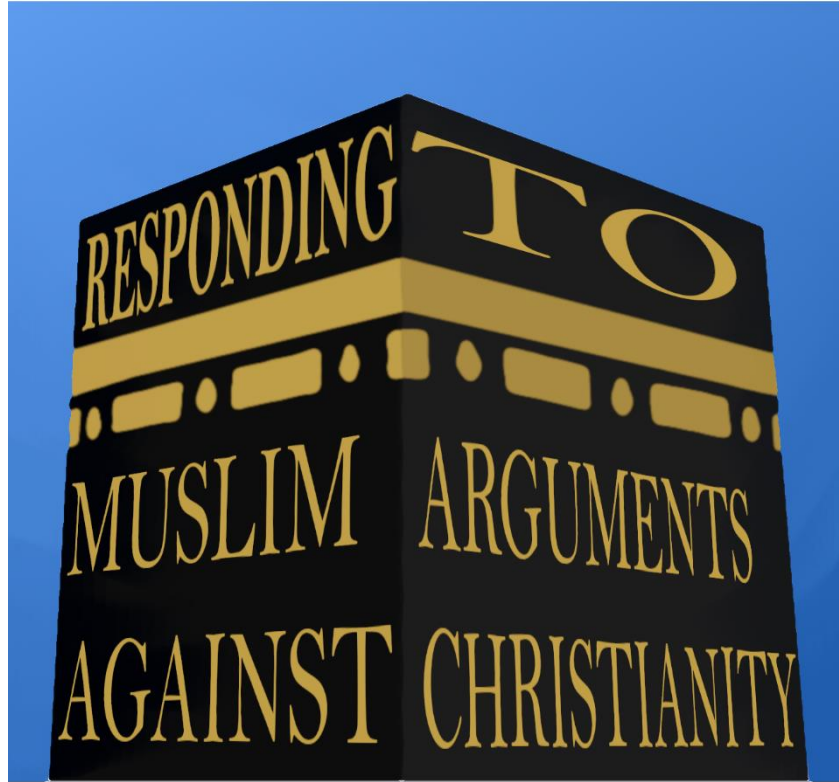


CODY COOK



*Persuasive Answers to
Common Objections*

Responding to Muslim Arguments Against Christianity

Second edition

by

Cody Cook

www.cantus-firmus.com

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Introduction

As a follower of Jesus, I do not desire to misrepresent either Islam or Muslim people. Just because Muslims aren't in my religious tribe doesn't mean I have a free pass to lie about them or simplify their beliefs in the interest of creating a straw man that is easy to knock down. My goal is to encourage Christians and Muslims to dialogue respectfully while honestly highlighting the differences between our religions. Honesty and respect require that we have a better understanding of each other.

This essay will focus on a handful of claims that conservative Muslim apologists often make about Christianity and the New Testament. I am focusing on conservative Muslims in particular for two reasons:

1. because their arguments will be the most common ones Christians will hear, and
2. because they treat the Qur'an especially seriously.

This latter point is important because many of my rebuttals will assume, for the sake of argument, that the Qur'an is, as conservative Muslims see it, a unified whole claiming to be inspired by God. Whether or not this assumption will hold up to scrutiny is a question which we will attend to presently. I will also appeal to highly regarded traditions within Islam about Mohammed and his teaching, called the Hadith, and will also seek to treat these traditions seriously.

It is my hope that this essay will help the Christian reader to have a basic understanding of how Muslims approach Jesus and the New Testament and that the Muslim reader will be challenged to reconsider the validity of the arguments which he probably hears most commonly against the Christian faith.

As a note on format, each section in this essay will begin with a short paraphrase of a common conservative Muslim argument and will then be followed by a Christian response. The claims I will be responding to are:

1. The Bible has become so corrupted that it can't be trusted.
2. The New Testament authors wrote at least four decades after Jesus, so they can't be trusted to be accurate historians.
3. In Mark 10:17-22, Jesus claims that he is not good, but that only God is good. Thus, Jesus was claiming that he is not God. In this same passage, Jesus also claims that the way to salvation is by keeping the commandments. This goes against the Christian belief that salvation comes from Jesus' sacrifice.
4. Paul invented Christianity.
5. In the Bible, God declares: "Understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me" (Isaiah 43:10). This means that Jesus cannot be God since there is only one God.
6. The doctrine of the Trinity is polytheistic.
7. If we are saved by faith, as Christians teach, then we can sin as much as we want.

