easily see that in spite of the lack of original manuscripts we still have very reliable, wide-spread, ancient, and accurate manuscript evidence. That may seem way too involved for, let's say, a sophomore New Testament class. Simply mentioning the thousands of New Testament manuscripts, as compared to the handful of manuscripts for other ancient writings, can show students that a challenge promoted by skeptics and atheists has a simple reasonable response. A short video on this is available from Ark Encounter.² Again, only the Word of God itself will turn those skeptics into believers. Our sinful human nature builds walls separating us from the gospel message. Showing skeptics the weakness of those walls can provide an opening for them to listen to the gospel.

There are some things in Scripture we cannot really understand such as the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ. That's okay. *Our students also need to know that's okay.* The Apostle Paul explains how God gives us confidence through the foolishness of what is preached concerning the cross of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). Our faith won't understand everything there is to know about God, but by God's grace it does trust him in spite of our limitations.

² "Can We Trust the New Testament Manuscripts?" Ark Encounter, <https://arkencounter.com/bible-true/beans/?fref=gc&dti=1034088886603560> (accessed 11-10-19)

After our students graduate high school, they will experience more human limitations in the face of challenges. Thank God for the power of the gospel. We depend on it. As we do, we don't need to be afraid of letting our students encounter those challenges in advance.

Allow students to see that their faith is not irrational like skeptics want them to think. Help them learn to use resources such as:

- The People's Bible commentary,³
- Q&A at WELS.net,⁴
- UnderstandChristianity.com,⁵
- WhatAboutJesus.com,⁶
- LutheranScience.org.⁷

These sources can provide our students with answers that make the challenges they face less severe. Pray for them that God may continue to keep them in his care, that they continue to make use of the means of grace, and that when they have opportunities to share their faith, they aren't afraid to because you've helped prepare them.

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³ The People's Bible, available at www.nph.net (accessed 11-10-19)

⁴ "Topical Q&A," WELS, <https://wels.net/serving-you/wels-topical-qa/> (accessed 11-10-19)

⁵ "Understand Christianity," <https://www.understandchristianity.com/> (accessed 11-10-19)

⁶ "What About Jesus?" <https://whataboutjesus.com/> (accessed 11-10-19)

⁷ The Lutheran Science Institute (LSI), www.LutheranScience.org (accessed 11-10-19)