

Apologetic Dialogue

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The following dialogue is an account of an actual apologetic conversation that I engaged in with a young man named Emmanuel. The dialogue recorded here is recreated based on notes that I took on the conversations. This dialogue is what I hope is the one practical outworking of what I argue in my “Apologetic Method” essay.

The Story

Emmanuel’s own explanation of his “spiritual journey” was that he lived life as an agnostic until age 20, when in response to “a feeling of emptiness and deep depression,” he decided that agnosticism was not a valid option. He had to find who God was if He was knowable. That led him to my church where he heard the gospel and made a confession of faith. Within months he had read most of the Bible and had devoured books, particularly apologetics texts. We became best friends, studying God’s Word and enjoying the life God had given us together.

Emmanuel had just completed Josh McDowell’s *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* when an atheist whom he was evangelizing posed the question to him, “Do you think that you might be a Christian because it was the first option you considered after deciding that you ‘wanted God’?” In order to evaluate this proposition “neutrally,” he left the church and decided not to participate in any of the spiritual acts that may be clouding his reason: No prayer, no Bible reading, and no fellowship. After a month’s absence, he finally agreed to meet with me to discuss what he had been doing and thinking during that time. He had come to the conclusion in that time that he was, again, an agnostic. The dialogue recorded below is from the second of those meetings, the last chance I had to speak at length with him.

Shortly following this conversation, Emmanuel changed his own account of his religious views. He was now an atheist. Weeks later, a message was found on his MySpace page: “This is that last time that any of you will hear from me. I killed myself today...I died an atheist...I died believing that people are capable of love and being good without the intervention of their gods...One day you will be where I am now: Dying. And just like I am doing now, you will close your eyes for the last time. Despite the amount of time you spent in the shadows, regardless of how strong your belief is, there will be no giant snake, no 70 virgins, no spirit horse, no Isle of the Blest, and no father on a throne because you’ll be dead, and you won’t even know it. Conquering the fear of death has proven the greatest satisfaction of my life.” That day, Tempe Police found Emmanuel dead in his apartment. That day, Emmanuel, who thought he could sit in judgment over God, found himself bowing in submission to that Holy Judge.

I document this conversation here in order to demonstrate the rebellious futility of autonomous reason set over and against God’s authority revealed in nature, in our hearts, and in His Word. It highlights Frame’s statement (Cowan, 2000, 211), “Those who deny God do so, not because they lack evidence, but because their hearts are rebellious.” It reinforces the necessity of the fellowship of Hebrews 10:24-25¹ in light of the warnings of Hebrews 10:26-27². It reminds me that the only difference between Emmanuel and me—the skeptic and the apologist—is only God’s saving and sustaining grace.

¹ “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

² “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

The Dialogue

JACOB: Emmanuel, I'm so glad to see you. I have really missed you since you've been gone.

EMMANUEL: You too. I'm thankful for your friendship.

JACOB: (smiling) Thankful to whom?

EMMANUEL: You don't waste any time do you? It's just a saying. I'm thankful for the circumstance. I'm thankful to fate. I'm thankful to you. You know what I mean.

JACOB: You know I'm only bringing this up again because I care for you.

EMMANUEL: I know you care. If I thought you were just being an annoying, argumentative jerk, I wouldn't be here. I thought the way you do now a couple of months ago. You think I'm going to Hell, and so you think the loving thing to do is to talk me into believing in God again. But I know now that things aren't as cut-and-dry as you think they are. I'm not going to talk you out of your beliefs because they work for you. I'm just not as naïve; or maybe I'm just not as strong as you. But don't worry, I know you, Jake, and I love talking with you.

JACOB: I do love you, and I don't know where your eternal destination will be. Time will tell. I've seen many evidences of God's grace in you, and I know that if God really began a good work in you He will be faithful to complete it. But let me help you see yourself from God's perspective. Remind me again, what made you start doubting in God?

EMMANUEL: Like I told you, when I met you Christians, I was ready for a crutch. I was depressed at the emptiness in the universe and in me, and I wanted something bigger. I think I wanted something bigger so bad that I deceived myself. Grace Bible Church was the first group of religious people who made sense to come along, so I forced myself to believe it. It wasn't so

much that I thought it was true that attracted me. It was something I felt I needed. I would have believed in whatever came along. That was what I needed at the time.

JACOB: And now you've decided that you don't need God?

EMMANUEL: I've decided I don't need religion. For you religion is God, so in your terminology: I don't need God.

