

IF CHRIST IS RISEN, WHY DON'T THEY BELIEVE?

1 Corinthians 15:3-8; Matthew 27:62-28:1-8 and other selected Scriptures

INTRODUCTION

Every Sunday, millions of Christians commemorate the resurrection of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Why should the Christian community gather on a specific day to remember His resurrection from the dead and why is the resurrection of Christ important enough that we should celebrate it? Doesn't the fact that Jesus lived a moral life and had some really good ethical teachings make him alone good enough to remember and commemorate? The Apostle Paul (who saw the risen Christ) gives us some really good answers to that question. He states it is important that Jesus truly did rise again because,

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 15:14** *and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.*

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 15:17** *and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.*

After Jesus rose from the dead, He met with His disciples (including the authors of the books of John and Matthew; and Peter, who informed Mark what to write for his gospel). He commanded them to tell others about the Creator, God the Son who came to save the world from the curse of sin (Matthew 28:19-20; Revelation 4:11, 5:9). Then, He returned to heaven to prepare a place for those who believe in Him (John 14:2-3). The apostle Paul clearly tells us that the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is part of the "good news" when he says,

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 15:1-4** *Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ **and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,***

So if the good news of the resurrection is part of the entire message of the gospel, we must ". . . . always [be] being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;" (1 Peter 3:15). We must be ready and willing to dispel myths, correct assumptions and ultimately be the best tool to be used by the Holy Spirit to bring His message to His elect people. Therefore, I want to preach to you today on the subject of why some of your family, friends, coworkers, and even skeptics of ages past do not believe in the Resurrection of Christ. It is important to look at what they are saying in regards to the Bible's claim to the resurrection of Christ and it is important to dispel their myths. However, the real issue, a deeper issue that is foundational to their unbelief needs to be discussed. Therefore, we are going to look at the resurrection of Jesus under four points:

1. Two examples of apostates who rejected the resurrection of Christ.
2. Claims of the critics.
3. How can *we* be sure of the resurrection of Christ?
4. If the evidence is so great, why doesn't everybody believe in the resurrection?

TEACHING/APPLICATION

1. Two Examples of Apostates Who Rejected the Resurrection of Christ.

1. Charles Templeton

There have been many former Christian leaders, prompted by their acceptance of evolutionary ideas and millions of years of history, who have also renounced Christianity and have become apostates.¹ One notable example, the late Charles Templeton, a famous evangelist who used to team with Billy Graham and sometimes preached to tens of thousands at a crusade, eventually rejected Christianity. Up to 30,000 people a night would flock to hear Canadian evangelist Charles Templeton who, in his heyday, was more famous than his team-mate at the time, Billy Graham. Thousands professed to have found salvation in Christ through Templeton's preaching.

However, things changed. Templeton, for a long time had doubts about the history in Genesis, which is foundational to the entire structure of the Gospel, and how it seemed to contradict the 'scientific facts'. Logically, 'millions of years' meant that the fossils were laid down long before man, hence before sin. But the fossils showed death, bloodshed and disease. So the whole idea of a Fall ruining a once-perfect world, to be redeemed via the 'last Adam', Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:46) was to him, meaningless. And no-one seemed to be able to give Templeton the needed answers to his associated questions.

In his book, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*, Templeton declared that the Bible was unscientific and untrue.² When Templeton told his colleague Billy Graham about his growing skepticism, Mr. Graham's reaction was that it was 'unspiritual' for Templeton to be concerned with such things. After the publication of his book, which declared his total unbelief, Charles Templeton died, after a struggle with Alzheimer's disease. A Canadian Gospel broadcaster used the occasion to draw a lesson for Christians regarding his countryman's 'fall from grace'. Templeton, he said, was wrong to ask such probing and skeptical questions in the first place. Trying to use common sense and reason to approach issues of faith was wrong; it was the "flesh" (which is apparently what he labeled the intellect) at war with the "spirit." Such a confused and Biblically unwarranted response to Bible/science issues still reigns in many conservative Christian circles today. Sadly, it reinforces the secular caricature that Christianity and reality occupy two separate zones and that Christians are just mindless fools. The Christian faith is thought to be only 'in your head' or some emotional crutch that might 'work for you', but has nothing to do with hard, historical and scientific facts.

The Apostle Paul, however, well knew that his faith was based on concrete, historical reality. The Lord Jesus died on a cross and rose again, as a fact of real *history* (and biology). He shared food with those who saw him (Luke 24:41-43) and Christ told doubting Thomas to touch him (John 20:27-28). Jesus also spoke with others (Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20-21; Acts 1) after His Resurrection. If that history and biology concerning the "last Adam" was wrong, said Paul, it was not a side issue; Christians would be a miserable lie-believing bunch whose faith was therefore futile (1 Corinthians 15:17).

