

How to Debate an Atheist – If You Must By William A. Dembski

[Ps. 14; v.1] The fool hath said in his heart, [There is] no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, [there is] none that doeth good. [v.2] The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, [and] seek God. [v.3] They are all gone aside, they are [all] together become filthy: [there is] none that doeth good, no, not one. [v.4] Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge? who eat up my people [as] they eat bread, and call not upon the LORD. [v.5] There were they in great fear: for God [is] in the generation of the righteous. [v.6] Ye have shamed the counsel of the poor, because the LORD [is] his refuge. [v.7] Oh that the salvation of Israel [were come] out of Zion! when the LORD bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, [and] Israel shall be glad.

It's an honor to speak with you on this happy occasion. I've titled this commencement talk "How to Debate an Atheist – If You Must." In a sense, the "if you must" is redundant. We live in an increasingly secular culture, and as followers of Christ we have little choice but to debate atheists. Because we are, as Jude 3 urges, to contend earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, silence in the face of atheism is not a Christian option. So, to today's graduates and those cheering them on, I'd like to offer some insights for debating atheists. Much of what I say will not be new to today's graduates, who, here at Southern Evangelical Seminary, have followed a rigorous course of study in Christian apologetics. Yet, I hope in this talk to tie together certain key strands in your education as you seek to advance the truth of Christ beyond the security of these walls.

Let me therefore start with what the Bible says about atheism. Among the Bible's 150 psalms, only one is repeated: Psalm 14, which appears also as Psalm 53. Verse for verse, Psalms 14 and 53 match up, saying the same thing, only at places using slightly different wording. For those, like us, who see the Bible as God's inspired and unerring word, this repetition cannot be accidental. Repetition stresses importance. It says, "Listen up, pay attention."

What, then, is so important about Psalm 14 that it bears repeating? This psalm gives the Bible's most penetrating insight into human corruption and wickedness. Indeed, when the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, needed to underscore universality of human sin, the first Old Testament text that he quoted was this psalm. Thus, in Romans 3:10–12, to prove that all, both Jews and Gentiles, are, as he puts it, "under sin," Paul writes,

There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

But what is this passage from Romans except an edited version of the first three verses of Psalm 14? Everything in Romans 3:10–12 is drawn from Psalm 14. And yet, not

everything in the first three verses of Psalm 14 appears in Romans 3. In particular, Paul omits the very opening of this psalm. Which is not to say that Paul is quoting the psalm out of context. In chapter 3 of Romans, Paul is intent on demonstrating the universality of human sinfulness; he is less concerned with analyzing its root. To get at the root of human sinfulness, we need to consider the opening of Psalm 14.

Psalm 14 begins, “The fool hath said in his heart there is no God.” Consisting of eleven one-syllable words in the King James translation, this opening of Psalm 14 is remarkable for its brevity, simplicity, and profundity. “The fool hath said in his heart there is no God.” All the wickedness of man described subsequently in Psalm 14 and expanded on by Paul in his letter to the Romans flows from this brief statement. I want in what follows to analyze this statement and show how it applies to 21st century western Christians as we engage an increasingly hostile secular culture.

“The fool hath said in his heart there is no God.” Does it seem odd in our age that those who deny God’s existence are referred to here as fools? Atheism, in our secular culture, is regarded as courageous and intelligent. Weak-kneed people who need God as a crutch, so we are told, are the fools. They believe in God against all evidence and hang on to that belief because they lack the courage to face the stark, bleak reality of an impersonal universe that’s winding down and will ultimately consign all human aspirations to oblivion. Again, so we are told.

One mother of a boy I grew up with, though not herself an atheist, remarked that her son was too intelligent to believe in God. In Hollywood films, children who confidently doubt or, better yet, deny God’s existence are portrayed as thoughtful, precocious, and admirable (take, for instance, the twelve-year old Christian Bale character in Steven Spielberg’s *Empire of the Sun*). When I was applying for secular jobs in philosophy some years back, a prominent philosopher of science suggested I remove from my résumé all mention of my work on intelligent design because, and I quote, “All the analytic philosophers are atheists and don’t want to see that stuff.” Please note, he meant this for my own good so that I could land a job – he wasn’t trying to be unkind or disrespectful.