*Muslim Claim #1:
The Bible has become so corrupted that it can't be trusted.*

The most popular contemporary Muslim view of the Bible is that it contains true teaching and stories which have been corrupted over time. The “Injil,” or the Gospel writing, is claimed by Muslim apologists to be not the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but a special message given by Allah to Jesus which he allegedly wrote down.

While conservative Muslims won't find any scholarly support for their idea that the Gospel is something Jesus wrote down, they will often cite critical New Testament scholars in support of their view that the New Testament has been heavily corrupted. In particular, the agnostic textual critic and professional skeptic Bart Ehrman is a favorite source among Muslims apologists. Ehrman has emphasized that we don't possess the original writings of the apostles but merely copies which are known to have introduced many thousands of variants.

Is this claim of vast corruption true? Well, yes and no.

Because the Greek New Testament books were freely copied for hundreds of years, we possess today roughly 5,800 Greek manuscripts, each representing at least a portion of the New Testament. Because all of these manuscripts were copied by hand, often in uncontrolled environments, differences or “variants” often crept in.

However, all of these manuscript differences help us to trace the history of the text, discover when new readings came in that aren't original, and thus to have a clearer understanding of what the original manuscripts would have said. While variants can sometimes create disputes or confusion about what a verse might have originally said, it is actually the lack of variants which presents a more difficult problem.

How so? Well, the Qur'an has far fewer variants than the New Testaments, but this is because, according to Sahih al-Bukhari 6:61:510, the Muslim leader Uthman rounded up variant Qur'an manuscripts, destroyed them, and produced one version of the Qur'an without variants. From a textual critical perspective, destroying ancient manuscripts because of variants and producing one unified text makes that final form of the text less useful in determining what the original might have looked like. The New Testament we possess today is, therefore, on naturalistic grounds a more trustworthy representation of the original documents—even despite its variants.

As for the difficulties posed by variants, even Bart Ehrman has acknowledged that “most textual variants... have no bearing at all on what a passage means”—the vast majority of variants are differences in spelling, accidental line skips, etc. He also agreed with the Christian textual critic Bruce Metzger that “the essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.”¹ Thus, many variants are obviously not original and nearly all of them are not meaningful. That being said, Ehrman does make much of the few variants that are meaningful and could be original, such as Mark 1:41 where Jesus was, according to a few variants “angry” with a man he healed whereas in most manuscripts he had “compassion” on him. In any case, there are many Christian scholars who are aware of these variants yet do not find them to be a challenge to the notion that our New Testaments today preserve the message of the original manuscripts. In other words, the New Testament has not been heavily corrupted.

But this Muslim claim of corruption has an even bigger problem—it is utterly inconsistent with the

teaching of the Qur'an. The Qur'an teaches, therefore the Muslim believes, that Jesus was a Muslim prophet and that everything he taught would have necessarily agreed with what Mohammed later revealed in the Qur'an. Since the Bible disagrees with the Qur'an, the Muslim concludes, anything in the Bible that disagrees with the Qur'an must be a later corruption.

However, this contradicts what the Qur'an itself says about the New Testament. The Qur'an claims that "no one can change [Allah's] words" (Surah 18:27). Thus, if God revealed what is in the Bible, it must be trustworthy.

Then perhaps God did not reveal the Bible, the Muslim might respond. But the Qur'an does teach explicitly that Allah revealed what is in the Bible:

"O People of the book! You have nothing [of true guidance] till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which was sent down to you from your Lord" (Surah 5:68).

"Say [O Muhammad]: 'We believe in Allah and that which was sent down to us and that which was sent down to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes; and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered'" (Surah 3:84).

"O Muslims! Do not argue with the People of the Book except in the best of ways, save with such of them who are unjust; and say: 'We believe in that which has been sent down to us and that which has been down to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we surrender'" (Surah 29:46).

The Qur'an goes even further and commands Christians to test what Mohammed was saying with what was in their scriptures, meaning the author of the Qur'an believed that the Bible which Christians had at that time (which we know included the four gospels and not the Muslim-theorized book that Jesus allegedly wrote) was inspired and trustworthy:

"Let the People of the Gospel judge by that which Allah had revealed therein. Whoever judges not by that which Allah has revealed; such are the corrupt" (Surah 5:47).