I think that, ironically, Paul would have taken the side of Charles Templeton—the Apostle agreeing with the apostate-to-be—on one point, anyway. He would have chastised the broadcaster (and, dare to say, even Billy Graham) for being unconcerned with whether the Bible contradicts historical facts. The same could be said with the Lord Jesus Himself, who taught that part of the greatest commandment was to love God with all your mind (Matthew 22:37)!

2. "Atheist Pastor" in Denmark Thorkild Grosboell

On the Answers in Genesis website, there is an incredible article about an atheist pastor in Denmark³. Such an obvious 'oxymoron' has shocked the conservative religious world. They find it impossible to believe

¹ An apostate is someone who "departs from the known truth." These people played like they were Christians but they really weren't and when the deception of the world took hold of their mind, they easily "fell away" from the Christian faith.

²For Templeton's views on the theory of Evolution, read the article titled [Death of an Apostate](http://www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/magazines/docs/v25n1_editorial.asparticle) at http://www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/magazines/docs/v25n1_editorial.asparticle.

³ See [Pastor openly rejects the Creator](http://www.answersingenesis.org/docs2003/0620atheist.asp) at <http://www.answersingenesis.org/docs2003/0620atheist.asp>

that an atheist was actually pastoring a Lutheran Church in Denmark—and, just as surprising, that most of his congregation was actually supporting him!

‘Pastor’ Grosboell believes there is “no heavenly God, there is no eternal life, there is no resurrection.” Eventually, the local bishop suspended him, but church members rallied to the pastor’s side—many of them saying that the church should be ‘tolerant’ of his views. When I first heard of this strange situation, it was not hard to guess that acceptance of the evolutionary worldview would have been foundational to this pastor’s atheism.

Apparently, this same pastor wrote a book called *A Stone in the Shoe*, in which he asked (this is translated from the Danish): “What is faith in a world where a technical, scientific rationality has made it *impossible to believe in the story of creation*, a virgin birth, paradise, resurrection, eternal life and an out-of-date God?” [emphasis mine].

Perhaps this slide into atheism within the context of a liberal state church should not be all that surprising, given the manner in which most pastors in Denmark (and perhaps most pastors now around the world) approach the Bible: as just another piece of ‘interesting’ literature, but certainly not a totally true and accurate revelation—the Creator’s authoritative message to mankind.

The rejection of Christianity by both ‘Pastor’ Grosboell and Charles Templeton at least showed a consistency in their thinking. Their beliefs were logical outcomes of their repudiation of the historicity of the Bible, beginning with the book of Genesis. If they couldn’t believe the Bible in Genesis, how could they trust it elsewhere? And how could they then logically conclude that the Christian faith itself was legitimate? Indeed, how could they believe in the salvation message, the Resurrection, etc., if they couldn’t accept the reality of Genesis, the Fall, and so on? What sense did it make to accept the Bible’s teaching about the “last Adam,” if the first Adam was a myth?

The “facts” that supposedly convinced these men to become evolutionists—and eventually apostates—were not really facts for evolution, but *interpretations of facts* that they easily accommodated within their mindset of not accepting scriptural authority. If they had only accepted the Word of God as written, and saw that the facts could be better interpreted within a biblical framework of history (and thus would actually confirm the Bible’s account of origins, the Flood, etc.), then the world might have instead seen two intelligent men earnestly proclaim the truthfulness of the Bible and the Christian faith.

In like manner, this bring us to point # 2, where we will look at some claims that have been made by those who deny Jesus actually rose again, and who need to explain why the tomb where He once laid is now empty:

2. Claims of the Critics

A. The Myth Theory

Some critics charge that the Gospels have obscured the historical Jesus of Nazareth by shrouding the true man in layers of legend and myth.⁴ They claim that the Bible's stories of Christ's resurrection are not history but myth. There are at least FOUR REASONS why the mythological interpretation fails:

1. Comparative literature demonstrates that myth takes a number of generations to develop. There are no parallels in other literature of myths developing and being believed in the presence of *eyewitnesses* and within the short timeframe in which the New Testament was formed.⁵

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (Scribner's, 1958).

⁵ John A.T. Robinson argues that, given its silence on the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the New Testament must have been written prior to that date. For since the demise of the Temple in Jerusalem would have fueled Christian preaching that Jesus had replaced the Temple sacrificial system (John 1:29, Hebrews 10:11ff), the New Testament would certainly have referred to its destruction as a past event, and distinguished it from the end of the world (Luke 21:25-28), had it already happened [John A.T.

