

Are the Claims Credible?

The Integrity of the Testimonies

April 17, 2011

If you were here for my last message, you're aware that we're taking a three-week break from "Route 66", and why that is. Evening Magazine is doing a segment on our series.



And we scheduled it so that their reporter, Jim Dever can act in the next video: "Titus".



We prayed that *God* would use this occasion to draw people into His Word through our Route 66 website (where they can watch the videos, listen to the messages, and download transcripts and reading plans).

And I challenged *you* to use this opportunity to talk to friends, family, coworkers, and classmates about your church, the Bible, and their relationship with the Lord. So, we're using these three weeks "off the road" to prepare for whatever conversations the Lord has scheduled for us.

The first message was titled: "Is the Bible Reliable?" And we examined several rational and compelling reasons to trust the integrity and accuracy of our modern Bible, even though it's been copied and recopied over the ages.



But, the integrity of the text doesn't really matter if the original writers had ulterior motives (i.e. power or prestige or money), or if they were delusional or just plain gullible. We would simply have a *reliable* copy of *unreliable* claims! The Bible *itself* says they were, at times, cowardly, conceited, and confused. Not to mention the contradictions in their accounts.

So, today's message is titled: "Are the Claims Credible?" And we'll look for reasonable, convincing answers to those who question the motives of the New Testament writers. Especially with regard to their most outrageous claim of all:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. - 1
Corinthians 15:14;19 NIV

This certainly cuts to the crux of it! If we accept that Christ rose from the dead (thus validating His deity, His teaching, and the redemptive purpose of His death), then it's only logical and rational to accept the *lesser* claims.

Conversely, if we accept everything *but* that, we're still lost.

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. - 1
Corinthians 15:17 NIV



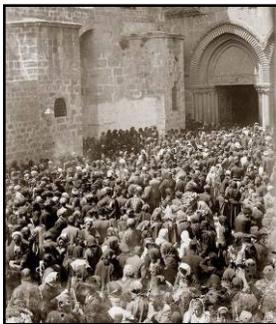
So, let's do like Luke (a Biblical cross between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson), and investigate the forensic evidence.

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. - Luke 1:3-4 NIV

I have been taught and fully believe that the writers of the Bible were inspired, empowered, and enabled by God's Spirit. So, let's make an "orderly account" to the certainty of *that!*



The starting point, the thing everyone agrees on, is the historical fact that Christianity spread like wildfire in spite of strong opposition and persecution. Those in the best position to question the claims embraced them and trusted them above their personal welfare. With that in mind, I would ask some *motive questions* of my own.



1. Why did they announce it so soon?

Fifty *days* after they claim Jesus rose from the grave (*the Day of Pentecost*) Peter publically proclaims it to *thousands* in Jerusalem.

For a *legend* to take hold, it has to have happened a *long time ago* or in a faraway land.

2. [Speaking of which] Why did they set it so close to home?

They said it happened "right here in Jerusalem, less than two months ago!" And then, just twenty years later *Paul* writes:

[Christ] was raised on the third day ... After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, **most of whom are still living** ... - 1
Corinthians 15:4,6 NIV

These things were written when you could still go interview the eyewitnesses (like Luke did); which brings up another thing ...

3. Why did they include well known people?

They list public officials *by name!* Including a renowned member of the very council that they claim convicted Jesus.

Joseph of Arimathea [AR-ih-muh-THEE-uh], a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to **Pilate** and asked for Jesus' body. – Mark 15:43 NIV

That's the guy you choose to own the tomb Jesus resurrects from?! What's the motive for making their claims so *ridiculously* refutable ... unless they aren't? Come to think of it ...

4. Why didn't opponents discredit their claims?



We know historically that the Jewish leadership and Roman government were *ferociously* motivated to stop the spread of Christianity. And the soon-ness, closeness, and well-known-ness would've made it very easy to dispel as delusional or gullible or deceitful ... if it was. So why didn't they? Instead, men like Josephus (a law-observing, Jewish historian who lived during the writing of the New Testament) *comments* on Jesus without questioning or contradicting the eyewitness accounts.

5. [Which reminds me] *Why* did they use *women* as witnesses?

In their grossly patriarchal, chauvinistic culture, women were branded as *invalid witnesses* and barred from testifying in court.