JACOB: So you're telling me that you think that you're God?

EMMANUEL: No I'm saying that either there is no god or if there is one (or many gods) we can't know him (or them). Whatever god is or isn't is beyond us. I only said that religion served me for a time and now I can live without it.

JACOB: How do you know that the God of the Bible isn't the true God?

EMMANUEL: That'll take all night to go through. There are so many inconsistencies in the Bible. Why would God make only one way? Evolution disproves what the Bible says about creation. What about all of the other religions? I could keep going...

JACOB: How do you know that any of those are valid objections?

EMMANUEL: If the Bible's been disproved, then it's a valid objection!

JACOB: But in order to disprove something you have to appeal to some rules of thought, some standard to judge by, right? You are ultimately saying that you have the power to determine right and wrong. The one that determines right and wrong or truth and falsity is God. That is why I said you thought that you were God. Emmanuel, in your heart you know God exists, and you know that you should therefore be subject to him. You don't want to be obedient; you want to be in control. So you have lied to yourself and are acting as if you are God. You know the Bible. What does God do to people that say that they are God or worship other gods?

EMMANUEL: He punishes them forever...that brings up another issue.

JACOB: That's right; He punishes them. We'll get to that other issue in a second. So God created you...

EMMANUEL: I'm not willing to grant that. It is plausible that we came from evolution

JACOB: We'll get there too. But let's just assume that the God of the Bible really is God. Our belief in him or lack of belief in Him cannot create or do away with His existence, so before you rule out his existence you must at least consider what reality would be like *if* He is the true God. Is that ok?

EMMANUEL: Ok, for the sake of discussion.

JACOB: Like you said, God punishes those that reject Him and turn to other things. That's what you are doing right now. Imagine yourself before the judgment seat of God on trial; He asks you, "Your life was marked by sinful rebellion to me. What justification do you have?" What would you say?

EMMANUEL: I don't know.

JACOB: From what you have told me thus far, your response would be that you had determined that God didn't exist. How foolish will that look as you are sitting before Him? He would say your condemnation is just. Apart from Christ, Emmanuel, you would justly be cast into Hell to experience God's righteous wrath against you because you wanted to be God instead of Him. Praise God that He is more than righteous only. He killed Jesus so that your treachery might not be final.

EMMANUEL: Right. That's what you believe. If God was really good, He wouldn't leave it up to us to figure out whether or not He really exists and then throw us in Hell if we picked wrong.

JACOB: Whoa, hold on. You just said “*If* God was good.” God is good.

EMMANUEL: Prove it.

JACOB: Jesus said that no one is good except God (Matthew 19:17).

EMMANUEL: You didn’t answer my question. For me to believe, you have to prove to me that God is good even though he sends people to Hell.

JACOB: I did. I’m not trying to be cute or clever. Hear me out. Goodness is defined God, so are holiness, righteousness, perfection, and many other things. God is the standard of all those things. Therefore, by definition, God is good.

EMMANUEL: By your definition.

JACOB: No, I don’t set the standards; God does. God is good by *His* definition. What definition are you using?

EMMANUEL: Common sense. If I took some tribesman from Africa and brought him to the United States without explaining to him any laws, and then arrested him and executed him when he jaywalked, that would be wrong.

JACOB: I agree.

EMMANUEL: Then how can you not say that what God is doing is wrong?

JACOB: There are some important differences. God created the world and created you for His glory; therefore, he has the authority to demand from you what He chooses. He wouldn’t demand anything unjust because He is the measure of justice. The execution of a jaywalker is not a just punishment. Finally, the jaywalker didn’t know the rules, but all of mankind knows the rules.

EMMANUEL: There is no way that we are all supposed to abide by the same set of rules. That’s just flimsy logic to try to defend the Bible. There has to be more than one way to live.

JACOB: That's not what you said. You said that you know to judge good and evil. You either know good and evil because you are God and define good and evil or you know the God who defines them.

EMMANUEL: Or they are defined by an individual's culture.

JACOB: Culture isn't capable of defining ultimate standards. Culture is an impersonal thing. It is the creation of man and has many different manifestations. There will be as many different definitions of *good* as there are cultures.

EMMANUEL: Exactly, just like culture is an invention of man, so is God. I say that culture defines good and bad; you say that God does. It's all the same thing, really, just semantics.

JACOB: Not at all. God is the Creator. Culture is a creation.