2. Historical research is on the side of an immediate belief in Jesus' resurrection. An early apostle's creed includes the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-9) and has been dated by many scholars to within 3 to 7 years of Christ's death and resurrection.⁶ This implies prior, widespread public belief about the resurrection. Scholars agree that the first letters by St. Paul appeared within 25 years or less of Jesus' ministry, and the four Gospels within 21 years of Jesus' ministry (and no later than 65 years).⁷ The preaching of the apostles always centered on the Resurrection of Christ as the main theme of hope for the lost. In a very short period of time, devout Jews throughout the Roman Empire who had formerly strictly worshiped God on the seventh day of each week, converted to Christianity and began meeting on the first day, in celebration of Christ's resurrection.

3. Hundreds of witnesses saw Christ alive after his death. Once he appeared to 500 people at once. Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes this event,

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 15:3-6** *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,⁵ and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;*

4. Many of these eyewitnesses to Christ's public ministry were hostile toward Jesus. Listen to how Matthew describes this,

^{NAU} **Matthew 12:22-28** *Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw.²³ All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?"²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons."²⁵ And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand."²⁶ "If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?"²⁷ "If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? For this reason they will be your judges."²⁸ "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

These opponents had both motives and means to correct falsehoods about Him had the first disciples attempted them.⁸ Yet they never tried to correct the disciples or say that their message was invalidated by a denial of the resurrection of Jesus. They had every opportunity to stop the message that Peter was preaching, but instead they silently acknowledged that the tomb was empty,

Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (SCM Press, 1976).]. John Macquarrie writes, "Myth is usually characterized by a remoteness in time and space... as having taken place long ago." By contrast the Gospels concern "an event that had a particularly definite location in Palestine... under Pontius Pilate, only a generation or so before the New Testament account of these happenings." [John Macquarrie, *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (Harper, 1967), pp. 177-180.] A.N. Sherwin-White writes, "The agnostic type of form-criticism would be much more credible if the compilation of the Gospels were much later in time... than can be the case... Herodotus enables us to test the tempo of myth-making, [showing that] even two generations are too short a span to allow the mythical tendency to prevail over the hard historic core." [A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 189-190.]

⁶ See Reginald Fuller, *Foundations of New Testament Christology* (Scribner's, 1965), p. 142.

⁷ See Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), pp. 11f, 14f.

⁸ Eta Linnemann, writes, "The eyewitnesses [both hostile and sympathetic] did not disappear from the scene in a flash after two decades. [Many are] likely to have survived until the second half of the A.D. 70's... Who at the time would have dared to alter the 'first tradition' beyond recognition?" [Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 64.] Interestingly, Dr. Linnemann was previously a negative critic of the New Testament in the line of Rudolf Bultmann. Having renounced her former position she now urges readers to "trash" her earlier works.

^{NAU} **Acts 2:22-23** "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know -²³ this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

5. The Gospels don't resemble either Greek myth or Jewish legend.⁹ In contrast to those, the Gospels understate and lack embellishment, yet contain details counterproductive to the invention of legendary stories. For example, the following six factors in John chapter 20 are at odds with the tendency of legendary material: (1) With great restraint, no attempt is made to describe the resurrection itself. (2) Mary neither initially recognized the risen Jesus (the "hero", John 20:14) (3) nor even considered that there was anything special about Him (John 20:16). (4) Indeed, even by the end of the day, the disciples (the secondary "heroes") were still in hiding "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). (5) And, were the Gospels the free creation of a male-dominated bias (as feminists charge), it is incredible the writers would have chosen *women* to be the first witnesses of the risen Jesus. The testimony of women didn't even count in a court of law in the first century¹⁰, so why would the disciples refer to them as being the first ones to see the resurrected Christ? Yet, it was their courage the morning after the Resurrection that put the men's contrasting cowardice to shame. Finally, (6) Jews were the poorest of candidates for inventing a mythical Christ. No other culture has so opposed confusing deity with humanity, as did the Jewish who were a fiercely monotheistic culture.¹¹

B. What About all the Contradictions in the Different Resurrection Accounts?

The varying Gospels admittedly take a little effort to reconcile, even for a young teenager. But this "problem," as it is typically called by skeptics, is vastly overstated. It is commonly held that, since the Gospels differ from one another in emphases and detail when it comes to the various resurrection accounts, there must have been invention somewhere. Yet such an interpretation is not required! Reporters to any event (secular or religious), following all standards of accuracy and integrity, will each edit their stories differently with their eyes on what is relevant to their readers and audience. Therefore, the rigid demands of the skeptics that all four Gospels be exactly alike are arbitrary and artificial. Dr. Dorothy Sayers states:

"One is often surprised to find how many apparent contradictions [in the Gospel Resurrection accounts] turn out not to be contradictory at all, but merely supplementary... Divergences appear very great on first sight... But the fact remains that all of [the Resurrection accounts], without exception, can be made to fall into a place in a single orderly and coherent narrative, without the smallest contradiction or difficulty and without any suppression, invention, or manipulation, beyond a trifling effort to imagine the natural behavior of a bunch of startled people running about in the dawn-light between Jerusalem and the garden."¹²

⁹ Michael Grant writes, "Modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory [Osiris, Mithras, etc.]. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars." [Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (Scribner's, 1977), p. 200.]