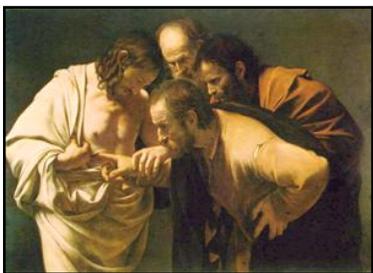
A 2nd century, Greek philosopher named Celsus wrote the earliest known comprehensive attack on Christianity. And in it he writes:

Christianity can't be true, because the written accounts of the resurrection are based on the testimony of women – and we all know women are hysterical. - Celsus, "The True Word"



What were the writers' motives for depicting women as:

- A. The last at the cross
- B. The first at the tomb
- C. The first to hear the angel's announcement
- D. The first to see the risen Christ
- E. The ones to tell to the frightened, *male* disciples?



6. [So] Why did they make themselves look so bad?

Judas betrays, Peter denies, Thomas doubts, and they all run and hide. They come off at times as confused, conceited, inconsiderate, vindictive, and cowardly ... and the kicker is: *they* wrote it! What could've been their motive - when making themselves look good would've satisfied their egos *and* their approval ratings!?

And what changed them, *overnight*, into focused, humble, self-effacing, considerate, forgiving, daring, courageous martyrs?

7. [In other words] Why were they willing to die for a lie?



They certainly weren't getting rich off the Gospel! Instead of power and prestige, they endured poverty, scorn, and persecution. *Every disciple* except John (and Judas) died by beheading, stoning, spearing, flaying, or crucifixion. Peter was crucified upside down. What was the motive for sticking to their story?!

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. - 2 Peter 1:16 NIV

If they were "cleverly invented" there wouldn't be inconsistencies.

8. [So] Why did they allow discrepancies in their versions?

Were they clever enough to know that *identical* accounts reveal a fabricated story that's been pre-agreed upon? Or, were they just honestly offering their unique perspectives?

Consistency in the main portrayal along with contradictions in the minor details *lends* credibility; it doesn't reduce it! They compared notes. They knew those minor discrepancies were in there; so, what was their motive for *not* removing them?



9. [And] Why did they include irrelevant details?

When John describes the empty tomb, he spends more time telling how he outran Peter, who entered first, and how the cloth was folded. Immaterial particulars make the Bible incredibly unique in that it reads like an eyewitness statement.



Like when Mark reports Jesus having "trouble" healing a man.

When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." **Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes.** Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. - Mark 8:23b-25 NIV

Insignificant and especially unflattering details are a hallmark of credible accounts being reported as honestly as possible.

But now, thanks to modern science, *we* know that those born blind and later receive sight often suffer from "visual agnosia", the inability to decode distance, size, and depth of field.

Mark didn't know he was validating the integrity of Jesus' *two* separate *miracles* for us "future people". So, what was *his* motive for depicting Jesus' "lapse" in power?

And, while we're on the subject of Jesus' power and authority ...

10. Why would they choose the cross for Jesus death?



They lived in a Middle Eastern culture of honor and shame that believed the manner of death most revealed your character. And crucifixion was *the most shameful way to die* in their world. And this instinctive reaction is exactly what Paul describes:

... we preach Christ crucified: **a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles** ... - 1 Corinthians 1:23 NIV



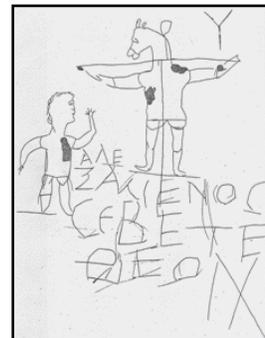
The earliest drawing of the crucifixion was found near the Coliseum in Rome in a guardroom or classroom. It's graffiti from about 200AD of a man worshipping a donkey-headed Jesus. And it says, "Alexamenos worships his god". The "Y" is most likely a cry of anguish.



This is how contemptible and absurd the idea of a crucified god was in that culture. What's the motive for making as the centerpiece of your story, the very obstacle and stumbling block to its acceptance?!

Sherlock Holmes has a respected and often quoted maxim:

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. - *Sherlock Holmes, "The Sign of the Four"*



And if the Bible is *reliable*, and the claims are *credible*, then God *Himself* desires an intimate, eternal relationship with *you*!

But, how do you make sense of, let alone relate to a God who is invisible and inaudible? A God who is three persons yet one being? A God who became fully human yet remained fully divine? Or, a God who was alive in Heaven while dead on a cross? And how can this God sustain a personal, intimate relationship with 7,000,000,000 people *simultaneously*?! On Easter we'll finish our series with: Is the Gospel Graspable?

It's amazing how God has ordained modern science to help us "future people" better comprehend and connect with our Creator.