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SERIES: REWRITING JESUS

SPEAKER: NAT CRAWFORD

TITLE: An Interview with Ken Samples: Answering Tough Questions About Christianity

Today Pastor Nat welcomes researcher and professor Ken Samples for an in-depth interview about tough questions people often ask about Christianity.

NC: Ken, thank you so much for joining me and our listeners today.

KS: Pleasure to be with you, Nat. It's good to see you.

NC: Yeah. Good to see you. Well, let's talk just a little bit about who you are and your ministry with Reasons to Believe, because some people may not have heard the last episode, or may just have no idea. So please tell us a little bit more about yourself and your ministry.

KS: Yeah, my educational background is in philosophy and theology. And in the old days, I worked in counter cult apologetics at the Christian Research Institute, with Walter Martin. Over the last 23 years, I've worked at Reasons to Believe, which is a science - faith, apologetic organization and think tank. Hugh Ross is the president. I'm kind of the oddball on the scholar team, because I'm one of the non-scientists. So I kind of bring my knowledge of philosophy and theology to bear on a lot of science issues.

NC: Right. Okay. So, before I get into the heart of the discussion, there are two words you use - and I would guess most people can define one; the other one maybe not: What is philosophy? And second: What is theology?

KS: Yeah, very good. Philosophy, the Greek word really comes from two Greek words, meaning the love of wisdom. And I would define philosophy this way, Nat: I would say, it is pursuit of the answers to the big questions of life. To me, that's the heart of philosophy. That's what Socrates and Plato and Aristotle were looking for. Theology comes from, again, a word *theos*, meaning God; so the study of God - the study of who God is, and how He's revealed Himself. And so Christians have always been interested in those two critical fields of philosophy and theology.

NC: And they're vitally important. And the answers were succinct and correct. And so finally, I got to quiz you, and you passed the test. So great job. Well, let's talk about one of your books. As I said in our last interview, some of your books have had a huge impact on my life, and I give these away freely. But one of the books that I absolutely love, and many people that I've pastored have, it's called *Without a Doubt: Answering the 20 Toughest Faith Questions*. And this book is succinct, it's clear, and I believe it's accurate. So let's talk about this book in a little bit more depth. The first question I want to talk to you about is God. Okay, many people today would say

that they believe in God, or some form of God, or many gods, but the question for you is, does God exist? And if so, how do we know?

KS: Yeah, that's a great foundational question. The answer is, I think, very clear that God does exist. How do I know that? God has revealed Himself. He has revealed Himself in the natural world. He's revealed himself in the human conscience and human mind. I think God's existence can be supported by the idea that it explains, you know, the universe. It explains life itself. I think a powerful argument can be made that Jesus Christ - His life, death and ministry – demonstrates the truth of God's existence. And I think God's existence also best explains things like ethics and values. So there's a lot of explanatory power that comes with believing in God, and to be perfectly candid, Nat, I think it's common sense to believe in God.

NC: Okay. Unpack that a little bit. What do you mean by that – “It's common sense”?

KS: Yeah. I think if you look at the world - I think if - you know, most of us who like reason and rationality, when we want to explain something, we appeal to things like logic and mathematics and science. Well, if there is an infinite, eternal mind behind the universe, Who has designed the universe and revealed Himself, then logic and science and math are expected realities. But if there's no God, if there really is no God, and we're the product of blind mechanistic, evolutionary, natural processes, how can we trust things like logic and math and science? It seems that these are accidental. It seems that these are things that are not easily explained. So I think that God's existence explains a lot, even things like beauty, and people, and all of these realities.

NC: Right. I would agree. So I'm just curious, what's your favorite argument for God's existence? You know, obviously you tried to do a cumulative approach, and, you know, tried to say, okay here's the breadth of evidence, but do you have a favorite?

KS: Yeah, I like that kind of cumulative idea. I mean, I certainly think the cosmological argument – looking at God to explain the universe - or looking at God to explain morality - the moral argument, or design in the universe. I think I gravitate though, Nat, toward that cumulative case - kind of the best explanation, because I think people can grasp it. I don't think they need a lot of background in philosophy to grasp it. It seems like the world makes better sense, if there is a rational God behind the universe. So I like to begin there, because again, I meet a lot of people who haven't studied philosophy.