To sum up, Muslims are obligated by the Qur'an to view the Bible as inspired. It is therefore appropriate to judge the Qur'an in light of what the Bible says. The reason for the later Muslim rationalization that the Bible was corrupted can only be that Mohammad incorrectly believed that the Bible agreed with the Qur'an, but once Muslims saw that the Bible teaches what the Qur'an has explicitly denied (the divinity of Jesus, his atoning crucifixion, etc.), an argument had to be made to explain why the Qur'an would speak so highly of the Christian Bible— it must have been referring to an earlier Bible that we have since lost. The Qur'an refutes this later view, as does historical inquiry. There was no such "Muslim" Gospel. As a result, the Muslim who wants to be faithful to the Qur'an's commands must take all of the Bible seriously and cannot just pick and choose what passages to listen to. However, since the Bible contradicts the Qur'an, the Muslim has a serious difficulty on his hands if he asserts that both the Qur'an and the Bible are inspired. He must choose one; the very logic of the Qur'an requires that he choose the Bible.

Muslim Claim #2:

The New Testament authors wrote at least four decades after Jesus, so they can't be trusted to be accurate historians.

Within liberal New Testament criticism, the idea that the Gospels were written after 70 A.D. (more than 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus) is based primarily on a naturalistic understanding of the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark, believed to be the earliest Gospel, records a prophecy from Jesus regarding the destruction of the Jewish temple (an event which occurred in 70 A.D.). Since naturalistic interpreters can't countenance the possibility of actual fulfilled prophecy, they must assume that the "prophecy" was written after the fact so therefore posit a date for the Gospels after the destruction of the temple. There are, in fact, many good reasons to suppose a much earlier date for these writings.² However, even if the later dates are accepted, that wouldn't require that the writings themselves be inaccurate. The Gospel of Luke, which does not claim of itself that it was written by an eyewitness, opens with a note about the author's methodology for collecting information. In it, he emphasizes his reliance on eyewitness testimony and his careful approach to compiling the data he had received:

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

However, even if this weren't the case, the conservative Muslim's argument still fails him because it is a double-edged sword—it cuts both ways. If a Muslim apologist seriously wants to argue that the Gospels can't be trusted because they were written 40+ years after the life of Jesus, why then does he trust the Qur'an's testimony about the life of Jesus when it was written *600 years later* and a great physical distance away from the events which it purports to record?

This point is especially troubling for the Muslim apologist since the Qur'an seems to claim that Jesus wasn't actually crucified,³ even though the vast majority of historians (even very critical historians) consider Jesus' crucifixion to be an undeniable historical reality. As John Dominic Crossan put it, "Jesus' death by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical can ever be."⁴ Bart Ehrman, the darling of Muslim apologists (when he's criticising the conservative view of the New Testament, anyway), even wrote that, "it is a historical fact that some of Jesus' followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead soon after his execution."⁵ That Muslim apologists will claim that the New Testament can't be trusted to be historically reliable on the basis of a few decades of distance between it and the original events, but will not make the same claim of the much later Qur'an even though it denies an event considered to be historical bedrock even by secular scholars, is irrefutable evidence of a double standard in Muslim apologetics.

Muslim apologists assume that the Qur'an is divine in origin, so there is never any need to question its claims, even if they would be considered incredibly flimsy on historical grounds. And yet Christians are told that they must defend their supernatural beliefs using the most highly naturalistic standards. This self-serving measure violates the command in the Qur'an to be fair and honest in the standards one uses:

"Woe unto those who give short measure, those who, when they are to receive their due from people, demand that it be given in full but when they have to measure or weigh whatever they owe to others, give less than what is due. Do they not know that they are bound to be raised from the dead (and called to account) on an awesome Day, the Day when all men shall stand before the Sustainer of all the worlds" (Surah 83:1-6)?

For the Muslim apologist, the New Testament is held to the highest scrutiny based on the analysis of naturalistically biased unbelievers. The Qur'an can never be treated in such a fashion. As the Christian apologist James White⁶ is known for saying, "inconsistency is the sign of a failed argument."

Muslim Claim #3:

In Mark 10:17-22, Jesus claims that he is not good, but that only God is good. Thus, Jesus was claiming that he is not God. In this same passage, Jesus also claims that the way to salvation is by keeping the commandments. This goes against the Christian belief that salvation comes from Jesus' sacrifice.

Here is the passage in question:

“And as he [Jesus] was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’ And he said to him, ‘Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.’ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:17-22).

