

## The Problem of Saul

This is an excerpt from a larger work in progress. The statements by "Presuppositionalist" are actual quotes from an individual who corresponded with me some time ago.

**Thesis:** *If the Christian god wants human beings (whether all or only some) to believe in it, then it should reveal itself to them in an obvious way, as the book of Acts says it did to Saul on the road to Damascus; otherwise non-belief in such a being is warranted given the lack of evidence, and it can even be pointed out that such a god is inconsistent since it claims to be no respecter of persons.*

Presuppositionalist response:

God is sovereign and is under no obligation to reveal himself to any man in the way he revealed himself to Saul. Indeed, God is no respecter of persons, and Saul by no means merited or deserved the revelation he received. It served God's purposes to meet Saul on the road to Damascus; so too, it serves God's purposes not to reveal himself today in the same ways as he did to Paul, Moses, etc.

None of these points answers the objection that has been raised, and all appear to be little more than an effort to subdue doubts that the objection raises in the mind of someone who wants to believe Christianity is true. For instance, to claim that "God is sovereign and is under no obligation" to do one thing or another, is irrelevant, since the objection neither charges nor requires that the Christian god has any obligation to begin with. The question is not what this god is *obliged* to do, but what it *wants* to be the case in the world it allegedly created. If the Christian god *wants* human beings today to believe in it, why not do for them what it allegedly did for Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus according to the book of Acts?

Recall that Saul was not merely a doubter or non-believer, but an active persecutor who aggressively pursued the Christians of his day. He was what today's believers would call in unison a hostile enemy of the body of Christ. The objection does not make pronouncements about why the Christian god might have chosen to reveal itself to Saul, other than that it simply chose to do so, nor does it suggest that it had any *obligation* to do so. The objection is wholly compatible with the view that the Christian god could have chosen *not* to reveal itself to Saul. All the objection does is point out the logical course of action given a desired end. In other words, it is a simple application of the principle of final causation: the end determines the means. It does not stipulate that the end in question is actually desired by any supernatural deity; indeed, if there is no god then it could hardly desire to reveal itself to anyone. But if such a being did exist and it wanted men to believe in it and accept its sacrificed son as their Lord and Savior, what better way to accomplish this end than to reveal itself in an obvious way before them, just as the book of Acts says it did for Saul of Tarsus?

The objection solidly rests on what Christians should be more than willing to take as biblical precedent, and, as mentioned above, upon the principle of final causation: a desired end determines the most fruitful and surefire means of achieving it. What we are expected to believe is that, instead of appearing before us as it allegedly did for Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, the Christian god actually prefers to send fallible men armed with flimsy arguments and no objective evidence to go through the hit-or-miss motions dictated by Christ's "great commission." This, we are told to believe, is the preference of a loving god which does not play favorites. On top of this, believers themselves - the ones who come to us with these flimsy arguments and lack of evidence - claim that they were moved to belief by an invisible "Holy Spirit" which "worked" in them a faith and desire to know this god, quite different from Saul's experience. The biblical precedent of Saul's conversion by means of a personal self-revelation of Jesus in empirical form remains confined to the pages of the storybook and is denied to those who exist today, regardless of whether or not they end up "believing." And while they claim, contrary to what we're supposed to believe about Saul of Tarsus, that their belief is the result of the moving of an invisible magic spirit which somehow influences their minds in some fundamental but poorly explained manner, it is a striking coincidence how many of these same individuals were raised up in the Christian tradition from their youth. The claim that the spirit of the Christian god somehow "moves" in minds of believers, simply does not ring true, and all it has going for it is personal testimony, i.e., an unsupportable claim. Unfortunately, it reduces the Christian claim to the same level as other religious claims: the believer is unable to show how one can reasonably distinguish between what he calls "God" and what he may merely be imagining.

