

## Does God exist?

Written by Andy Buchan, May 2015

*"When I was a kid I used to have an imaginary friend. I thought he went everywhere with me. I thought I could talk to him and he could hear me, and he could grant me wishes and stuff too. But then I grew up and I stopped going to church..."*

Does God exist? It has become fashionable to say that he does not. Comedians make jokes about an imaginary friend. More seriously Richard Dawkins has written: "If children understand that beliefs should be substantiated with evidence, as opposed to tradition, authority, revelation or faith, they will automatically work out for themselves that they are atheists."

The evidence suggests that not very many people share Dawkins' outright atheism. Opinion polls vary widely, but something like 80% of people in Britain believe in some sort of a God or spiritual reality.

However, while most people do believe in something, the vast majority are not at all sure what that 'something' is. Asked about God in an interview with the Sunday Times the pop singer Madonna said: "I can't describe it. To me, sometimes, I don't know whether it's a being or more like the higher state of my consciousness, like trying to rise above everyday life and the things that bring you down...". The same uncertainty can also be expressed in more everyday language: "If all the Christians believe one thing and all the Muslims believe something else and the Buddhists believe something else, how can anyone be sure about anything?"

Does God exist? Some say "No". Others say, "Maybe, but we don't know what he's like." But then the Christian says, "Yes. God is real and I know what he's like and I know him." Very often Christians come across as arrogant in this kind of discussion. It seems arrogant to claim certainty where others are less sure. But that depends (doesn't it?) on whether the Christian can give evidence to back up their certainty.

So what evidence can the Christian give for believing in God and for feeling any kind of certainty about Him? Without trying in any sense to exhaust an enormous subject, let me put forward two things that I find helpful in my own mind.

### God visited

Christians believe that God exists and that they know what he is like, *not* because they have big brains and have worked it all out, but because God visited.

At the start of his gospel John wrote: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." A few verses later he then makes the most extraordinary claim: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory." The Christian claim is that God visited. At a point in real history he became flesh and lived a human life among us.

Suppose I told you that I have a sister. I tell you her name, that she has black hair, that she lives in Glasgow. Of course that could be true or false, so you might try to analyse the probabilities. It's quite common for people to have a big sister. Then again, Andy said she her hair is black, whereas his hair is more blondie-brown. Overall you haven't got a lot to go on! You would basically have to either take my word for it, or not. But what if she visited? Suppose on a Sunday she had come through to see us and came along to *Chalmers*. People would be able to meet her. Then you would be able to *know*.

This is why Christians believe in God. It's not because of fancy reasoning, but simply because God visited. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

John who wrote this gospel was friends with Jesus – for about three years they were like colleagues or flatmates – and what John saw and heard convinced him that his friend was more than just a man. Jesus was an ordinary human being in the sense that he got tired and had to sleep, got thirsty and had to drink man, felt pain and all the rest of what is 'normal' for us. But Jesus also claimed to be more than a man. He said things like: "I and the Father are one... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father... Before Abraham was, I am... I am the way and truth and the life."

Now other people have made claims like this. You may have heard about Sun Myung Moon who died

a couple of years ago. He claimed to be the Messiah, God's Son, and led a cult known as the Moonies. Or in the UK, a former footballer named David Icke proclaimed himself to be God's Son in a television interview with Terry Wogan. But when someone makes this sort of claim you can look at their lives and make up your mind. In his lovely lilting voice Terry Wogan tore David Icke apart because he could give no evidence in support of his claims. The same could not be said for Jesus. The claims he made were backed up by the facts of his life.

In his gospel John gives three main strands of this evidence to show why he believed that Jesus really was God visiting.

First he shows us Jesus' miracles. These were things that no human being could do – turning water into wine, healing sick people with just a word, multiplying food out of thin air, walking on water, raising a dead man back to life. When a man turns up claiming to be God we are naturally suspicious, but miraculous power like Jesus showed would force us to take the claims seriously.