EMMANUEL: You *think* that God is Creator. Just like you're playing "what if," let me play "what if." What if there is no God, and what if good and bad are ultimately our perceptions of what is best and worst for society?

JACOB: What defines "best"?

EMMANUEL: That which brings the greatest good.

JACOB: Wait. You just said that what is good is that which is best, and the best is whatever is good.

EMMANUEL: You know what I mean. Let's say it is that which helps the most people.

JACOB: Helps them in what way?

EMMANUEL: Makes them happier, makes them healthier, or helps them live at peace. That kind of thing.

JACOB: Why are happiness, health, and peace good things?

EMMANUEL: Who in the world is going to argue that they aren't?

JACOB: Exactly. It's not like God left us without knowing his ultimate standard. Everybody knows they are good things because God says they are, when identified as gifts from Him. Open your Bible, and read Romans 1:18-23.

EMMANUEL: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."

JACOB: You see, then, we all know God because He has made Himself plain to us.

EMMANUEL: Then why doesn't everybody believe in God? If supposedly I know God, then why don't I believe in Him right now?

JACOB: Because of sin: Read what it says again in verse 18: By unrighteousness, man suppresses the truth. Not only do we all know the truth in our hearts and know who God is from creation, but God then told us exactly who He is, what He requires of us, and how to be saved from this mess we've gotten ourselves into. God says, "They know God but refuse to honor him as God". That's exactly what you're doing now. You know God, but you think that you can judge Him and tell Him what is good and evil.

EMMANUEL: *If* what you say is actually true.

JACOB: I've shown you that you have to either consider yourself, culture, or some other impersonal thing to be God. But it's obvious that those things are incapable of functioning as God. You acknowledge that there's such a thing as good and evil; you even charged God with evil. You then said that all people know that good and evil exist. Yet the only way that we can account for good and evil is the God of the Bible.

EMMANUEL: Ok, I'll play your game. God says that He is jealous, and the Bible says that jealousy is wrong. But God also says that He is good. God can't be both good and bad right? So right there the Bible disproves itself on its own terms.

JACOB: Well then something is wrong with what you just said. God is good, and God is indeed jealous that His people honor Him alone as Lord. God made all things for Himself, for His glory. God has the right to be jealous for that since He defined the purpose of all creation. When God demands our allegiance and worship, He is actually giving us the best, and that is good and gracious. When we are jealous for the attention of others, we want to take that to which we have no right. Our jealousy breaks God's law and is unjust. God's jealous, because it is God's, is necessarily totally just. Our jealousy is just the outworking of trying to elevate ourselves to God's position, defining what is right by what we want and not what God wants. Therefore, jealousy that is wrong for us is right for God.

EMMANUEL: You're using the Bible to prove the Bible.

JACOB: You were trying to use the Bible to disprove the Bible. What standard do you consider authoritative enough that we could judge the God's Word by it?

EMMANUEL: Science.

JACOB: I disagree that science is valid as an ultimate standard. Regardless, how are you going to prove with science that God doesn't exist? You'd have to look everywhere for Him?

What if God didn't allow himself to be found with the tools for observation and evaluation available to you? He is Lord over them because He created them.

EMMANUEL: You said that God made Himself known through the things that have been made. If the Bible is true, shouldn't we be able to find God through science?

JACOB: Define science.

EMMANUEL: Making hypotheses and testing them with the evidence.

JACOB: So how do you propose we test the hypothesis that God exists with science?

EMMANUEL: If God created the world, we should see evidence that he did it that can't be explained by any other means. Evolution proves that there is another explanation for life, therefore, God can't be proven through creation. The best you can do is to say that God is an untestable option that has to be believed in by faith because there is no conclusive evidence for him.

JACOB: Evolution is far from proven. Scientists haven't even been able to put forth a plausible explanation of how something as basic to life as DNA could have possibly been formed by evolutionary means. Even primitive bacteria have too many interworking parts to have been created by impersonal chance. A personal God is the only explanation. Then there is the question of how science is to test what happened in the past? Based on your definition of science, that's impossible. Finally, there is so much appearance of design in the world that, especially in the face of not even so much as a hypothesis of how a cell could form using Darwinian processes, the evidence is far from conclusive, even on the terms of science.

EMMANUEL: Why should I take your word over all the scientists who are smarter than you and obviously know more about science than you?

JACOB: Ultimately, I think that the best answer that I can give to that question is that I am telling you God's Word. I'm telling you that I know how all the world came to be because God told me. He was the only one there. I am dependent on Him for that information.