In response to the objection, it is pointed out that “Saul by no means merited or deserved the revelation he received,” but according to the story of his conversion, he got a private visit from this god all the same. This, mind you, from an omnipotent being which is claimed to have “so loved the world” that it gave its only begotten son (cf. John 3:16), and is claimed not to be given to partiality toward any of its creatures (cf. Acts 10:34). Pointing out that Saul did not deserve a personal revelation, does not address the objection. On the contrary, it only makes the matter all the more complicated for the apologist. For now he has to reckon with the claim that the Christian god does not play favorites while at the same time choosing to reveal itself to one individual (one who was actively hostile toward the church in fact) but expecting the same devotion from everyone else.

Saying that “it served God’s purposes to meet Saul on the road to Damascus” also does not address the issue, for it is already granted that the Christian god had a purpose in revealing itself to Saul of Tarsus by granting that it has the ability and the choice to do so. It could likewise have a purpose in revealing itself to human beings of today as well. The objection does not require that the Christian god act without purpose. Indeed, if it exists and desires that men believe and worship it, the purpose in revealing itself to modern human beings would be, among other possibilities, to make its existence incontestably certain to those individuals to whom it reveals itself. That it does not do this is consistent with the premise that it does not in fact exist to begin with.

On this account, the Christian god strikes me as either non-existent or wholly indifferent to the plight of men. Moreover, the very idea that an immortal, indestructible and perfect being would have any purpose to begin with is conceptually specious. Such a being would certainly have no *need* to act for any purpose, for it wouldn’t have any deficiency to overcome. To say it has needs would only imply that it is somehow incomplete, and that it needs to take action in order to secure something that makes its existence possible, as in the case with biological organisms (such as human beings). In response to this, apologists seek to dumb the matter down to the level of a mere desire rather than a need: the Christian god’s purposes are based on its desires (wishes and wants), not needs that it must satisfy in order to sustain itself or any attribute it might possess. But if such a being were to have any wants, wishes or desires which could provide a basis for any purpose it might set before itself, they would be purely arbitrary. Here apologists prefer to call their god’s purposes “mysterious,” which is a euphemistic signal to shut down all inquiry in preference for “just believing.” At best they can only hope to appeal to passages like Psalm 115:3, which suggest that pleasure of the moment is the final arbiter of their god’s choices and actions, all the while ignoring the fact that the characteristics they attribute to their god would mean that it could refrain from all choices and actions for all eternity, and still be what it is.

All this suggests that it is men, having adopted a worldview philosophically based on [the primacy of consciousness](#) and allegorically based on the narratives of a storybook, who are in charge of a god that exists only in their imaginations as they scramble to work out the implications of the assertions they make in describing what they claim to worship.

Presuppositionalist:

This objection intimates that God has not already provided sufficient revelation of himself to all men.

That depends on what one considers “sufficient revelation.” Who determines what is “sufficient” when it comes to something labeled “revelation”? “Sufficient” for what exactly? This is not explained. Was “sufficient revelation” available at the time Saul of Tarsus was supposedly persecuting Christian believers? How would one determine this? Saul had the testimony of the believers he personally persecuted - some of whom could have been eyewitnesses to the resurrection if we go by the accounts - and that was presumably not sufficient. If the testimony of eyewitnesses or their immediate comrades is not sufficient, why suppose that a 2000-year-old storybook is sufficient?

Believers of course reserve the right to say what they choose to say in response to such questions, and posture themselves as speaking for their god. That’s fine - they can imagine and say whatever they want. But notice how the apologist has to keep back-pedaling on this question and dragging it off to irrelevant matters. Today’s non-believers did not invent the example of Saul of Tarsus being converted on his way to Damascus. If Christianity wants to keep Paul, they have to deal with the implications that the story of his conversion introduces. But this is something that believers tend to shove under the rug and ignore. If it were the case that “God’s revelation of himself” were sufficient at the time Saul was persecuting believers, then the personal appearance paid to Saul by Jesus would be superfluous and, worse, all the more an instance of “respecting persons.” And if it were not sufficient, then whose fault is that? Saul’s? If so, he sure got redeemed in a jiff!