¹⁰ Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 115.

¹¹ M. Grant. writes, "Judaism was a milieu to which doctrines of deaths and rebirths of mythical gods seems so entirely foreign that the emergence of such a fabrication from its midst is very hard to credit." [Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (Scribner's, 1977), p. 199.] Oxford's N.T. Wright demolishes Spong's assertion that the Gospels are Jewish midrash and therefore fantasy in N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1992). The two are different literary genres. And midrash is not fantasy anyway, but "tightly controlled and argued" material (p. 71f). See also Paul Barnett, Peter Jensen and David Peterson, *Resurrection: Truth and Reality: Three Scholars Reply to Bishop Spong* (Aquila, 1994).

¹² Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to be King* (Harper and Brothers, 1943), p. 19f. Her comments are in her introduction to the radio plays on the life of Christ she prepared for BBC Radio. Also see: G.E. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1975),

C. Miracles are Impossible and Cannot Happen.

The success of modern science in describing the world in terms of cosmic regularity has led some to rule out miracles as an outmoded and impossible concept. This is an unwarranted philosophical assumption and not a scientific conclusion. Philosophy cannot dogmatically forbid miracles apart from proving that there is no reality outside of nature. Once God's existence is granted as a Biblical fact, miracles can't be dismissed out-of-hand. In all actuality, since God exists (according to Scripture), we'd expect Him to have acted in the past in miraculous ways. Also, whether or not a given miracle has occurred becomes a historical matter that calls for investigation.¹³ Nevertheless, the Scripture explicitly states,

^{NAU} **Acts 4:10-11** *let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead-- by this name this man stands here before you in good health.*¹¹ *"He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone.*

D. Jesus' Body Was Stolen From the Tomb.

There is no question that Jesus Christ's tomb was mysteriously empty. As Paul Althaus has said, the resurrection message "*could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact...*"¹⁴ Dr. William Lane Craig observed that, "*Conflicting traditions [to the empty tomb story] nowhere appear, even in Jewish polemic.*"¹⁵

At least one skeptic (Dr. John Dominic Crossan) has wrongly asserted that Roman law automatically forbade Jesus' burial, and that he must therefore have been thrown anonymously into a common pit. This is not sustainable. Raymond Brown has shown that Roman burial policy varied with circumstances and did allow the possibility of personal burial of some of the crucified.¹⁶ This scenario would also contradict the consistent Jewish protests that the body had been removed.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Gospels could not have successfully invented as owner of the tomb one so specific as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin named Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43). Had the Gospels been false on this matter they would not have been able to withstand the swift correction and ridicule from the Jews. How have doubters of Christ's resurrection responded? Some skeptics have claimed that someone must have stolen Jesus' body from the tomb, and that this led to the stories of miraculous resurrection. Is this possible?

The Jews and the Romans

Neither the Jewish nor the Roman leaders, who guarded the tomb (Matt. 27:62ff) would have taken the body. Rather, both groups had every motive to produce the body publicly in order to humiliate the disciples and

p. 79f. John Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1992). Wenham's research led him to a conclusive NO!

¹³ Even atheistic philosopher Anthony Flew concedes that David Hume's objections to miracles involve "gross weaknesses." [Anthony Flew in Gary R. Habermas and Anthony G.N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? -- the entire transcript*, Terry L. Miethe, editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 34.]

¹⁴ Paul Althaus in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus-God and Man* (SCM Press, 1968), p. 100.

¹⁵ Dr. Craig in M. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, editors, *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), p. 149.

¹⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Vol. II (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 1205f.

¹⁷ See the Jewish Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," and the "Toledoth Yeshu," a Jewish tale that the owner of the grave sold the body of Jesus which was then dragged through the city streets. Both are discussed by Gary Habermas in Gary R. Habermas and Anthony G.N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? -- the entire transcript*, Terry L. Miethe, editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 99f.

destroy any hopes of Christianity spreading right from the beginning. And since the scene in question was right at Jerusalem, it was completely within their power to locate the corpse should it still have existed. Yet to their dismay, no such body was ever produced. If the Jews had the body, they would have wheeled it right down the middle of the streets of Jerusalem at the day of Pentecost when all Jerusalem was in an uproar because of Peter's sermon on the Resurrection of Christ.

