

Background to Modern Theology

David Hume

9.10.2005

For over 100 years, many scholars, scientists and the media have publicly denied Christianity is a valid way of life. Many have slung their barbs, saying Christianity is unscientific, the Bible is full of mistakes, etc.

This attack is not new. However, the twist of the knife has been that the attacks did not just come from people outside the church. Many bishops, ministers and leading lay people have openly argued against the truth of the Bible, while still claiming to have a valid faith in God.

In a series of six sermons, I want to skip through the history of why the church caved in on the traditional understanding of the faith to such an extent in the twentieth century.

Each sermon will focus on a major scholar who tried to shed new light on Jesus and the Bible, and who has had a major impact on Christianity. Today, we begin by looking at the Scottish philosopher David Hume.

Are you uncomfortable when someone asks you to prove the Bible is true? Do you squirm when they say miracles do not happen, someone got it wrong? Do you feel like running when friends ask how you know Jesus is true?

If you do, then much of your discomfort was focused through the brilliant mind of David Hume, who popularised much of that argument. He was born in Edinburgh in 1711 and died in 1776, six years after Captain Cook entered Botany Bay.

The world was different then. Dinosaurs were not discovered. It was possible for a man to be an expert in every branch of science. Everything in life was dominated by an obvious feeling that this was God's world.

Darwin had not been born. Most Westerners believed every action had a cause, which inevitably related back to your relationship with God.

The Methodist revival spread through the British Isles in the mid 1700s. Methodists believed that

God had intervened in history, as revealed in the Bible. Miracles were seen as the great proof that God was in Christ, just as Jesus said in John 10:37-38 *"If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you don't believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."* If he did miracles, then God was in him.

However, there were many in churches who held reason in higher esteem than the Bible. They did not disbelieve the Bible, rather many did not see the need to read it carefully. Using reason, our brains would tell us what we need to know. These people were often called deists. They used reasoning to argue for God's existence, and which morals to live by. God made the world, but like winding up a clock, they claimed he left it alone to tick along until he comes back to end it all.

In this climate, David Hume began to make enemies with the church. In 1748 he wrote the first of his important books *A Treatise Concerning Human Nature*. But it was not popular. In 1757, he published *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. This book caused a ripple in his lifetime, but in the 1800s and 1900s it created massive waves as people developed his thoughts. And in 1779, after his death, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was published.

Hume tackled the problem of how do you know something is true. How do you prove something is true? Living before Albert Einstein, Hume was deeply influenced by Newton's physics and maths.

He claimed you know something exists because you can see, touch, taste, hear or smell it. We judge if something is proven true by our senses.

Hume claimed that reasoning was not a good guide for proof, because reasoning tried to make a co-ordinated whole out of life. But for Hume, life is not a coordinated whole, merely a massive series of individual impressions on our senses.

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I can only know reality from what my senses pick up. If I do not sense it, how can I know it is real?

If it is pushed to its logical conclusion, it becomes almost impossible to prove that something caused something else. eg If I squeeze the trigger of a gun, you might see and hear this event. Then, when the bullet smashes the window over there, you can see or hear that, but he says it would be invalid to say that my squeezing the trigger caused the bullet to hit the wall, unless it occurred every time.

For him, proof comes through repetition. So if something happens often enough, with no exceptions, then it has been proven to be true and is now a Law.

Something is not true because God said it is. God is no longer the centre of truth. The focus of the world is my impressions. The centre of reality is me, yet it is not me, for how can I truly know me? When pushed to an extreme, Hume's view of life is very destructive. All is meaningless, and you cannot even be sure if you exist.

But away from the extreme, society accepted that something is proved to be true if it occurs regularly. Uniform experience amounts to a proof. We know this now as Scientific proof.

How do you know something is true? Repeat the experiment to see if it keeps on working. If it does, then it is proven true. If not, then it has not been proven to be true.

Humes' work blasted at the 2 main supports for Christianity of his time.

1. By concentrating on what we pick up in our senses, he rattled those who relied much more on their reasoning abilities, and made people question whether we can really know God if we cannot see, hear, taste, touch or feel him. And

2. He caused many to doubt that miracles occurred. He asked awkward questions, and seemed so convincing. He said we have been

deceived.

With a fine stroke of reasoning (even though he dismantled reasoning), Hume looked at the proof for miracles.

First, he defined a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. However, for him the Laws of Nature could not be violated, otherwise they would not be the Laws of Nature, but flawed laws. So by definition, miracles are impossible.

Secondly, he then asked, which is more probable:

[1] that miracles occurred, or [2] that Jesus' followers deceived people or were deceived? Hume chose for the latter.

Thirdly, how do miracles go with scientific proof? Miracles are not repeatable events. That is why they're miracles. He says they cannot be proven.

So has Hume dealt the death punch to Christianity?

No!

What can we say to those who want us to prove the Bible, prove God and prove miracles are true?

The most important step is to look at the basis for proof. Hume defined proof in a very narrow way. He was then able to chuck Christianity out.

But scientific proof is not the only type of proof that we can validly rely on.

Scientific proof cannot prove much in court, or from history, because a murder, or theft, or specific crime or event is not repeatable. How can you prove who won the Grand Final in the NRL? You cannot prove it by repeating the event all the time, not even by repeating it once. Other proofs are needed. Scientific proof cannot be used to prove if God intervenes in history at a certain time. Scientific proof cannot be used to prove if you love someone. Repeatedly testing love destroys it, and does not prove it. Other proofs are needed for life and are valid.

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Hume taught people to take one type of proof, and sieve the world through it. This will wipe out the special unique occasions.

How do I know the Bible events are true?

First, there is enough historical evidence to validate the Bible. Jesus did die and rise again for us. There is a large historical basis for this.

and 2ndly, I have a relationship with Jesus. He is my Lord and friend. I know He is true because I know Him.

Do not be covered into disbelief or shame by people wanting scientific proof.

We have no need to be ashamed of the gospel. For it is God's power for the salvation of those who believe.