The evidence of science and history, we are told, shows that God probably doesn’t exist and, in any case, need not exist. Polling numbers confirm that this is the conventional wisdom among our cultural elites. Among America’s top scientists – those who belong to the National Academy of Sciences – only seven percent admit to any belief in God. In a 2007 survey of 149 evolutionary biologists, only two admitted belief in God. When Francis Collins, an evangelical, was appointed to head the National Institutes of Health, mainstream scientists cited his Christian belief as reason to deny his appointment because it would prevent him from being objective. Most of the media thought this concern entirely legitimate.

It would seem, then, that all the smart people are atheists and that Psalm 14 got it wrong about only fools saying in their hearts there is no God. Yes? Quite the contrary. The Bible got it right. These atheists may be smart, but they are smart fools. Nor is this to suggest that Christian believers are necessarily pious imbeciles. Up until the 20th century, most

prominent scientists were utterly convinced of God's existence and said so unapologetically. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, Euler, Faraday, Maxwell, and Kelvin all spring readily to mind.

But that raises the question, Why has there been such a great falling away from the faith by the quote-unquote "smart" people? Smart people who deny that God exists are fools because, as Phillip Johnson notes in *Reason in the Balance*, they are "ignoring the most important aspect of reality." Imagine going to a football game and paying attention only to the concessions stand or the color of the cheerleaders' uniforms. Imagine going to a play, ignoring the actors, and attending only to the furniture on stage. God is the main attraction. He is the lead actor, the primary agent, in the world – a world that he has created. To miss God is to miss everything. As Maximus the Confessor, the great 7th century theologian, put it,

If all things have been made by God and for his sake, then God is better than what has been made by him. The one who forsakes the better and is engrossed in inferior things shows that he prefers the things made by God to God himself.... If the soul is better than the body and God incomparably better than the world which he created, the one who prefers the body to the soul and the world to the God who created it is no different from idolaters.

In short, the atheist is a fool because he is an idolater. It's not that he worships nothing. It's rather that he worships everything except the one true God.

"The fool hath said in his heart there is no God." In analyzing this opening verse of Psalm 14, let's consider next how exactly the fool denies God's existence. Notice that this verse doesn't say that the fool *believes* in his heart there is no God. Rather, it says that the fool *says* in his heart there is no God. This is significant. In all my encounters with atheists, I'm not convinced any of them truly disbelieve in God's existence. A fact about language is that words can be strung together any which way we like and then given utterance. Just because people say something doesn't mean they believe it.

In fact, there's good reason to think no real atheists exists (real atheists being those who believe deep down in their hearts that there is no God). Why do I think that atheism describes an empty set, something like married bachelors? For one, Paul in Romans 1:18–20 characterizes all human attempts to deny God as vain. To be sure, humans move their lips and utter words that deny God, but such speech acts, according to Paul, don't reflect what's really going on in their hearts. Paul writes:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

This passage is so rich that whole books could be (and indeed have been) written on it, but I call your attention to two points: (1) Humans have been given plenty of evidence to believe in God, notably from the world God has created, a world that reflects his glory. (2) When humans fail to acknowledge such evidence for God, their failure is not intellectual but moral in that they *willfully suppress* that evidence.

Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell was once asked what would happen if upon dying and going to heaven (or wherever) he was asked why he didn't believe in God during his tenure on earth. He responded, "Not enough evidence." But this response, which contemporary atheists repeat endlessly, going even further by claiming that there is no evidence whatsoever for God, is a sham. To see this, we need to consider the nature of evidence.

The problem with evidence is that what constitutes evidence is not self-evident. Simply put, what counts as evidence is not, and indeed cannot be, decided by evidence. Evidence – that is, what makes a claim evident to us – depends on what we are predisposed to take as evidence. I recall lecturing at the University of Kansas on intelligent design some years back, showing the marvelous intricacy and technological sophistication inside cellular life and being asked, during the Q&A, when I was finally going to present some real evidence for design. I thought the question was a joke – isn't that what I had been doing the last hour and a half of my lecture? But the questioner was, apparently, serious. Suffice it to say that a human heart intent on turning away from God is ready to invalidate any evidence that might point to God.

I'll return to the question of evidence for God later, but I want to finish why I don't think there are any real atheists, that is, atheists who believe deep down in their hearts that God doesn't exist. The testimony of Scripture, especially Romans 1, seems to me decisive here. But I've also had occasion to debate and interact with atheists, most recently Christopher Hitchens. Invariably, I find their atheism to be a pose. The more virulent atheists might better be called "antitheists." They not only deny that God exists but also hate him. Yet whence this hatred of a nonexistent entity? "There is no God and I hate him" seems a strange position to take. Why get so bent out of shape about a being that doesn't exist?