Muslims and other skeptics often seize on this passage since Jesus counters the young man’s label of Jesus as “good teacher” with the claim that only God is good. In addition, Jesus goes on to give a list of commandments to follow in response to the question, “what must I do to inherit eternal life,” thus seemingly rejecting the Christian notion that salvation comes through Jesus’ sacrifice and not by a series of works on our part.

During a recent conversation with a Muslim brother on Facebook, this passage was referenced, and he gave this argument:

“Jesus did not say that to have the eternal life of paradise, man should believe in him as Almighty God or worship him as God, or believe that Jesus would die for his sins. On the contrary he said that the path to salvation was through keeping the commandments. It is indeed striking to note the difference between the words of Jesus Christ and the Christian dogma of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus.”

Let’s tease apart these arguments, though.

First Jesus’ claim that only God is good. Logically, this can be taken in two different ways:

1. Jesus is not good, so he can’t be God.
2. Jesus is actually good, so he must be God.

The first option assumes that Jesus is a mere man who wants to clearly distinguish himself from the majesty of God. The second option assumes that when Jesus asked the young man why he called him good, this was a rhetorical device meant to encourage deeper thinking about who Jesus was and not a denial of his divine identity. Notice that Jesus does not explicitly deny that he is good, but only asks why the man would call him good knowing that only God is good.

If there are two interpretations possible, which is the most probable? Simply by reading Mark’s broader context, it becomes clear. Who is Mark claiming that Jesus is? A few passages that deal with similar themes should suffice to answer this question:

“[Jesus] said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, ‘Why do you question these things in your hearts?’

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the paralytic— ‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home’” (Mark 2:5-11).

Mark recounts a question that is asked—”who can forgive sins but God alone?”—and it is a valid question. Only God can forgive sins, because God is good and is ultimately the one whom we sin against. But if Jesus can forgive sins, who does that make him? To prove that he can forgive sins, Jesus heals the man’s paralysis.

In Mark 4:40, Mark recounts another question which is never answered, but which can easily be answered by anyone paying attention. When Jesus commands that a storm at sea be calmed, his disciples say to each other, “who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” Who indeed?⁷

Mark gives us another unanswered rhetorical question in his 12th chapter:

“And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, ‘How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son’” (Mark 12:35-37)?

While Jesus does not answer the question directly, it is nevertheless clear that he is implying that he is David’s Lord.

We see therefore that “why do you call me good?” is not the only rhetorical question asked about Jesus in Mark’s Gospel. And if we read it the way that Mark intended us to, we will understand the answer: Jesus can be called good because he is God.

As you will recall, my friend, like many conservative Muslims, also claimed that “the path to salvation [is] through keeping the commandments,” and that this was also what Jesus was teaching. While the Qur’an does insist that our good and bad deeds will be weighed on judgment day, Bukhari also tells us that Mohammed said, “the good deeds of any person will not make him enter Paradise” (i.e., none can enter Paradise through his good deeds) and that Allah must bestow mercy for someone to be saved.⁸

The Muslim must therefore be very careful when interpreting these words of Jesus, lest they go beyond what even Mohammed would view as appropriate—even Mohammed claimed that it was not good works that actually save someone (though they play a part) but God’s grace.

But there is another issue here that the modern Muslim has chosen to ignore—context. Because the Muslim has decided that he is at liberty to determine what Jesus *really* said and didn’t say, and to cherry pick the verses in the New Testament that *he* thinks are authentic, he feels quite comfortable ignoring the context. Both the context of this passage, the book of Mark itself, and of the rest of the Gospels paint a very different picture than the Muslim asserts.

Immediately following the passage in question, we find Jesus’ interpretation of what had just happened: The man was rich and he loved his possessions more than God. Jesus summed up his situation thusly: “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” (10:23).

The disciples, having accepted the common view of their time that those who were rich must be rich because God favored them, found this assessment to be shocking. If the rich couldn’t be saved, who

could? Jesus' answer:

“With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God” (10:27).

So, Jesus was *not* saying that works were what saved someone, but that we are far too sinful to save ourselves—it is, in fact, *impossible* for us to do so. God must do the work.

To summarize, this passage, when read in its context, makes it clear that salvation is by the grace of God—a God who was revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

*Muslim Claim #4:
Paul invented Christianity.*

Muslim apologists, like many revisionists who try to hold onto Jesus while still rejecting Christianity, tend to blame many things they don't like in Christianity (such as the idea that Jesus was divine or that salvation comes to man by God's grace through man's faith in Christ's sacrifice) on the apostle Paul. This is partly why in the last section I discussed the deity of Jesus without ever appealing to Paul's writings.