Christ's Followers

Also, it is highly unlikely that Jesus' followers could have removed the body with a Roman guard protecting the tomb, plus a large stone door.¹⁸ And it won't work to charge them with inventing the account of the sleeping guards in Matthew 28:11ff. This story would only have served to help their cause had the guards stayed awake. Why would the disciples (or anyone else) want to risk their lives to steal Christ's body? The biblical record shows the disciples were scared, discouraged and disheartened. Their only motive could have been to deceive. But everything we read about these men indicates they were good and honest. How could they have gone out the rest of their lives and daily preached that Christ had risen from the dead when they knew all along it was a lie? Again, why would they have sacrificed and suffered so greatly for something that they knew was an outright deception?

It would have been foolish to hide the corpse and fake a resurrection. The consequences of their loyalty to Jesus included beatings, imprisonments, and even death. No sane person chooses these for what they know is false. Under such pressures, liars confess their deceptions and betray their cohorts.

The explosive growth of the Church is strong evidence for Jesus' resurrection and the fact that the Holy Spirit *was* poured out in great power. Significantly, it wasn't the powerful people of the day, but commoners, burdened with every cultural strike against them (1 Cor. 1:26ff), whose Resurrection message peaceably transformed the Roman Empire. Who would ever have predicted such an "impossible" feat? Yet it actually did happen through the power of the Spirit!¹⁹

That Christianity originated in Judaism²⁰ is further evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Renowned archaeologist William F. Albright observed, "In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the forties and the eighties of the first century A.D."²¹ Jewish bias against the Jesus of the New Testament was massive. What else would have led Jews to accept a shamefully hung (Gal. 3:13) "criminal", as their promised Messiah when they had longed for a military deliverer? And what else would have moved Jews to break their monotheistic convictions²² to worship Jesus as God the Son (John 1:18), or change their worship day from Saturday to Sunday (Acts 20:7)? A mere invented myth would have been powerless to overthrow such deeply ingrained hopes and cultural and religious traditions. Even Millar Burrows admits, "Jesus was so unlike what all Jews expected the Son of David to be that His own disciples found it almost impossible to connect the idea of the Messiah with Him."²³

¹⁸ This stone door would've weighed @ 1-1/2 to 2 tons (3000-4000 lb)! See Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 228.

¹⁹ "That the Christian movement could have succeeded, so that the humble men who fished on the shores of the Sea of Galilee are today better known than the very Caesars who ruled the world...is so amazing that it would be incredible if we did not know it to be the case." [Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 140.]

²⁰ Acts 2:5-43, 6:7.

²¹ William F. Albright in an interview in *Christianity Today* (January 18, 1963), p. 3.

²² "Monotheism," drawing on Deut. 6:4 ("The Lord our God is one Lord"), set Israel's belief in contrast with the polytheism of its neighbors. It appeared to exclude, even in principle, Jesus' claim to be deity. In reality, however, the same Hebrew word "one" (echad-___) is used in Gen. 2:24 ("two become one flesh"), Joshua 9:2, and Judges 20:1, and implies a composite unity (like a cluster of grapes). Thus, while Jewish bias strongly opposed Jesus' claim to be God's Son, the word in question actually allows and even implies such a possibility.

²³ Millar Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Viking Press, 1958), p. 68.

However, the New Testament states that it was Jesus' resurrection that single-handedly overcame that “impossibility,”

^{NAU} **Acts 2:23-24** *this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.²⁴ "But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.*

The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus

In addition, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus points to a momentous miracle. Beginning as a violent enemy of the Church (Acts 8:3; 9:1, Galatians 1:13), he was utterly turned around into becoming Jesus' servant. Choosing suffering for Christ's sake (2 Corinthians 11:23ff), Paul gave up all he had, endured persecution, and preached the Gospel in city after city all the way to Rome, where he died a martyr's death. He is credited with having had greater influence over the course of the Roman Empire than any other figure of the First Century apart from Christ.²⁴ Nothing other than Christ's resurrection and appearance to him can remotely explain Paul's major transformation from a hater of Jesus to a missionary for Him.