EMMANUEL: But you haven't answered me yet. You said that God is obvious and that scientists who look at nature all day long can't see Him. He must not be that obvious.

JACOB: Science will never find God because science is operating under the assumption that nothing supernatural occurs. Science is looking for purely natural reasons for everything. That is the way in which scientists do exactly what God told us all mankind does: They suppress the truth that is clearly revealed. Scientists observe what any child recognizes as bearing the marks of a Creator and declare—because they have placed man-made science as the ultimate standard of truth—that it is not created. That's more absurd than looking at the Bible in your hands and declaring that it was not written, but rather formed itself through some preexisting laws of letter formation and association. What science does, and what you are doing, simply serves to validate that Scripture's assessment of man's suppression of the truth about God.

EMMANUEL: I'm running out of time. One more thing: The Bible claims that God is all powerful, right?

JACOB: Right.

EMMANUEL: So there should be nothing that God can't do? Could God create a rock so big that He couldn't lift it.

JACOB: (laughs out loud) I'm sorry for laughing. That's a little bit ridiculous. Emmanuel, stand back and evaluate yourself from God's position. The week before you left our Bible study, we had read Job. Remember what God said to Job? He basically pointed out Job's relative

ignorance. Do you remember my memory verses from Job³? God replied to Job: Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you will make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone? Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it (Job 38:2-7, 40:2).

EMMANUEL: I'm serious. Until this impossibility is reconciled in my mind, I can't believe in God. God can't be an illogical impossibility.

JACOB: Just because God can't do something that is logically impossible, doesn't mean that He is not omnipotent. If all that God can do is the standard of that which can be done, then your scenario is invalid. Logic is not some system that sits back and evaluates God. God created the universe, and God created logic. If God cannot do illogical things it only means that illogical things are out of the set of things that can be done, the set of things that an Omnipotent does. He can't be destroyed or dethroned by his creation or his creation's version of logic. Don't you see? That's exactly what you are trying to do. You are a little dependent creature thrashing against God with all the treacherous hatred you can muster.

EMMANUEL: I don't think that I hate God.

JACOB: But we've identified that you either think that you are God or are substituting all kinds of things in the place of God. In the Ten Commandments, God says that those who serve other gods or bow down to them hate God and that God will punish them (Exodus 20:5). But

³ Appropriately, the last small-group Bible study Emmanuel ever attended, ended with me reciting these verses from memory as a summary of the point of the book. After this conversation, as a reminder to myself of the sinfulness and foolishness of contending with God, I created a desktop wallpaper with this verse on it for my computer. This reminder from God's Word in light of my last real conversation with Emmanuel serves forever as a reminder that the tenets of presuppositional apologetics must be basic convictions of my heart. I must forever remember that God is God and I am not.

God also says that he is “a merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty⁴ (Exodus 34:6-7).” God won’t just ignore your sin; but He can forgive it. Emmanuel, I know you have a hard time understanding how a God who says He is love could send people to Hell. God proved His love when He came and died in our place. You are in rebellion, acting like you hate God, but God will wipe that away and treat you like a child. Why would you refuse that? I know that you know the gospel, and I recognize that it doesn’t answer all of the questions. That’s the point. The one who would come to God for reconciliation is one who has stopped telling God what questions He must answer. That one recognizes His dependence. God designed the gospel to break down your pride; He ordained it so that He would get the glory.

EMMANUEL: I wish I could believe that, but I can’t. (long pause) I have to go.

JACOB: Just listen to this one last thing.

EMMANUEL: Ok, one more minute.

JACOB: In 1 Corinthians 1, God said that the gospel appear as foolishness to man’s wisdom. God in his wisdom made it so that man won’t find Him by that which the world calls *wisdom*. You claim to be looking for answers, but God says that you are looking for them in the wrong way. If you are looking for God, you should look for Him the way that He tells you He will be found: In humility and dependence. So will you promise me that as you search for God, before we talk next, you will pray every day and read the Bible?

EMMANUEL: I can’t promise that.

JACOB: Please then, at least read 1 Corinthians 1-2 and consider what God says what true wisdom is. Can you do that?

⁴ Emmanuel had memorized these verses in our study of Exodus.

EMMANUEL: I'll try.

JACOB: I love you, Emmanuel. I'll be praying for you.

EMMANUEL: I love you too, Jacob. I'll see you later.

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