And who is to determine whether something is sufficient for another human being? Does the believer reserve for himself a place of privilege here, claiming that in spite of his poor answers to objections raised against his god-belief,

its "revelation" is nevertheless sufficient anyway?

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Conversion of Saul](#), [Excerpts](#)

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [12:00 PM](#)

#### 4 Comments:

[Peter](#) said...

Dawson, Dawson. I leave blogging behind for a couple of years, I come back, and I find you're still reasoning in a circle. What's going on?!

By the way, who took my old domain? (<http://corneliusvantil.blogspot.com>) Now it's "Raul, Raul, Raul" or something?

Anyways, as to your thesis, let me just make a few points. First, you write about the thesis, "... the objection neither charges nor requires that the Christian god has any obligation to begin with." Yet, the thesis states: "... it *should* reveal itself to them in an obvious way... ." In an intellectually sober and fair moment, I think you'd admit you're sending conflicting messages here.

Second, you send another conflicting message since the thesis places God *under obligation*, contrary to your claim, to reveal Himself in a particular manner - "... as the book of Acts says it did to Saul ... ."

Third, the thesis says, "... otherwise non-belief in such a being is warranted given the lack of evidence ... ." As a Christian I grant the claim that non-belief in something is warranted if there is no evidence. But when you assume that there is a lack of evidence for the existence of God, you're reasoning in a circle. If God exists, then He is under no obligation from anyone but Himself, then He has revealed Himself obviously (Romans 1:18-20), then all men know God (though many suppress the truth in unrighteousness). So you can only say that there is no warrant for believing in God if you already assume He doesn't exist -- which is the very thing is dispute, and thus you reason in a circle.

Fourth, about a little more than a week ago or so, I began work on a series called "Christianity vs. atheism and the burden of proof." It's still a work in progress, but it does address, though perhaps not directly, your thesis here.

Fifth, there were many who saw Jesus and his miracles and yet rejected him. Disbelief in God is an ethical problem, which is to say that people disbelieve God because of their sin, not because of a lack of evidence. People need the God's Spirit to change their hearts -- to "convert" them to embrace God.

Finally, Jesus Christ may not reveal himself to you like he did to Saul (the Apostle Paul), but you can certainly read about it. It was quite amazing, don't you think?

(P.S. I'm now going by "Peter" instead of "Christian Theist").

[July 02, 2007 7:23 PM Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Peter wrote: "Dawson, Dawson. I leave blogging behind for a couple of years, I come back, and I find you're still reasoning in a circle. What's going on?!"

Hi Peter,

Welcome back to my blog. It's good to hear from you again. I had wondered what happened to you.

Peter: "By the way, who took my old domain? (<http://corneliusvantil.blogspot.com>) Now it's "Raul, Raul, Raul" or something?"

Yes, I remember.

Peter: "Anyways, as to your thesis, let me just make a few points. First, you write about the thesis, "... the objection neither charges nor requires that the Christian god has any obligation to begin with." Yet, the thesis

states: "... it should reveal itself to them in an obvious way... ." In an intellectually sober and fair moment, I think you'd admit you're sending conflicting messages here."

There is no conflict here. There is a profound difference that you're overlooking. I'll clarify. When I point out that "the objection neither charges nor requires that the Christian god has any obligation *to begin with*," what I mean is that the objection neither assumes nor requires that the Christian god has any a priori *duty* to save men, or to take measures which ensure their salvation. The objection, as I made clear in my paper (so I thought), simply grants the benefit of the doubt that the Christian god is capable of logically determining the best course of action given any hypothetical goal(s) one might attribute to it. This is not a matter of duty, but a matter of final causation. I.e., if outcome X is its goal (e.g., to save some or all men), then course of action Y (e.g., appearing before them, as given in the biblical precedent of the story of Saul and his fabled encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus) is the most logical course of action to take to ensure outcome X. The objection grants the Christian god the ability to determine such logical consequences, but does not in any way hold that the Christian is morally obliged to pursue outcome X. Given these distinctions, the word "should" the thesis statement could easily be replaced by words to the effect of "the logical thing to do would be to..."