Moreover, the actual arguments such atheists use to deny God's existence seem to me less than convincing. Christopher Hitchens, for instance, hitches his atheism to Darwinian evolution. Fellow atheist (or antitheist) Richard Dawkins puts it this way: "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist." It's no coincidence that Dawkins, the world's best known atheist, is also an evolutionary biologist. Atheists, like everyone else, need a creation story. Without God in the picture, something like Darwinian evolution must be true.

But Darwinian evolution is in deep trouble. If you doubt this, look at my book *The Design of Life*, Stephen Meyer's *Signature in the Cell*, or Susan Mazur's *The Altenberg 16*. The latter, subtitled *An Exposé of the Evolution Industry*, is by a secular journalist. It shows how secular biologists are finding Darwinian theory so full of unresolved

conceptual difficulties that they are conceding that the field is in disarray and needs a new theoretical underpinning.

But what about milder atheists – those who don't go out of their way to deny God's existence but find that they seem to get on quite well without him? God, to them, seems irrelevant. Ironically, such atheists might provide stronger evidence for real atheism than overly reactive antitheists like Dawkins or Hitchens, who protest too much against God. Notwithstanding, milder atheists aren't real atheists either. Milder atheists do not so much disbelieve in God's existence as ignore him. But turning your back on something or ignoring it doesn't make it go away, and at some level milder atheists realize that they are merely sidestepping the God question. The world has presented them with many distractions, and they are happy, for the moment, to forget God.

I've been focusing on atheists in the sense of those willing to be publicly identified as denying God's existence. For much of the last 30 years, Gallup polling data have placed the incidence of atheism in the United States at just under 10 percent of the U.S. population. In the last five years, however, those willing to adopt the label "atheist" has risen to just under 15 percent – a five point increase. Although this rise is significant, the vast majority of Americans continue to eschew the label "atheist." Most Americans remain, and are happy to be called, theists. Is that good news? Let me suggest that we not pat ourselves on the back.

Whenever Richard Dawkins is interviewed on radio or television, he attempts to soften atheism by suggesting that we are all atheists about most of the gods that humans have ever worshipped – Isis, Thor, Zeus, etc. – so all he's proposing is that we get rid of one more god, the God of Christianity. He's trying to be overly clever here, but in a mistaken way he has a point. All of us, at places in our lives, forget God. All of us have acted in ways that implicitly deny God, that pretend God isn't watching and that no one will hold us to account. In other words, all of us have been atheists not just about Isis and Thor and Zeus but also about the one true God.

Christian atheism may seem like an oxymoron, but, as I'm using it, it is not. Consider that the Barna polling group has found that, in category after category of moral failure, born-again Christians do no better, and in some cases worse, than atheists and agnostics. Paul speaks to this problem in Titus 1:16. Many, according to Paul, "profess that they know God. But in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate." In Mark 7:6, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." The language that Paul and Jesus use here is very strong. Fortunately, we serve a God of grace who gives us space to repent and return from our backslidden ways. But many never do.

Christian atheism, in which we effectively deny God even though our lips seem to affirm him, is widespread. Consider the Barna polling data on marriage. Those who call themselves atheists and agnostics actually have, percentage-wise, fewer divorces than born-again. Yet, if asked, born-again would say that they not only believe in God but also regard marriage as sacred. To be sure, there are legitimate grounds for dissolving

marriage, but the statistics here suggest that many Christian marriages dissolve for illegitimate reasons. For a popular account of how widespread moral failure is among Christians and how our secular counterparts, statistically speaking, often do no worse in this regard, see Ron Sider's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Sider is not my favorite author, but he is right that we need to do better.

The difference, then, between Christian atheists and secular atheists is this: Christians who act as though God doesn't exist are hypocrites because, if asked whether God exists, they'll affirm that he does. On the other hand, atheists who publicly identify themselves as atheists are liars because, deep down, they know that God exists. In denying God, we can be hypocrites or liars, but we can't be real. In Daniel 5:23, Daniel tells Belshazzar, "the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." Our very life, moment by moment, depends on God. We are made in the divine image. God is closer to us than any created thing. Sometimes we miss something not because it's too far but because it's too near. Thus, we may forget that we are wearing glasses or a hat, or that we have a nose. God's very nearness is the atheists' excuse for denying him.