The Other Apostles

The other Apostles too, overcame fear to brave suffering, imprisonment, and even death, as they proclaimed the good news of the risen Christ across their world. Is it thinkable that these people would die so willingly for a mere myth? There are a lot of people who will die for what they believe to be true, but who in their right mind will die for what they know is a lie? Josh McDowell states, “Each of the disciples, except John, died a martyr's death . . . because they tenaciously clung to their beliefs and statements,”²⁵

In contrast to others who have died for an unverifiable hope beyond the grave (e.g., mystics seeking reincarnation or Muslim militants expecting reward from Allah), Jesus' disciples lived and died for the historically verifiable claim that the grave was empty and that he was seen alive again.

Legal scholar Dr. Simon Greenleaf, founder of the Harvard Law School, notes:

"Propagating this new faith, even in the most inoffensive and peaceful manner, [early Christians received] contempt, opposition... and cruel deaths. Yet this faith they zealously did propagate, and all these miseries they endured undismayed, nay rejoicing. As one after another was put to a miserable death, the survivors only [continued] their work with increased vigor and resolution... The annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of like heroic constancy, patience, and unblenching courage... If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error. From these [considerations] there is no escape but in the perfect conviction and admission that they were good men, testifying to that which they had carefully observed...and well knew to be true."²⁶

Dr. Greenleaf is considered by many to have been one of the greatest legal minds we have had in the U.S. He was formerly an outspoken skeptic of Christianity and who set out to disprove the deity of Christ. In the end he concluded that the Resurrection was true "beyond any reasonable doubt" according to the principles used in a court of law. Greenleaf was converted to Christ after the Holy Spirit used the conclusions of his own research as a means to show him the foolishness of his own skepticism. Many top legal minds agree with Greenleaf that if the case for Christ's death and resurrection were taken to a court of law, it would undoubtedly win. The

²⁴ Sir William Ramsey, as cited in Wilbur Smith, *Therefore Stand* (Wilde, 1945), p. 246f.

²⁵ Josh McDowell, editor, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, California: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), p. 255.

²⁶ Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists* (Kregel, 1995-reprint from 1847 edition), pp. 31-32.

claims are very well established and verified by independent and converging proofs. As Luke also confirms this when he says, *“To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.”* (Acts 1:3)

E. Jesus Just Fainted or “Swooned” on the Cross.

Crucifixion was an excruciating experience - indeed, these two words are clearly related. The cause of death by crucifixion was multifaceted and torturous! These factors included exhaustion, asphyxiation (strangling), dehydration, and congestive heart failure.²⁷ That Jesus could have survived such agony on a Roman cross only to faint and convince the professional Roman executioners that he was really dead, then push a 3000-4000 lb stone out of the way uphill with holes in his hands and feet is improbable enough! That His bruised and grievously wounded appearance could have been hidden enough so that He could deceive despairing disciples into believing He was "The Risen Lord of Life" and the valiant conqueror of death, is absurd! A man in such a condition could hardly have inspired his disciples. Jesus would have been incriminated as a fraud by his own followers! Only a supernaturally raised Jesus was capable of healing the broken hearts of the disciples before *and* after His resurrection.

As I already mentioned, if the Roman soldiers pronounced Jesus dead, then He was dead. The mixture of blood and water that poured out of the spear wound they made in his side is clear evidence of this. If the writers of the Gospels had been inclined to exaggerate, they would have been restrained from doing that by the fact that a great many people were still living who had witnessed the events of which they were writing. Many were foes. If the disciples had put in errors or exaggerations in their message, they would have been exposed by the religious leaders and others who knew the truth.

Some today might naively assume that the First Century was an age of extreme childish credulity - that people in those days were willing to attribute supernaturalism to almost any unusual occurrence. But this is an unfair way to describe that time. Jerusalem was a crossroads of the world. Educated men had been reading Aristotle for over three centuries and Epicureanism was the prevailing philosophy of the day (which said “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”). Many in the Greek and Roman world barely recognized the existence of a real God and held in utter contempt the idea of God intervening in the affairs of men. The Jews also were a skeptical and reasoned people, and had absorbed Roman and Greek philosophical ideas. Thus, the swoon theory seems to have swooned long ago!

F. Did the Disciples Hallucinate or Suffer From Mass Hysteria?

On one point virtually all scholars of every description agree, the first disciples were themselves utterly convinced they had seen the risen Christ.²⁸ The Christian gospel message about the death and resurrection of Christ breathes through virtually every New Testament document. So the real question is, how do we account for their obvious conviction? Were they just hallucinating?

²⁷ William Edwards, M.D., et.al., "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* (March 26, 1986), pp. 1455-1463.