Secondly, John also records Jesus' teaching. There's a point in the record of events where some of Jesus' opponents are baffled by his wisdom and insight. They ask, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?" He was teaching the crowds and making sense of the Old Testament and making sense of life.

Thirdly, John also records Jesus' character. He was brave enough to stand up to those who abused their power, but he was also gentle enough for little children to feel comfortable in his company. Jesus spoke with unique authority, commanding people to change their lives on the basis of his teaching, but he was also humble like a servant. There was a perfect balance about his character. He was consistent, always the same man: with women and with men, with crowds and with individuals, with the cream of society and with the dregs.

All this is the evidence that John presents, leading us towards the crucial conclusion that God visited. This is how a Christian can have certainty without arrogance. Our conclusions do not come from any special merit or insight in ourselves. Simply, God visited to introduce himself.

### **God's visit was well-documented**

"Even if God did visit though," someone might object, "he didn't visit me!" That is true. In Jesus' human life God came to a specific set of people at a particular time and place. John and the others may therefore have been able to know the truth about God, but what about us?

The second fact and piece of good news for us becomes crucial at this point: God's visit was well-documented. The events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection did not happen in a corner. Eye-witnesses wrote down what they saw, and they did so early enough and publicly enough that their testimony has to be taken seriously. People who make up outright fables do sometimes manage to get a hearing, but not for long.

This is something that Christians have to think really carefully about. Just because claims are written in a book, that doesn't mean you should believe them. And just because other people have believed these claims, that doesn't mean we should believe them either. There is such a thing as legend and folklore. Stories get embellished and people make things up! What you have to do in each case is look at the evidence and make up your mind.

What sorts of factors might we find persuasive? I would want there to be lots of independent witnesses. If some of these witnesses could be from different sides of a debate, that would also help. If the records could come from a time close to the actual events, that would be nice. Also, if the author stood by his report even when put under pressure to disavow it then that would lend still further credibility. Then if lots of people at the time saw the things happening and did not dispute their reality, that would pretty much clinch it.

When you look at the evidence for Jesus being God come down to see us, all of this is pretty much what we have. Eye-witnesses wrote down what they saw soon after the events, at a time when loads of people were still alive to verify what they said. Jesus had powerful enemies, people who were looking to sweep him under the carpet and expose him as a fraud, but they couldn't do it. It is also not just Christian historians like John who record these things about Jesus. There is corroboration from Roman

writers like Pliny, Tacitus and Seutonius, as well as from Jewish sources like Josephus.

When God visited it was not done in the corner but out in the open. Many people are persuaded because the evidence is straightforward and strong.

People sometimes respond to this line of reasoning that they would believe if only they had seen these things *themselves*. "With something so big I would want to see it with my own eyes. If God visited *me*, then I'd believe." At first that sounds reasonable, but only at first! Imagine someone said to you, "I don't believe in Henry VIII. I know there are all these records and things, but because I didn't see him myself I don't believe a word of it." That is not a reasonable position. You do not need to see something to believe it. That is not how evidence works! Juries do not need to see a crime in order to find someone guilty. Instead they listen to witnesses and look at the evidence.

It is the same sort of process that leads Christians to believe. It is not blind faith, but rather a sensible decision based on the solid evidence of a well-documented visit from God himself.

### **Conclusions**

If you are reading this as someone who does not believe in God, or if you think we can't be certain, what do you think happened two thousand years ago when Jesus came? Who do you think he was? Why do you think so many believed that he was God made flesh? These are questions that we all have to come to terms with.

Many reading this, however, will already be persuaded in their own minds that Jesus was and is the Son of God. In that case, don't be shy! When people makes jokes about our imaginary friend or claim that atheism is the only reasonable position, it is easy for Christians to feel like they are on the back foot. I don't think we are. The evidence is strong and people generally find it interesting to talk about, so don't be shy!