To say that God is near is not to say that God can't also be far away. God is near to each of us in that he is the source of our being – every breath we take, we take in him. Ontologically speaking, God is as close to us as close can be. But morally speaking, God can be quite distant. Thus, when it comes to our personal relationship with God, the distance between God and us can be great. Isaiah 59:1–2 reads, "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid [his] face from you, that he will not hear." In many of the psalms, the psalmist pleads that God not be far from him. Sin puts a moral or relational distance between us and God. But it leaves untouched our ontological closeness to God.

Our challenge in confronting atheism is therefore this: to bring those who deny God to repentance and faith, thereby closing the moral gap between them and God. In the end, such moral transformation will always be the work of the Holy Spirit, who imparts God's grace to our lives and thereby leads us to salvation. But note, every act of divine grace presupposes the *means of grace* by which God makes that grace real to us. And that brings us back to the title of this message, "How to Debate an Atheist – If You must." Christian apologetics, in which we not only defend Christianity from the challenges of atheism but also challenge atheism with evidence of God's existence, is one such means of grace.

Because it is a means of divine grace, apologetics must not be dismissed as something Christians can safely ignore. Indeed, throughout the New Testament, Christians are enjoined to defend the faith through rational argument. Thus, Peter urged, "Always be ready to make your defense [*apologia*] to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." (1 Pet. 3:15) Likewise, Paul understood his own ministry as constituting a "defense [*apologia*] and confirmation [*bebaiosis*] of the Gospel." (Phil.

1:7) The Greek *apologia* denotes a legal defense, and the Greek *bebaiosis* means verification or proof.

Rational argument used to be an ally of the Christian faith. It was thought that sound arguments and powerful evidence supported the key claims of the Christian faith. If people rejected the teachings of Christianity, it was because they weren't thinking clearly, and not, as is now commonly supposed, because our heads are telling us one thing and our hearts another. It's worth remembering that until 200 years ago, most people in the West saw the Resurrection of Jesus in historically the same light as the other events of antiquity, such as Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. Christ's Resurrection and Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon were both regarded as equally factual and historical.

Unfortunately, in the 200 years since the Enlightenment, Christians have steadily retreated from seeing their faith as rationally compelling. Instead of being apologists for the faith, we have become apologetic about it. We tend to think that the reasons for rejecting Christianity are at least as strong as those for accepting it. After all, so many "smart people" now reject the faith. Moreover, these "smart people" have developed a veritable arsenal for dismantling the Christian faith, everything from the biblical criticism, which purports to show that the Bible cannot be trusted, to advances in modern science, which purport to show that God's role in nature is dispensable.

The Roman statesman Seneca observed, "If you want a man to keep his head when crisis comes, you must give him some training before it comes." Our secular culture breeds many a crisis of faith. It is common for young people who are enthusiastic about serving God to leave home, attend college, get exposed to faulty teaching, lose their heads, and turn away from the truth of Christianity. People need to be equipped to handle the assaults on heart and mind that they encounter at school, in the workplace, on television, and just about everywhere they look. This is why seminaries must teach apologetics, and this is why I commend Southern Evangelical Seminary.

All that I've said till now is stage-setting, defining the problem of atheism and noting Christian apologetics' pivotal role in redressing it. But what does all this mean practically? How, in real life, are we to engage in the debate over atheism? Atheists speak to us and we must speak to them. They attempt to convince us that no God exists. Or, more precisely, since there's good reason to think no real atheists exist, they attempt to convince us to play their atheist language games, in which we are encouraged to talk as though no God exists even though deep down we all know that he does. Atheism thus attempts to undermine theology in its most fundamental sense. The very word "theology" comes from two Greek roots: *theos*, meaning God, and *logos*, meaning speech act or word. Theology is speaking about God – God talk. Apologetics keeps theology honest by insisting it speak rightly about God. This is the task of apologetics in confronting atheism, to preserve sound Christian theology.

I've debated lots of atheists over the years – one-on-one, in small groups, before large audiences, via radio and television, and on the Internet. Atheists raise four main challenges against Christian theism: the challenge of science, the challenge of history, the

challenge of evil, and the challenge of divine presence. With regard to science, evolution is supposed to show that no intelligence was required to build biological organisms, thus rendering God unnecessary. With regard to history, biblical criticism is supposed to show that the Bible is replete with fanciful tales, thereby ruling out key events in salvation history such as the Resurrection of Christ. With regard to evil, the existence of a good, all-powerful God is supposed to be incompatible with the existence of evil in the world. And finally, with regard to divine presence ... Where is God? If God is the primary fact of reality, why is it so hard to see him? Why is it so hard to discern his presence?