²⁸ Renowned Oxford Classical historian Michael Grant states, *"These accounts do prove that certain people were utterly convinced that [Jesus had risen]."* [Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (Scribner's, 1977), p. 176. Even historical skeptic, Rudolf Bultmann, concedes the disciple's certitude to be "*fact*" in *Kerygma and Myth*, Vol. I, (SPCK, 1953), p. 42. Even ardent skeptic John Shelby Spong admits, *"The change [in the disciples] was measurable and objective even if the cause of this change is debated. [It] was part of that first-century explosion of power that cannot be denied by any student of history."* [John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), p. 26.]

While this may first sound plausible, many factors contradict such a notion.²⁹ To name a few:

1. The large number of witnesses (hundreds) (1 Corinthians 15:5-8) that covered the spectrum of personality types (e.g., John 20 – Peter [eccentric and frightened], Thomas [doubtful skeptic], the two Marys [fearful and unexpected], etc.), contradict the theory of hallucinations, which, by definition, are not shared experiences. There is no such thing as a vision appearing to a psychologically unexpectant crowd. It's generally received only by one person at a time, and that person must be *expecting* the vision and be in a highly emotional state. As the Bible shows, *none* of Jesus' followers expected him to rise from the dead. Luke said that when Jesus appeared to the disciples, "*But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit.*" (Luke 24:37)

2. Mistaken identity cannot be the explanation, either. Certainly the disciples would recognize the person they had been with every day for more than three years. The substantial, permanent, and positive change in lifestyle of many of the converted overthrows any theory of hallucination. Jewish New Testament scholar Dr. Pinchas Lipide, has written,

*"When this frightened band of apostles suddenly could be changed overnight into a confident mission society... Then no vision or hallucination is sufficient to explain such a revolutionary transformation."*³⁰

Although Lipide is an Orthodox Jewish rabbi who does not accept Jesus as the Messiah, (hence and unbeliever) he *concedes* the inescapable evidence that Jesus must have risen from the dead! So why doesn't he receive Messiah Jesus as his Savior by faith?

3. How can we be sure of the Resurrection of Christ?

Just as 'science' cannot empirically prove that Jesus rose from the dead, it also cannot empirically prove that God created everything in six days. In fact, 'science' can't prove *any* event from ancient history, because it is limited in dealings about the past. Historical events are known to be true because of reliable eyewitness accounts. Similarly, there are reliable eyewitness accounts (Scripture) that Jesus' tomb was empty after three days, and that He later appeared to as many as 500 people at once (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Most importantly, we know that the Resurrection is true because God, the most reliable eyewitness of all, who never lies and knows everything, tells us in His Word that these things happened. As Paul says,

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 15:3-6** *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,⁵ and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;*

Just as we accept the fact that God created in six normal-length days because of the clear Words of Scripture (Genesis 1, Exodus 20:11) Christians also accept by faith in the revelation of God that Christ rose bodily from the dead! Conversely, if we cannot believe God created in six earth-rotation days though the Words in Genesis state this, then how can we insist on believing the Words in Scripture concerning Christ's

²⁹ Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 186f. This book cites 14 fatal flaws with the hallucination theory. "Apologetics" does not mean to apologize for, but to give a rational defense ("apologia") of Christianity (1 Peter 3:15).

³⁰ Pinchas Lipide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Fortress Press, 1988), p. 125.

bodily resurrection? As we contemplate the real meaning of Christ's Resurrection during this time of year, let us also remember how important it is to take God at His Word!

^{NKJ} **Psalm 119:160** *The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.*

4. If the evidence is so great, why doesn't everybody believe in the resurrection?

If one investigates the past with the right 'glasses', and begins with the right starting point (presuppositions or axioms), the evidence, especially in the 'big picture', will be seen to be totally consistent with the Bible's history. Biblical faith is not an excuse for ignoring historical facts; instead it gives the right basis for understanding and *interpreting* the facts, which *never* speak for themselves, anyway. With that in mind, let's now turn to Matthew chapter 27-28 for an answer as to why people don't believe despite the solid historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ (Turn in your Bible to Matthew 27:62-28:1-15).

^{NAU} **Matthew 27:62-66** *Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate,⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.'⁶⁴ "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how."⁶⁶ And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.*

^{NAU} **Matthew 28:1-15** *Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.² And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.³ And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.⁴ The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.⁶ "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.⁷ "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."⁸ And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."¹¹ Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers,¹³ and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.'¹⁴ "And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble."¹⁵ And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.*

Notice a few things from this passage:

1. Matthew 27:63-66 says that the Pharisees and chief priests went to Pilate and reminded him that Jesus said He would rise from the dead and because they were afraid that the disciples would steal the body and try to start a conspiracy that Jesus arose. In v. 66, with Pilate's order, the guard went and set a seal on the tomb and guarded it all Saturday night.
2. In Matthew 28:3, there was an earthquake, an angel descended, rolled back the 3-4,000 lb. stone from the opening of the tomb and sat on it.