NC: Right, right. I think a lot of people are terrified by philosophy. I was one, and I've survived, and I think I'm better off for it. Right. Well, let's dig a little bit deeper on the topic of God, because there are many people today, again, they would say, “You know, I believe in God; I think God exists”, but they'll say that knowing God accurately, that it's impossible. I mean, we can't really know who God is, and you know, you've heard the analogy. It's like a bunch of [blind] people touching an elephant, and one person's got an ear; one person's got a tail; so they they've got these pieces, but no one really has it all. So can we be correct about our knowledge of God? And if so, how?

KS: Yeah. You know, the Christian worldview says that God has revealed Himself. God has taken the initiative, and He has conveyed knowledge and information and truth about Himself. And so Christians talk about revelation that God has made Himself - He has made Himself known in the design of the universe. He's made himself known through our conscience. The

Bible talks about humans being made in the image and likeness of God. And not only has God revealed Himself in nature and in conscience, but incredibly important, Christians believe that God has actually entered into the world in the incarnation of Christ: that God, the second person of the Trinity, took a human nature, and became the God-man. So I would say Nat, that the reason we can know there's a God, and the reason we can then test and have confidence, is that God has revealed Himself. He took the initiative and He is not bothered when we ask difficult questions, and say, "Why the Trinity, instead of Allah?", or "Why Christianity instead of Hinduism?"

NC: Great answer. Great answer. And one of the other books you wrote is *A World of Difference*, and you talk about other worldviews in there. So we would highly recommend our listeners to pick up that, so they can kind of get a broader view of other worldviews and perspectives. So let's keep talking about God, because God, I mean, this is a big topic, and it's real popular today. I've even heard amongst evangelicals, there seems to be a little bit of a divide here about, "Do we all worship the same God?" - you know, I mean, between the God of Islam, Christianity - same God. So are we all pointing our worship at the same place? Or are we really miles apart?

KS: Yeah. You know, it's interesting, a few years ago, when there was that discussion all throughout the internet, about, "Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?" - I thought it was interesting that the Islamic theologians said, "Absolutely we do not". And the reason the Muslims said that is, you know, Islam rejects the Trinity. It rejects the divinity of Christ. It rejects the Atonement. It even denies we're made in the image of God. My point here is just simply this - if you look at Islam and Christianity, they negate and deny one another. I mean, Islam says, "Jesus is not God incarnate. He did a lot of good things in His life and maybe He was born of a Virgin, but He's not God incarnate. He's not God in the flesh". Christianity says, "No, Jesus is God incarnate". Those are statements that contradict one another. So one of them is right and one of them is wrong.

We can do that with the other religions as well. We can begin to compare truth claims, and logic is a tool to kind of help us sort through which of these views could possibly be true. And as you say, that's a big issue. How do we make sense of all these religions?

NC: Right. And we do need to take time, and carefully look at the evidence, and make an educated decision, which I know is something that you are a big proponent of. Before we go to a real brief break, let's talk about another difference between the God of Islam and Christianity. And that's in the area you mentioned of the Trinity. Okay, so for Christians, we believe that God is triune, but is that even coherent?

KS: Yeah. Great question. I love to talk about the Trinity, because it's such an important part of Christianity. Well, what the Trinity is, the word *Trinity* really comes from tri-unity: That there's one God that exists in three persons. And so the doctrine of the Trinity says, that God is one *What* and three *Whos*. That is, God is one in essence or being, but when it comes to *who* God is, God is super-personal - He has a diversity of persons. So I would argue the Trinity is logical. It is arguing for example, that the three persons all share the one divine nature. So we're not saying God is One and not one, or Three and not three. What we're really saying, is the way in which God is One - His essence or nature - is different than the way He's three - in terms of His

personhood. I think you can state and identify the Trinity, and many in church history have, in a very coherent manner.

NC: So is there an analogy you actually like using for the Trinity? Because I remember taking a class through Biola, and everything I had ever used was - everything was a heresy. So is there an actual analogy you like to use?