The challenges of science, history, and evil, though serious, have in my view been answered successfully by Christian apologists. A good place to start looking, if you are new to Christian apologetics and need such answers, is a recent anthology I coedited with Mike Licona titled *Evidence for God*. Those who are graduating today will have reflected at length on these three challenges in your course of study at Southern Evangelical Seminary. I want, therefore, to focus here on the fourth challenge, which concerns divine presence. This, it seems to me, is the greatest stumbling block for atheists, and the one that keeps them entrenched in their atheism. This challenge often fails to be articulated, so it is worth exploring here even among expert apologists such as yourselves.

To understand the challenge of divine presence, consider some remarks by Richard Dawkins regarding his visit to Lourdes (see his documentary *The Root of All Evil?*). Lourdes is a Catholic shrine in France where many pilgrims claim to have received miraculous physical healing. Dawkins denies that any miracles of healing have in fact occurred at Lourdes. What's interesting is how he denies the miraculous at Lourdes. He finds at Lourdes many crutches left behind by people who claim to have been healed of infirmities in their legs. This, it would seem, ought to provide some evidence (even if inconclusive) of miraculous healing and thus of a divine (or at least supernatural) presence at Lourdes. But not for Dawkins. Following the 19th century French atheist Anatole France, Dawkins asks why only crutches were left behind but not wooden legs.

Many have asked this same question. Indeed, an entire website with domain name whywontgodhealamputees.com is devoted to it. On this website, one reads,

Does god heal amputees? The Bible clearly promises that God answers prayers. For example, in Mark 11:24 Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." And billions of Christians believe these promises. You can find thousands of books, magazine articles and websites talking about the power of prayer. According to believers, God is answering millions of their prayers every day. So what should happen if we pray to God to restore amputated limbs? Clearly, if God is real, limbs should regenerate through prayer. In reality, they do not. Why not? Because God is imaginary.

Though mistaken in its conclusion, this statement raises an interesting point about the obviousness of divine action in the world. Even in the ministry of Jesus, we find no

persons with missing limbs or missing body parts who get them miraculously replaced. In every instance, however diseased or misshapen, what Jesus heals is there already.

Since all things are possible with God, why doesn't he make himself more obvious, as in restoring limbs to amputees? And since he doesn't make himself more obvious, isn't whywontgodhealamputees.com right in concluding that God doesn't exist at all? What are we to make of this challenge? The problem is that obviousness is not an adequate criterion of divine presence. We can see this by going back to Anatole France's original criticism of the miraculous at Lourdes. Many contemporary atheists, in citing France, suggest that if miracles at Lourdes were real, we would see not just crutches but also wooden legs. Yet Anatole France considered what would happen if we actually did find wooden legs at Lourdes. He wrote:

Happening to be at Lourdes, in August, I paid a visit to the grotto where innumerable crutches were hung up in token of a cure. My companion pointed to these trophies of the sick-room and hospital ward, and whispered in my ear: "One wooden leg would be more to the point." It was the word of a man of sense; but speaking philosophically, the wooden leg would be no whit more convincing than a crutch. If an observer of a genuinely scientific spirit were called upon to verify that a man's leg, after amputation, had suddenly grown again as before, whether in a miraculous pool or anywhere else, he would not cry: "Lo! a miracle." He would say this: "An observation, so far unique, points us to a presumption that under conditions still undetermined, the tissues of a human leg have the property of reorganizing themselves like a crab's or lobster's claws and a lizard's tail, but much more rapidly. Here we have a fact of nature in apparent contradiction with several other facts of the like sort. The contradiction arises from our ignorance, and clearly shows that the science of animal physiology must be reconstituted, or to speak more accurately, that it has never yet been properly constituted."

This is an amazing statement and one that contemporary atheists rarely quote. It shows that no evidence could ever get a hardcore atheist to admit that God exists. In every case, atheists will cite the possibility of alternative naturalistic explanations. Indeed, even if no such explanation is on hand, they will rationalize that no actual miracle has occurred, simply asserting that we are ignorant of the underlying naturalistic causes. Their faith in the power of nature knows no bounds.