Peter: "Second, you send another conflicting message since the thesis places God under obligation, contrary to your claim, to reveal Himself in a particular manner - "... as the book of Acts says it did to Saul ... ."

Actually, I don't do this, the biblical precedent does this for me, not as a matter of moral obligation as explained above, but as a) a course of action that the Christian god has allegedly followed in the past, and b) as a course of action best determined by the principle of final causation, as I explained.

Peter: "Third, the thesis says, "... otherwise non-belief in such a being is warranted given the lack of evidence ... ." As a Christian I grant the claim that non-belief in something is warranted if there is no evidence." But when you assume that there is a lack of evidence for the existence of God, you're reasoning in a circle."

I would only be reasoning in a circle at that point if my intended outcome was to prove that there is no evidence for the Christian god. But I don't have to prove the non-existence of something that does not exist, so mere observation is sufficient, and mere observation is not an instance of reasoning in a circle. Christians are free to produce whatever they consider as "evidence" for the existence of their god, and I am free to examine it and follow my judgment about what they present. You're not expecting me to replace my judgment with your own, are you?

Peter: "If God exists, then He is under no obligation from anyone but Himself, then He has revealed Himself obviously (Romans 1:18-20), then all men know God (though many suppress the truth in unrighteousness)."

Well, if one takes the story of Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus seriously, one could argue that the Christian god revealed itself obviously to Saul himself. But it would not follow from this - even if we did take the story in Acts seriously - that the same god revealed itself obviously to anyone or everyone else. Now, if you have something more substantial to go on than merely the *claim* that this god has revealed itself obviously to everyone, then please, don't hold back. But merely claiming that "everyone already knows God," as many Christians have asserted to me, is empty if it's not backed up by something more substantial than the original claim found in Acts chapter 1. The Lahu could just as easily claim that their Geusha has obviously revealed itself to all men, and I see no reason to suppose the Christian apologist has anything more substantial going for his religious beliefs than the Lahu has for his. The parenthetical disclaimer "though many suppress the truth in unrighteousness" is simply a license for the believer to assume dishonesty on the part of those who don't believe. It would be easy to build such a disclaimer into such a set of beliefs. But the result is that it simply multiplies the apologist's burdens of proof rather than moving him any closer to prove any. Now he has three claims to prove: i) that his god exists, ii) that his god has revealed itself obviously to everyone, and iii) that some to whom it has allegedly revealed itself "suppress the truth in unrighteousness." Multiplying your own burdens of proof is not a very wise procedure to follow if your goal is to persuade.

Peter: "So you can only say that there is no warrant for believing in God if you already assume He doesn't exist -- which is the very thing is dispute, and thus you reason in a circle."

This statement only exposes your lack of familiarity with my writings. I have presented ample justification for rejecting god-belief, and it is certainly not circular in nature. My point in the present paper is that non-belief is justified given the New Testament's own model conversion of Saul. In your response, you've given no reason why one should not expect the Christian god to appear before those it wants to save, à la Saul of Tarsus. But there are many other points I have raised. In the present paper, I have already alluded to one, namely the fact that believers

offer nothing in the interest of distinguishing what they call “God” from something they may merely be imagining. Given the lack of any objective means by which I as an outsider to your belief can reliably distinguish between what you call “God” and what you may very well be imagining, the only reasonable course is to be honest and admit that there may be no significant distinction. Moreover, I have shown time and time again that religious god-belief stands on an invalid philosophical basis, namely the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, which contradicts itself. I have seen no defender of Christianity overcome this point.

Peter: “Fourth, about a little more than a week ago or so, I began work on a series called “Christianity vs. atheism and the burden of proof.” It’s still a work in progress, but it does address, though perhaps not directly, your thesis here.”

