



Sermon Series – Roadblocks for Faith

#3 The Crimes of The Church

When I visited the Vatican a few years back, like so many tourists, I went to the Vatican museum and St Peter's Basilica.



In the museum I was conflicted – on the one hand, I was amazed at such an **array of treasures** from all the world's history; yet, on the other hand I wondered **what violence and power** had wrested these jewels from the hands of their original custodians.



In the **basilica** I was also conflicted – on the one hand, amazed at the **Renaissance architecture**; yet, on the other hand, I was disturbed by so many statues **commemorating men – popes of the past**. I wondered how many were **perpetrators of violence and war**.¹

For some of our friends and neighbours the long history of the Church's many **acts of injustice** is a real roadblock for faith. They say, "**How can I believe in God when the Church is responsible for so much injustice?**"

Let me say clearly from the outset that I'm **not addressing directly any objections people have due to crimes of sexual abuse** perpetrated by the Church. I don't believe a sermon, or an argument is the appropriate response to victim/survivors. An **appropriate response** to this current issue of injustice is for the Church to apologise, to fully participate in redress and reparation at great cost, and to make changes to ensure **zero tolerance** to abuse in future.

Instead, **my focus today** is on those who have an **intellectual problem** with Christianity due to **personal disappointment with Christians** and the Church.

Two common sources of objection are raised:

¹ For examples, see *The Bad Popes*, a 1969 book by E. R. Chamberlin documenting the lives of eight of the most controversial popes



1. **Character flaws** in Christians
2. **Violence** and war related to religion

Sadly, many of us know someone who, due to **crushing disappointment** with the Christians now finds it hard to believe in God.

Can anything be said or done to help remove this roadblock for faith?

1. Character Flaws

It doesn't take longer than your first morning tea after a church service to discover that all **Christians have character flaws** – and that's just after meeting the **Vicar!**

Because churches **welcome all-comers**, there are people from all sorts of backgrounds in a congregation. It should be no surprise that there can be **greater conflict in churches** than in a Biker gang! Add to the argument...

- well-publicised **moral failings of Christian leaders**
- **fanaticism** of many public Christians, and
- **many non-religious people** around who live **morally exemplary lives**.

No wonder someone will ask: If Christianity is all it claims to be, **shouldn't Christians** (overall) **be much better people than everyone else?**

Our first step to removing this roadblock to faith is to discover what presuppositions lie beneath a person's genuine objection to faith – in this case, the **mistaken idea of what Christianity teaches about itself**.

- i. **Firstly**, Christian theology affirms the **common grace** of God. The New Testament teaches that **no matter who does it**, every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty is **also an act of God**. For example, *The Letter of James 1:17* says...
Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the "Father of lights", with whom there is no variation...

In *The Gospel of Matthew 5:45* Jesus says,



*(God) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends **rain** on the **righteous** and on the **unrighteous**.*

What Jesus was saying is **God gives to and through others**, without regard for their faith in Him. **Regardless of religious conviction, race, gender** or any other attribute, Christianity teaches that God casts His gracious gifts across **all humanity** to enrich, refresh, preserve, and redeem His creation.² So it's a false premise to assume Christians should be morally better, more talented, or more blessed than other people.

ii. Secondly, Christians are **recipients of saving grace**.

It is true to say also, however that Christians have appropriated what we might call "saving grace" by faith. In *The Letter to the Ephesians* Chapter 2 we read...

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

While it's a wonderful advantage to be a recipient of saving grace, it's clear in Scripture that there is nothing to boast about – this new status of "friend of God" comes about not by **any merit of our own**. Instead, Christians are simply those who put their faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us in his saving death on the cross.

It's a mistaken premise, then, to think that Christianity requires a person to **clean up their act** and make themselves good, **before** God will accept them into the Church. The **opposite is true!** For example, consider the two criminals hanging on crosses alongside Jesus at his crucifixion³: Luke's Gospel tells us the one who defended Jesus as

² Note in Acts 10 how the Apostle Peter, having his mind changed about this through a dream, states in conclusion: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (vss. 34-35)

³ Luke 23:39-43



righteous (good) was welcomed by Jesus that very day to join him in “Paradise”. Note that the man was not required by Jesus to descend from the cross, make reparation for his crimes, dress in his Sunday best, or even to be baptized! Yet, he was completely accepted on the basis of Jesus’ goodness, not his own.

The New Testament tells us that **only the goodness (or righteousness) is of help to gain us a harmonious relationship** with God. We could never earn such a status, nor do we deserve it, because of what the Bible refers to as the problem of sin.

In **Romans 3:10-23** (abridged below) the Apostle Paul explains:

There is no one who is righteous, not even one... All have turned aside... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...