Thus, the miracles that atheists often claim would lead them to acknowledge God, if they were to happen, would still not engender faith. How could such events engender faith? The atheist will constantly move the bar higher and higher. As soon as God renders his presence more obvious, it will not be obvious enough – a new level of obviousness will be required. Signs and wonders indicating the divine presence are addictive. Witness the children of Israel in the desert after leaving Egypt. They experienced all the obviousness of divine presence one could ever desire, and still they failed to trust God. That's why, when in Mark 8:11 the Pharisees demanded of Jesus a sign from heaven, Jesus refused to give it.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells of a rich man who ends up in Hades and wants desperately to spare his brothers that same fate. If only someone will rise from the dead and appear to his brothers, urging them to repent, this rich man pleads, then they'll get their acts together and escape the torments he is now experiencing. What is the response to the rich man's plea? Luke 16:31, the final verse of the story, reads: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Perhaps that's why Jesus only appeared to 500 of his followers after his Resurrection and not to the Pharisees, Sadducees, and mob that had him killed.

I've often mused why, in the wisdom of God, Jesus' Resurrection occurred before the advent of video-recording technology. Wouldn't it be great if we could have a video of Jesus' Resurrection and his post-Resurrection appearances? In fact, with Photoshop, animation software, and video-editing, anyone can be made to rise from the dead – at least so it could be made to appear. We are actually on much surer ground believing the Resurrection on the basis of eyewitness testimony by disciples who gave their lives for holding that testimony than on the basis of video-recording technology.

But surely, a flamboyant enough miracle will convince even the most hardened atheist of God's existence, wouldn't it? Consider the miracle that would have convinced the atheist philosopher Norwood Russell Hanson to become a theist:

I'm not a stubborn guy. I would be a theist under some conditions. I'm open-minded.... Okay. Okay. The conditions are these: Suppose, next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world are knocked to our knees by a percussive and ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls, leaves drop from trees, the earth heaves and buckles, buildings topple and towers tumble. The sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light, and just then, as all of the people of this world look up, the heavens open, and the clouds pull apart, revealing an unbelievably radiant and immense Zeus-like figure towering over us like a hundred Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays over the features of his Michelangeloid face, and then he points down, *at me*, and explains for every man, woman and child to hear: "I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be assured Norwood Russell Hanson, that I do most certainly exist!"

Well, that surely would do it. Or would it? Perhaps not. Certainly, a being capable of Hanson's miracle would be far more sophisticated and powerful than we are, but it's not at all clear that such a being would be the transcendent God of Christian theism. Presumably, it's possible for technologically advanced extraterrestrials to provide a freak show that would cause us to take seriously their claims to godhood, much as we Westerners might be able to dazzle aborigines on some remote island into believing that we are gods through the power of our technologies. Dazzle alone, however, doesn't purchase theism. A God who transcends the universe has to be more than a special-effects artist.

In this connection, consider Jesus' response to the Pharisees when asked about the coming of the Kingdom of God. In Luke 17:20-21 we read: "And when he [Jesus] was demanded of the Pharisees when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Because we are made in the image of God, God is closer than close to each of us. Indeed, ontologically speaking, no created thing is closer to our essence than the uncreated God who is the source of our being. Created things may reflect God's glory. But we commune with God not through created intermediaries but through the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who is God himself and is given to every follower of Christ. All miracles involve manipulations of created things. To the unregenerate heart, these can never, by themselves, lead to God. Only God can lead to God.

That said, a key means of grace by which God leads to God is apologetics. Thus, in debating atheists, by all means learn as much as you can about the challenges atheists raise against Christian theism and what are the best apologetic arguments in reply. And by all means, sharpen your critical thinking and rhetorical skills. Moreover, to those who are graduating today from Southern Evangelical Seminary and have honed your apologetic skills throughout your course of study here, use those skills to advance the truth of God's Kingdom.

But do so in love. Realize that the problem with atheism is not the head but the heart. "The fool hath said in his *heart* there is no God." God has already given atheists all they need to believe in him – if only their hearts did not lead them astray. God therefore refuses to indulge in flamboyant displays – signs and wonders – to convince atheists of his existence. It is a truism of counseling psychology that the presenting problem is never the real problem. The various challenges that atheists raise against Christian theism are, in the end, not the real problem. Instead, the real problem is that atheists have, for whatever reason, chosen to deny God and, short of God's grace acting on their lives, are looking for excuses to continue to deny God.

Our attitude as Christian apologists in debating atheists needs therefore to follow Paul's example in 2 Timothy 2:24-26. I close with this passage of Scripture:

The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

May God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us the grace to take these words to heart so that as we engage atheists with the truth of God's word, they encounter not only the wisdom of God but also the love of God. Amen.