However, if I had desired to quote Paul on this topic, that wouldn't have made my arguments any less valid. This is because Paul was extended the right hand of fellowship by the apostles and his beliefs were confirmed by them to be valid. Indeed, Bart Ehrman, the aforementioned skeptical New Testament scholar who is appealed to by Muslims everywhere, defended Paul's connection to the apostles in an interview on *The Infidel Guy Show* on the topic "Who Changed the New Testament and Why?" (dated December 05, 2007): "We have an author who actually knew Jesus' relatives and knew his disciples... Paul."

Ehrman also went on to say that he has no reason to doubt, for example, Paul's relationship to James, the brother of Jesus:

"It's not an embellishment that Paul met with James in Jerusalem... If you're saying that there are people who doubt that, Paul, for example, knew James in Jerusalem... who doubts that? ... I've never heard of anybody who doubts it."

The earliest record of Jesus' first followers is the Book of Acts, a book included in the New Testament. It records that Paul's mission and doctrine were supported by Jesus' original disciples. Ehrman describes the Book of Acts' account of Paul and the disciples thusly:

"When you read the book of Acts there is no ambiguity whatsoever about how Paul relates to these people. He is introduced to them by Barnabas and they immediately welcome him, after some initial hesitancy... Of yet greater importance, in the book of Acts, Paul's entire mission to the Gentiles is endorsed with a unified voice by the Jerusalem apostles."⁹

However, Ehrman goes on to argue that Paul in his letters suggests that there was more tension between he and the Jerusalem Church than the Book of Acts lets on:

"You get a very different view of things from Paul. To be fair – and to avoid being too one sided – Paul does on a number of occasions claim that his views are precisely those of the apostles before him (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:22-24; 15:3-5). But there are instances where it is quite clear that Paul and the others do not get along or see eye-to-eye on issues of fundamental importance (in contrast to Acts). The key example has to do with Paul's conflict with Peter in Antioch [over Jewish and gentile fellowship], as narrated in Galatians 2."

However, even if the controversy spoken of in Galatians 2 was as significant and unresolved as Ehrman seems to believe it was, it doesn't change the fact that Paul records for us the doctrine that the disciples believed and told him, and which they encouraged him to teach to the gentiles.

Paul claims this as the substance of the gospel message the disciples taught him:

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

In other words, Jesus' true crucifixion which resulted in a death he died in order to save humanity from our sin and its consequences was the gospel message that Jesus' disciples taught Paul shortly after Jesus' ascension to heaven.

Paul mentions in another place a teaching of Jesus that the disciples shared with him, and the core underlying doctrine of the previous passage is in this teaching as well:

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:23-26).

In other words, the true death and resurrection of Jesus, along with its consequences for our salvation, is the key message that the disciples were teaching immediately after Jesus ascended to the Father. Then, after sharing this doctrine with Paul, Jesus' disciples sent him to share it with the world:

“and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” (Galatians 2:9).

These ideas are central to Christianity but rejected by Islam. Paul did not invent them. He merely passed them along.

Muslim Claim #5:

In the Bible, God declares: “Understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me” (Isaiah 43:10). This means that Jesus cannot be God since there is only one God.

Part of the issue here is the fundamental misunderstanding that Muslims have of the Trinity (see Muslim Claim #6). Christians are not claiming that Jesus is a god that came after Allah, but that there is one eternal God which manifests in three discrete persons. As such, Isaiah 43:10 simply doesn't rebut the Christian view. It would certainly rebut the Mormon's polytheistic view of God, and perhaps even the Jehovah's Witness view which sees Jesus as a second lesser god, but it does not stand in contradiction to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Moreover, since the Muslim is obligated by his Qur'an to treat the New Testament as having a divine source, it is worthwhile to look at how the New Testament uses this passage.

In John 8:58, Jesus actually references this passage when talking about Himself:

“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I AM [in Greek, ‘ego eimi’]” (NASB).

This wording matches the Greek version of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint or LXX) in Isaiah 43:10-11. The Greek Old Testament is quoted numerous times throughout the New Testament, so its wording was familiar to its authors. In the Septuagint of Isaiah 43:10-11, we read:

“...understand that I am he [in Greek “ego eimi”– I AM]: before me there was no other God, and after me there shall be none.”¹⁰

Jesus cites this passage in order to claim that he is to be identified with the one and only God. In the next verse, his Jewish opponents demonstrated that they understood his meaning by picking up stones to stone him.