3. In v. 3, the angel is described in his glorious splendor.
4. In v. 4, the guards became extremely fearful of their lives and “became like dead men.” Listen to what the old Baptist Pastor John Gill says about this event,

Ver. 4. *And for fear of him the keepers did shake*, etc. Though they were soldiers, Roman soldiers and veterans, who had been used to terrible sights in the field of battle; were men of courage, and fearless of danger; and yet were seized with a panic, and every limb of them shook and trembled at the sight of the angel, for fear he was come as an executioner of divine vengeance upon them; who had been concerned in the crucifixion of Christ, had watched him as he hung upon the cross, and now his body in the sepulchre: and even supposing no consciousness of guilt in them, or dread of punishment from him; yet such was the glory and majesty in which he appeared, of which they had never seen the like before, that it had this effect upon them: “*and became as dead men:*” they turned pale, as dead men, and had scarce any life, or spirit, left in them.³¹

5. Notice in v. 5-6 that the angel did not address the unbelieving guards, but the faithful women who arrived at the tomb.
6. In v. 11 notice that “some of the guard” reported to the chief priests *all* that had happened.
7. Notice that in vv. 12-15, the guards, who were the first ones to see the glory of the angel and shook for fear of their lives upon his appearance, were easily bribed into lying about the truth of the resurrection of Christ and instead, they took the money and perpetuated a story that the disciples stole the body while they slept.

Q: Now, if an accumulation of the evidence that I taught about earlier is what is required to lead someone to faith, then why didn't these men believe? **Didn't they have “better eyewitness evidence” than anybody alive today?** Wouldn't the appearance of a majestic angel rolling back a 3-4000 lb. rock and then sitting on it at least give these unbelievers “cause for pause” to at least “check out the truth claims of this Jesus?” Not only this, but why does man today persist in his ignorance and unbelief despite the “many infallible proofs” that surround him every day such as God's handiwork in Creation and the common blessings that all people experience in life in general? Since you've never seen what those unbelieving guards saw, why do you believe and they did not? As usual, Jesus has the answer when He was talking to the wicked Pharisees,

^{NAU} **John 8:38-47** *"I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father."³⁹ They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham."⁴⁰ "But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do."⁴¹ "You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God."⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me."⁴³ "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you **cannot** hear My word."⁴⁴ "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."⁴⁵ "But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me."⁴⁶ "Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me?"⁴⁷ "He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God."*

³¹ The John Gill Library CD-ROM, *Exposition of the New Testament: Commentary on Matthew*. The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 2000.

Jesus said of the believer, "*He who is of God hears the words of God . . .*" (John 8:47a). My friends, *that* is why you believe. It is not because you had more evidence, it is not because some genius answered your confusing and tough questions, but is because you were BORN OF GOD! Praise God for the goodness and mercy He has shown toward you!

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that the godless theories attributing the Resurrection of Christ to myths, hallucinations, or to other alternative explanations of the empty tomb are improbable and are also inadequate to explain the beginnings of and fast growth of Christianity. To be sure, the Resurrection of Jesus is unprecedented and unique. As Merrill Tenney remarks, "Although the resurrection was without precedent . . . it was not abnormal for Christ.... He rose from the dead because it was the logical and normal prerogative of the Son of God."³² The Apostle Peter also remarks,

^{NAU} **2 Peter 1:16** *For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the **power** and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.*

Beloved, I would argue that *only* the appearance of the risen Christ mixed with the power of the Holy Spirit poured out on Pentecost can satisfactorily explain how Jesus' skeptical brother James (John 7:5) became a leader in the early Church (I Cor. 15:7; Acts 15), how despondent Peter became a fearless preacher at Pentecost, and how a fanatical persecutor of Christians became Paul, the greatest missionary and Apostle to the Gentiles. Christ said (John 11:25-26): "*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,"²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

For the Resurrection of Christ to be more than a beautiful Easter story, each person needs to receive Christ as Lord and Savior by faith, knowing and believing that not only has Christ bore their penalty on the cross, but that He demonstrated that His sacrifice appeased the Father by rising from the dead.

^{NAU} **Romans 1:16-17** *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for **it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "**BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.**"*

Beloved, Jesus said that He is the Resurrection and the Life and that if we believe in Him we shall never suffer spiritual death. Peter said that he didn't follow a cunningly devised myth but that he was an EYEWITNESS of the majesty of Christ. The eternally important question for you is: Do you believe this?

³² Merrill Tenney, *The Reality of the Resurrection*, 1963, reprinted 1972, 133.