He goes on to show how God has offered us his goodness, because ours fails to be fit for God’s holiness:

the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe...

He concludes that those who put their faith in God’s Son...

...are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

As the saying goes, “**the church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints.**” While the Scriptures do teach about the transformation of Christian lives over time, the starting point is that same for all people - **helping to make sense** of why churches can be full of faulty people! It’s more than possible that our friends who are roadblocked on this issue have a **mistaken view** of what Christianity expects Christians!

2. Religion and Violence

A **second source of objection** to faith through disappointment with the Church can be the link between **religion and violence**. In our time, the late



Christopher Hitchens, a prominent atheist author in America, argued powerfully that **religion leads inevitably to violence**.⁴

Whether it be Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem or Baghdad, Hitchens claimed religion **aggravates racial and cultural differences**, often to the point of war. **This often appears to be true.**

Yet, violence is not linked to religion alone. We can point to the **Communist, Russian, Chinese and Cambodian** regimes that committed heinous human crimes in the 20th Century all **rejected organised religion and belief in God.**

A deeper investigation, therefore, shows, as Alister McGrath has pointed out⁵, that **when the idea of God is gone** a society will ‘transcendentalize’ something else in order to appear morally or spiritually superior – for example: **Nazi’s** elevated race and blood; **Marxists** made the State absolute.

We can make the point to our friend that in modern history **violence has been inspired as much by secularism as by moral absolutism.**

None of this should be put as an **excuse** for the terrible acts of violence committed in the name of God in the past. But we can also show how the Bible critiques Christians who adopt violence and power and cause harm. For example, in Mary’s song, from Luke 1:51-53, the lyrics cry “God...

...has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts... has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly... has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

The vision of the future of Old Testament prophets was one of extraordinary peace, not war (Shalom). For example, Isaiah 2:4 declares...

*...they shall beat their swords into **ploughshares**, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:4)*

⁴ In his book *God is Not Great: How religion poisons everything* he has a chapter titled: “Religion Kills”

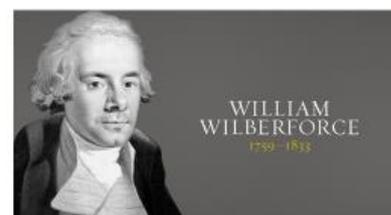
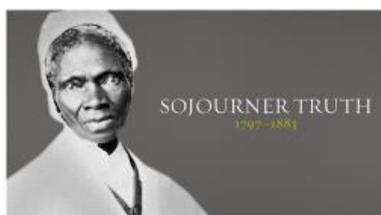
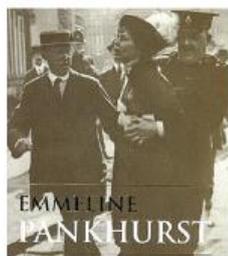
⁵ In his book *Bridge Building*



So, to summarize our response to the objection based on a link between religion and violence often put by opponents of Christianity, let me suggest that we can say:

- In our time, violence has been inspired **as much by secularism as by moral absolutism.**
- There is a **longing for peace in the bible** that finds its hope in the coming of Christ, and
- The predilection for violence in human systems is more **proof that humans need a saviour who can transform the heart**, and rid it of the need for power.

Finally, it may help our roadblocked friend to be made aware of the **Christian activists** who have worked to overturn injustice who **populate history.**



We could easily point to people such as Wilberforce, Romero, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King Jr., Emeline Pankhurst, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It's interesting to note that each of them was **often at odds with the established church**; each had **well-documented character flaws**; yet, each driven by Christian beliefs, helped to **overturn incredible injustices** at great cost to themselves.

Such "good" examples of Christians who challenged distorted and unjust expressions of Christianity **may help our roadblocked friend** to see that, unlike



other human systems, Christianity continually critiques itself from within – it is **ever-reforming**.

In his Letters and Papers from Prison, Bonhoeffer wrote:

“It is not a religious act that makes a Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life... not in the first place thinking about one’s own needs, problems, sins and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ.”



Note that the definition of a Christian in this quote above is probably very **different to the presuppositions held by our friends** who are roadblocked by objections caused by the Church’s failings or by Christians with flawed character.

In the end, a conversation defending Christianity or faith in God may not be very convincing to our friends. Our **actions will often speak louder than words** to promote the possibility of faith in our friends. As Romans 13:8-10 points out...

(All God’s commands are) summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

It’s good to remember that Jesus redefined our understanding of both “neighbour”⁶ and “love”⁷ in ways that undermine violence and overturn injustice. The more Christians love their neighbour in this manner, the less objections people will have as the roadblocks for faith fall away.⁸

⁶ Luke 10:25-37

⁷ John 15:13; 13:34

⁸ John 13:35; James 2:8