*Muslim Claim #6:
The doctrine of the Trinity is polytheistic.*

I often see this claim formulated as a joke: “If you think the Trinity is monotheistic then you would probably also believe that there is only one member in the three musketeers.”

Before we can respond, we have to define our terms. Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God. Do Christians deny this claim? Not at all. The Christian view of the Trinity is that there is one God who is composed of three necessary, co-eternal persons. These persons share equally the exact same nature; one nature that necessitates that there be three persons expressing it. One way this has often been explained is that the one divine being (God) is composed of three persons, or that God consists of three whos and one what.

But isn't this tritheism? No. For Christian theology to be positing tritheism, it would have to argue that there are three distinct divine beings having differing natures. But Christians believe in one divine nature that is shared equally among three divine persons. Part of the confusion here might be that the Muslim is putting her own experience onto God's experience. Since in her own experience of reality there are no examples of three persons sharing one being, the idea seems nonsensical.

Of course, when it comes to the Muslim doctrine of God, she would not want us applying our limited experience to God. Muslims believe, along with Christians, that God is timeless, immaterial, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. However, the Muslim can point to no other examples from human experience of a being like this. Does that mean that the notion of God is nonsensical? Certainly not. An idea being complex or difficult to understand is not an argument against it.

No human can be everywhere at once, but God can. Likewise, in human experience, where there is one human being, there is by definition only one human person. Humans are unitarian beings. In contrast, God is a Trinitarian being, composed of three persons. The one being of God is communal in nature, meaning that the one being of God necessarily manifests in three persons.

In other words, the quip about three musketeers commits a category error. It confuses being with person. In the Muslim mind, these might be the same thing, but it is dishonest to use your own definitions for other people's words and then accuse them of being irrational. Instead, you must show that there is inconsistency in their own system using their own definitions.

The New Testament makes clear identifications of Jesus with God, while also distinguishing him from the Father (see for instance John chapter 1). It also insists upon the oneness of God (Mark 12:29), and the distinct personhood and divinity of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4, John 16:13, Matthew 28:19). Just because the Trinity is foreign to us doesn't make it false. If we believe, as the Qur'an teaches, that the New Testament was given by God, we must in fact accept it as true.

Muslim Claim #7:

If we are saved by faith, as Christians teach, then we can sin as much as we want.

A comment by the protestant reformer Martin Luther is often seized upon by Muslim apologists and presented as evidence that Christianity, and in particular protestantism, entails that active, willful sin is okay since Christ paid for our sins. This comment was in a letter Luther wrote to Phillip Melancthon:

“If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong [in some translations, “sin boldly”], but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God’s glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner.”¹¹

On the surface, Luther could be understood to be encouraging Christians to sin. However, Luther also emphasized the necessity of doing good works as a demonstration that someone is truly in Christ:

“For if you do not give forth such proofs of faith, it is certain that your faith is not right. Not that good works are commanded us by this Word; for where faith in the heart is right, there is no need of much commanding good works to be done; they follow of themselves. But the works of love are only an evidence of the existence of faith.”¹²

What, then, was Luther trying to say? Essentially, his point was this—Jesus came to deliver us from our sins, and our sins are heavy. They are offensive. They are horrible. We are real sinners with real sins. To undermine this reality is to undermine our need for a savior. As such, we should not minimize the weight of our sin, but acknowledge just how sinful it is in order to glorify the savior who paid for our iniquities. We should not deny that we are sinners but let our “sins be strong.”

However, even if Luther had falsely stated that Christians should keep on sinning, his false understanding would not constitute the Christian view of faith and works, or even the protestant view, but only his. As a result, the tendency of Muslim apologists to bring this up is simply a non sequitur—an argument which conclusion (the conclusion that Christianity encourages sinning) does not follow. But as noted above, this invalid argument not only suffers from a bogus conclusion, but also from false premises.

That being said, it is true that the protestant tendency to strongly distinguish between justification (being forgiven because of Christ’s work) and sanctification (a change in behavior and attitude toward holiness because we have been forgiven) can sometimes send a confusing message to the uninitiated that salvation has nothing to do with doing good works or being holy.

The apostle Paul also had to deal with this objection from Jews in his day who misunderstood the Christian proclamation of forgiveness of sins, but he denied their charge:

“And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying” (Romans 3:8).