KS: I actually do. You know, I'm pretty fond of St. Augustine and Augustine liked to talk about analogies of the Trinity. Let me use just a couple simple ones. One, you know, you look at a triangle - a triangle possesses both one-ness and three-ness simultaneously. Now that doesn't give us the whole Trinity, but it does indicate that you can have one-ness and three-ness at the same time. I think another analogy - and you know, it's important to say this is an analogy - I think we can think of God as like a family.

I mean, there's the Father who is the lover, the Son who is the beloved, and the Spirit is the love that they share. Nat - I think very important - I think the Trinity can explain how God is Love. With Jehovah's Witnesses, with Muslims and traditional Jews, you have a single solitary God. Who does this God love before He creates the world? When First John 4:8 says, *God is love*, I think the Trinity explains that - that there are these three persons in an eternal, loving relationship, analogous to a human family.

NC: I think that's beautiful. One of the descriptions I love to talk about the relationship of the Trinity is that *perichoresis* - the dance - always dancing for eternity, and always has, and always will be in that relationship. I think that's a beautiful picture, but I'm going to steal that one of the family, if you don't mind,

KS: Go right ahead.

NC: Ken, let's keep talking religion. It's real popular today to hear claims like, "All religions are basically the same". Is that a true sentiment? Why or why not?

KS: That's such an important idea, because it permeates our culture. And I'm going to tell you why I think it's fundamentally flawed: All religions cannot simultaneously be true. Number one, because they teach fundamentally different things - they fundamentally disagree. I mean Judaism says there's one God; popular Hinduism says there are 330 million gods. Some other forms of Hinduism say the universe is god, and then original Buddhism says there is no God at all. The world's religions cannot be simultaneously true, because they teach fundamentally different things. Secondly, there's no kind of lowest common denominator. There's no way to kind of bring them all together, even the common ethical ideas that you find in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The problem is we follow our ethics for theological reasons. For example, Christians believe in loving their neighbor, and not murdering their neighbor, because they're made in the image of God, but their ethics is dependent upon our theology. And then thirdly, and most importantly, Nat, all the religions can't be true, because they contradict each other; religions that contradict each other can't both be true. The Muslims say, "Jesus is not God incarnate". Christians say, "He is". And both of those positions can't be true. And one is true and the other is false. So somebody is wrong.

NC: Right. Well, I think I know how you're going to answer this next question, but it flows

from that same, I think, thought process, is that sentiment that all religions lead to God. You know, some would say, yeah, that they're basically the same, but it's that idea that, look, it doesn't matter if you take road A, B, C or D. In the end, as long as you're sincere, you're going to get to the top of the mountain. But that's not true either then, is it?

KS: It's not - it's as you say - it's such a common sentiment. And I think a lot of people feel like, you know, "I just kind of take the good in all the religions." A big part of the challenge though, is that Jesus comes into the world, and He says, *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14:6) Peter in the Book of Acts says, *Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.* (4:12). These religions contradict each other; these religions don't fit easily. We can't reduce them all down to a lowest common denominator. So Christianity has always been exclusivistic. It's always said, "Jesus is the truth". Jesus didn't say, "I'm one of many ways". He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life".

NC: Well, if anyone is listening to this, and they may be offended, they're going to probably say, "Well, Ken, you're obviously intolerant," and you actually talk about intolerance in your book. So let's just talk about that for a moment. Does Christianity promote intolerance?

KS: I think one way to maybe think about that topic, Nat, is to say, "Look, as a Christian, I want to be tolerant, in that is, I want to be respectful and gracious to people". I think tolerance basically just means being respectful - but I'm intolerant of bad ideas. I'm intolerant of ideas that are contradictory and false. So as a Christian, I certainly want to be respectful and gracious to people, but I, because I love truth, I cannot accept false ideas, incoherent ideas. And I think Christians have to keep both of those ideas. "I don't want to be a jerk. I don't want to be an unloving person. And so I want to be gracious, but I won't settle for bad ideas, because truth is too important." Truth is a sacred thing for the Christian.

