

## The Strange Case of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Houdini, and Romans 1

Doug Powell



One of the most interesting passages in the Bible relating to defending the faith is Romans 1:18-19, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness, because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them." What makes this interesting to me as an apologist is that it says unbelievers do not lack

information; that is not the fundamental issue. Rather, the issue is self-deceit, since they know the truth but suppress it. Apologetics, then, reveals the self-deceit of unbelievers. But can people really deceive themselves so profoundly?

The answer is yes. Consider Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a medical doctor and creator of the world's most famous detective, Sherlock Holmes. The methods Conan Doyle armed Holmes with were so sensible that some of them were actually adopted by Scotland Yard. And Conan Doyle himself was consulted on several cases as if he shared the abilities of his fictional creation. If ever there was a man who could think logically about the facts of a case and arrive at a plausible solution it was Conan Doyle.

But when his son died in World War I, Conan Doyle turned to Spiritualism for consolation in hopes of making contact with him through mediums. Sir Arthur became so involved in spiritualism he became its most famous evangelist in the 1920's, doing speaking tours to promote it.

It was on one of these speaking tours that Conan Doyle was introduced to magic's most famous magician, Houdini. Houdini had begun a crusade against Spiritualism because he recognized the so-called mediums were really unscrupulous magicians taking advantage of grieving and emotionally distraught people. Indeed, early in his career Houdini had posed as a medium and regretted the damage he

had done. Despite their differences a friendship was formed and the two families even vacationed together.

Conan Doyle would tell Houdini about the incredible things he had witnessed at different séances and about the mediums he insisted Houdini visit. Houdini would respond by explaining and even demonstrating the methods used to achieve the effects. Conan Doyle refused to be convinced and would always respond to the effect of, "That's *one* way to do it," as if Houdini's revelation lacked full explanatory power. Even when mediums outted themselves as frauds, Conan Doyle would treat them as the exception, not the rule.

Eventually, the friendship broke down over the issue. Houdini wrote a book exposing the methods of mediums shortly before his death. Some years later, Conan Doyle devoted a chapter in a book arguing that Houdini's feats were so fantastic that the best explanation is that Houdini was himself a medium who used his power for entertainment. He argued that when Houdini escaped from a locked milk can, or from handcuffs and chains inside a box nailed shut and locked, or the Chinese Water Torture cell, or a jail cell, that the only possible way he could do it was that he had dematerialized and rematerialized outside the restraint. In fact, so sure was he of this explanation, Conan Doyle declared it an "outrage against common sense to think otherwise." But Sherlock Holmes would have been the one outraged. Not even Dr. Watson at his most confused would have come up with that one!

The story shows that truth, no matter how obvious, can be suppressed, even by the most intelligent of people. It is an illustration of the truth of Romans 1. And it is a reminder to those who defend the faith that giving answers can often be painful to those who need them because it reveals self-deceit. All the reason more to be mindful of Ephesians 4:15, to speak the truth in love.

---

© 2009 Doug Powell

Doug Powell is the author and designer of "The Holman QuickSource Guide to Christian Apologetics," a contributor to "The Apologetics Study Bible," and the forthcoming "Apologetics Study Bible for Students." He is currently writing and designing a book on Christianity, pop culture, and the arts. Doug holds a Masters degree in Christian Apologetics from Biola University.

Both an accomplished musician and producer, Doug has released seven solo albums, received numerous awards, performed on Late Night with Conan O'Brien and done all manner of other cool stuff for a forty-something husband/father/Bible-believer and defender. You can learn more about Doug, his ministry and artistry, contact him for

conducting an apologetics seminar, interview, etc. through [www.selflessdefense.com](http://www.selflessdefense.com)  
and [www.dougpowell.com](http://www.dougpowell.com).