He then dealt with the charge head on:

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ...We were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life... For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:1-11).

For Paul, the central reality of Christian faith was that Christ had joined Himself to us. As such, Christians exist *in Christ*. This new existence saves us from the consequences of sin (death) and the holiness of Christ flows through to us. Justification and sanctification both flow from being united with Christ.

Jesus (in Matthew 7:16) emphasized that a tree of a certain kind will produce fruit consistent with its nature. An apple tree, for instance, will produce apples. As a result, that which is joined to Christ will produce the good works of Christ. Later, Jesus made this direct comparison:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit... Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:1-5).

By under-emphasizing the biblical doctrine of unity with Christ, protestants sometimes unfortunately create the impression that Christianity is all about being justified, and that everything else is just an added bonus. But in reality, justification, sanctification, and our future resurrection are all tied up in our being one with Christ—the fundamental reality of salvation. As such, perhaps the Muslim apologist can be forgiven for this misunderstanding, but it is most certainly a misunderstanding.

Conclusion

The most popular arguments used by Muslim apologists seem to have one major thing in common--inconsistency. Every argument we've responded to in this essay is either based on taking words out of context, using arguments that, if successful, also eviscerate the claims of Islam, or else flows from a total lack of interest in carefully representing what Christians actually believe.

I hope that I have been fair in representing the arguments of conservative Muslim apologists and that my responses have been both fair and persuasive. I appreciate you, the reader, for taking the time to understand what Christians believe (if you are a Muslim) or what Muslims believe about your faith (if you're a Christian). I hope that by listening to each other carefully, we can elevate the dialogue and remove the fear and straw man representations that block genuine understanding.

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- 1 Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, p. 252, 1st Ed Paperback.
 - 2 See, for example, F.F. Bruce's [The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?](#) and A.T. Robertson's [A Harmony of the Gospels](#) for arguments for early dates. One important piece of evidence has to do with Luke's sequel to his Gospel, entitled *The Acts of the Apostles*. This sequel, which details important early church events, ends abruptly with details from the early 60s, leaving out major events in the lives of Paul and Peter which would occur in the mid 60s. This suggests that Luke, which precedes Acts was also written in the early 60s. Since it is generally agreed that Mark and Matthew were written *before* Luke, this places their dates of composition even earlier. In addition, Richard Bauckham's book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* gives compelling argumentation for the Gospel writings as containing original eyewitness sources that doesn't require that the writings themselves be especially early.
 - 3 See Surah 4:157.
 - 4 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Kindle Edition.
 - 5 In his book [The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings](#). My citation, however, is a quotation of the book in William Lane Craig's [Reasonable Faith](#), p. 350.
 - 6 Whose book, [What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an](#), is highly recommended by this author for its depth, quality of thinking, and honest attempts at fairness.
 - 7 The answer would have been particularly obvious to Mark's readers, who were steeped in the writings of the Hebrew Bible: "As various scholars, both conservative and liberal, have observed, the Gospel accounts of Jesus walking on the sea allude rather clearly to the account in Exodus 14-15 of the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea. The Israelites walked in 'the midst of the sea' (Exod. 14:16, 22, 27, 29 NASB) and crossed to the other side (Exod. 15:16). Likewise, the disciples' boat was 'in the middle of the sea' (Mark 6:47 NASB) and they also 'crossed over' the sea (Mark 6:53). A strong wind from the east blew across the Red Sea and, close to daybreak, the Egyptians found it increasingly difficult to drive their chariots as they attempted to follow the Israelites (Exod. 14:21, 24-25). Likewise, an adverse wind blew across the Sea of Galilee and, based on the geography, it also would have been blowing from the east; this wind also blew close to daybreak and made it difficult for the disciples to row their boat (Mark 6:48).' According to Mark, the disciples had the same problem as the Egyptians: their hearts were hardened (Exod. 14:4, 8, 17; Mark 6:52)" (Bowman, Robert M., and J. Ed. Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ*, Kindle Edition.)
 - 8 Bukhari, Volume 7, Book 70, Hadith 577.
 - 9 <http://ehrmanblog.org/paul-and-acts-part-three-for-members/>
 - 10 Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, *English Translation of the Greek Septuagint*.
 - 11 <http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Luther-Sin-Boldly.html> (emphasis mine)
 - 12 Martin Luther, *Through the Year with Martin Luther*, 2007, Hendrickson Publishers, p. 380.