NC: I love that - truth is a sacred thing for the Christian. We're going to have to tweet that, because I think that is so beautiful. And it is so true. And you know, when we talk about tolerance - and I think what you said is right on - we need to be respectful of people. And I also think, because we are Christians, and because we love people, we need to be willing to lovingly approach them and point out their faulty worldviews, and their false beliefs. Because the alternative is Hell. I mean, it's not like this is a game, and it's not like it all works out in the end - as we talked about earlier. No, these things matter. Ideas have consequences. And at the end of the road, there is Heaven or there's Hell. And if we love people, we will be respectful, and we will also confront their bad ideas.

KS: Well said.

NC: Well let's end out our time talking about, I think a pretty big - I would say almost controversial - topic nowadays, and that's science and Christianity. And you talk about this in your book as well, because there's a lot of people on both sides of the spectrum that say, "You know, Christianity and science - they're at odds - they're against each other. You know, you've got to believe science or Christianity. You can't have both". I mean, is that true?

KS: You know, Nat, I think that Christianity has a unique relationship to science. First of all, historically, science really began in the middle of the 1600's in Europe, and that was a Christian

civilization. I mean, sure - the Greeks and the Romans and the Chinese and the Babylonians all made contributions to something like science and technology - but science really began in Christian Europe. And it was the Christian worldview that allowed science to be birthed and helped it to flourish. So historically, many, most of the great scientific thinkers - Galileo, Pascal, on and on - they were Christians. So Christianity has a unique historical relationship to science, and also a philosophical one. I mean, you can't do science without beginning with certain presuppositions: Like there's a real world out there; that you can trust your brain and your sensory organs; that math and logic work; that there's a continuity. Well, these presuppositions that are critical to science, they fit really well in a Judeo-Christian or biblical worldview. So, sure. There are times where a science might say something and it seems to have a conflict with Scripture. But I think that the broad view is, that if we understand the natural world correctly, and we interpret Scripture correctly, since they both come from God, they're going to cohere. The problem might be interpretation rather than an incoherence.

NC: And I would assume that you would encourage people not to be necessarily dogmatic maybe, about some of that interpretation; because it seems like a lot of Christians want to divide and devour each other over some of those interpretations. And I always go, you know, look at Genesis 1:1, you know, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* I did this at the University of Nebraska - and someone asked, "Well, how old is the universe?" And I go, "Well, read Genesis 1:1. And what does it tell you?" And they go, "Well, God created it." That's it.

KS: I think you're absolutely right. I mean, even though there may be some differing positions within the school of Christianity, we agree on the big issues: that God created the world, that the world is rational, and that science is possible. So I think Christianity and science have always, rather than being enemies, I think they've been allies.

NC: Well, and a great place to think about science and Christianity is your ministry that you work for, Reasons to Believe. So, as we close out, why don't you share with our listeners and those watching, where they can go to learn more about you and Reasons to Believe?

KS: Well, thank you again Nat. Yeah. Reasons to Believe has a really fine website. You can go to reasons.org, type in Ken Samples, or type in Christianity and faith issues. And there's a lot of really fine material there on science - faith issues, and I add some philosophy and theology. So go to reasons.org.

NC: Awesome. And we encourage you to - I do almost weekly. And last but not least - again, you've written some books, and we encourage our listeners to go check them out, and they can get these on Amazon. And before we go, one book we didn't talk about is *God among Sages*. Give us the brief summary of that book.

KS: Yeah. Very good. Nat, years ago, I taught at a community college. And I teach World Religions, and students - I might have Buddhist students, Hindu, Muslim students, sometimes atheists. And, you know, it was right in the beginning when the internet was available. So they would do a search, and they'd discover, "Hey, Professor Samples, you're a Christian. Why did you pick Jesus?" Well, this is my answers to my old students. I compare Jesus with Krishna, Buddha, Confucius, and Muhammad, and I use eight standards of category to compare them.

NC: Fantastic. Well, again, get these books, check out Ken Samples, and check out Reasons to Believe. Ken, thank you so much for joining myself and our listeners today.

KS: Pleasure to be with you.