I’d be happy to examine it if you want to send it to me, or publish it on the web. But until then, it doesn’t do much good. I have many works in progress myself, but until they’re up, they don’t amount to much in terms of my discussions with others. So all I can say is, bring it on!

Peter: “Fifth, there were many who saw Jesus and his miracles and yet rejected him.”

That’s what the stories allege. But can you produce any firsthand testimony from those who allegedly fit these criteria? Can you find the writings of someone who testifies, for instance, “I witnessed the miracles of Jesus of Nazareth, and they were in fact miraculous performances, but I rejected his claim to godhood anyway”? Can you? Or, does the claim that there were such individuals remain confined to the pages of the Christian storybook? If the latter is the case, then it really does no good; anyone could make such claims, and anyone (such as yourself) could easily come along and repeat them. The point is not to regurgitate claims, but to substantiate them. And that’s what you have yet to do.

Peter: “Disbelief in God is an ethical problem,”

If disbelief in invisible magic beings is a consequence of simply being honest to oneself, whose “problem” is that? I certainly do not have a problem with people choosing to be honest. I made the choice to be honest, Peter. The outcome is that I do not believe what Christianity teaches. Time and time again, the apologists’ and their efforts to salvage their position only convince me all the more that I made the right decision.

Peter: “Finally, Jesus Christ may not reveal himself to you like he did to Saul (the Apostle Paul), but you can certainly read about it. It was quite amazing, don’t you think?”

Many stories found in storybooks are amazing. But insofar as what is amazing is concerned, recourse to the supernatural in storywriting has always struck me as a rather cheap device. Besides, truly amazing things are accomplished by those who have hurdles to overcome, like merely mortal men pursuing goals in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. But for a god which created the universe, is omnipotent and can make whatever it wants happen just by wishing or snapping its fingers, there’s nothing amazing there. So no, the stories in the bible fail to impress me on many counts. But the achievements of someone like Thomas Edison, the Wright Brothers, even Bill Gates... now those are amazing.

Regards,  
Dawson

[July 03, 2007 6:01 AM Peter](#) said...

Hello Dawson.

I’ll just get to the heart of the matter: you’re not actually arguing here against God or Christianity but rather against a straw-man. In Christianity, Saul’s conversion is anything but a model conversion. And God is not subject to the (your) principle of final causation. Saul’s conversion was unique, and God Himself determined/determines the best possible means to the achieve the ends He desires. So I’m afraid you’ve wasted some time arguing against a position other than the Christian’s.

And so you know, Saul did not accept Jesus Christ because of the unusual, unique, extraordinary events surrounding his conversion. He came to love Jesus Christ in the same way that all people do -- God Himself regenerated Saul’s heart, brought life from death, granted him the gift of faith. That’s why Saul believed Jesus, that’s why I’m a Christian, and that’s what it would take for you to love God also.

God must save you, Dawson. I'll leave you with Him.

[July 03, 2007 8:13 PM Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Peter,

I see you've not changed much since we corresponded in the past. I was always surprised how easily you seemed to give up.

Peter: "I'll just get to the heart of the matter: you're not actually arguing here against God or Christianity but rather against a straw-man. In Christianity, Saul's conversion is anything but a model conversion."

The point you raise here is completely compatible with the objection I have raised: it is *because* the conversion Saul is said to have experienced according to the storybook is so unique in comparison to how the vast majority if not all other Christians experience conversion, that it calls attention to itself in the first place, and consequently - for the reasons I have already indicated - that the Christian worldview brings itself under question.

Peter: "And God is not subject to the (your) principle of final causation."

Then your god is simply not logical. That's what you're saying here if you are saying that your god does not apply the principle of final causation, for final causation is simply the identification of the most logical course of action given an intended outcome one wants to achieve. Your statement here means either that your god is incapable of determining the most logical course of action to achieve its goals (assuming it could have any goals), or that it knowingly thwarts the choice to follow the most logical course of action to achieve its goals in preference for something illogical, hit-or-miss or simply arbitrary (e.g., sending fallible human beings on a "great mission" over a period of several thousands of years, risking the proliferation of widespread heresies and false teachings, and needlessly losing many souls in the process). Beyond that, it could simply be that your god does not exist, and the conversion that Saul is said to have experienced remains confined to the storybook simply because it is a legend to begin with. You've provided nothing to rule out this last alternative.

Peter: "Saul's conversion was unique, and God Himself determined/determines the best possible means to the achieve the ends He desires."

My objection grants (perhaps too generously, given the angle you have chosen to play) that your god is capable of determining the most logical course of action to achieve its goals. What you're saying is that it either does not follow the most logical course of action to achieve its goals, or it simply has not set before itself the goal of reaching very many. As you say, Saul's conversion was unique. How do you know this? You give no indication. My objection is at least compatible with the supposition that there are others besides Saul throughout history to whom your god has paid a personal visit. But have it your way if you like. That just means it played favorites with Saul. But this goes contrary to other claims in the bible, as I pointed out in my blog.

Peter: "And so you know, Saul did not accept Jesus Christ because of the unusual, unique, extraordinary events surrounding his conversion."

It's curious that you would go this far in denying the importance of Saul's conversion experience to his acceptance of Jesus as his savior. It hardly seems justifiable given the emphasis that Acts itself puts on Saul's conversion experience. It relates the story twice (chapters 9 and 22) and has Saul cite his experience before Agrippa as the key turning point in his spiritual life (chapter 26). It has always amused me what Christians will deny about their religion in order to defend it. It summons to mind the image of a snake devouring its own tail.

Peter: "He came to love Jesus Christ in the same way that all people do -- God Himself regenerated Saul's heart, brought life from death, granted him the gift of faith."

I didn't know that "all people" love Jesus Christ. Also, if it's the case that "God Himself regenerated Saul's heart," why doesn't it do this for everyone else? Again, we come back to the biblical notion that the Christian god is "no respecter of persons." Why then would it choose to regenerate some, but not others? It's favors some while despising others. It's had a long history of doing this.

Anyway, I think my point is clear now if it weren't earlier: if the Christian god wants me to believe it exists, it

knows what to do - it's up to the Christian god, not up to me. For me to affirm its existence given what I do know, I would have to be dishonest. But since truth is more important to me than agreement, I go with honesty, not peer pressure.

Peter: "That's why Saul believed Jesus, that's why I'm a Christian, and that's what it would take for you to love God also."

In other words, I'm not doing anything wrong, since there's nothing I could do anyway to overcome my non-belief. It's not up to me whether I believe or not, it's up to the Christian god. If it wanted me to believe, what would stop me from believing? Certainly you don't think that "sin" is stronger than your god's will, do you? I ask this because most Christians I talk to, seem to think there's something I'm doing on purpose by not believing. But if it's up to the Christian god whether or not I believe, then nothing I do or choose to do is relevant in the matter. What could possibly trump the will of the Christian god? So on your view, I must be a non-believer precisely because your god wants me to be a non-believer. Consequently, I am doing the will of your god just by not believing.

Peter: "God must save you, Dawson."

But most Christians say their god is under no obligation whatsoever. Do you suppose differently?

Peter: "I'll leave you with Him."

He's welcome to come over and have tea any time. All he has to do is show up, like he did for Saul. Why does he hide from me, Peter? What's he afraid of? What's he waiting for? I'm always ready to have guests over. I just ask that he not smell bad and behaves himself as a cordial guest. And please, leave the water in the water pots alone - I already have enough wine in the house.

So far, it appears that my objection endures all the points you've tried to bring up against it so far. In the meanwhile, Peter, I notice that you've offered nothing to help me distinguish between what you call "God" and what you may merely be imagining. Why is that? Is it really that hard for you, too?

Regards,  
Dawson

[July 04, 2007 12:51 AM](#)