

1. Who is Jesus?

I'm New to This

My earliest recollection of anything to do with Christianity was something I saw while walking to school one day at the age of ten. As I passed a Salvation Army church, a poster on the wall happened to catch my attention. It read: "Are you really alive?" I thought it was the most ludicrous statement ever! Of course, I had to be alive to read the stupid thing! There was no explanation for it, and it seemed to me that Christians could be the most illogical people around. Of course, when I finally became a Christian myself, I understood that when a person comes to Christ, there is a different kind of life that he enters into, a new life in Christ. This is what the poster must have meant; to be "*really alive*." I understand the thinking behind that statement now, but at the time, it made no sense to me. The person who had that idea was not thinking of his target audience I guess, because it only made sense to me in retrospect.

My bias against Christianity led me to search through lots of New Age stuff and other religions. What finally turned my head to look at Christianity was a book by Hal Lindsey, who wrote the book, "*The Late Great Planet Earth*." He presented many instances that gave witness to the fact that Jesus is very much alive and well. He did this by presenting biblical prophecies concerning the return of Christ and the days leading up to it. He pointed out that many of these prophecies are being fulfilled in our day. It impacted my life. I don't know about you, but I needed a lot of evidence before I came to the place in my life where I abandoned self for Christ. I knew that if I were to entrust my soul to Christ, everything would change. I was not willing to do that just for a good idea. There had to be more to it than that. I was searching for the truth itself. I reasoned that, if what the Bible says is true, it meant a lot of challenges to my present way of thinking, my worldview, and my daily decisions about how to live! I had to be sure that this was worth my commitment.

I began my search for meaning in my life with great earnestness. I don't believe that you can prove Christianity with mathematical or scientific logic, but there is a tremendous amount of evidence, which, if presented in a court of law, any logical thinking person would be obliged to consider (in my opinion). At the *very least*, anyone with a rational mind would want to weigh up the evidence and think whether it *could* be true. The Bible presents astonishing truth. The truth that, if embraced, will affect your life now and also claims to change your eternal destiny. So isn't it worth a fresh look, even if you have previously dismissed it? In this study, I want to examine some of the historical evidence for the person of Christ, who He was, and who He *is*. So, if you consider yourself to be open-minded, I would ask you to give your consideration to the following:

First of all, how do we know He even existed?

In a communist Russian dictionary, Jesus is described as "a mythical figure that never existed." Surely this is how a lot of people today think of Jesus, as a character in a fictitious story. No serious historian could maintain that position today. There is a great deal of evidence for Jesus' existence from multiple sources. This evidence comes not only from the New Testament Scriptures in the Bible, but is also found in non-Christian writings, for example, the Roman historians Tacitus (directly) and Suetonius (indirectly) both have written about Him. Then there is the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, born in 37 A.D., describes Jesus and His followers thus:

"Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it is lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians so named after him, are not extinct at this day."¹

How Do We Know That the New Testament Documents Are Reliable?

Perhaps some would say that the New Testament was written too long ago to be accurate. After all, how do we know that what they wrote down has not changed over the years as to be unrecognizable? The answer lies in the science of Textual Criticism. What that means is that the more texts or manuscripts we have, and the closer to the time it was written, the less doubt there is about the original.

Let's compare the New Testament with other ancient writings handed down to us. The late Professor F.F. Bruce (who was Rylands professor of biblical exegesis at the University of Manchester, England) points out that for Caesar's *Gallic War* we have nine or ten copies, and the oldest was written some nine hundred years later than Caesar's day. For Livy's *Roman History* we have not more than twenty copies, the earliest of which comes from around 900 A.D. When it comes to the New Testament we have a great wealth of material. The New Testament was written between 40 and 100 A.D. We have excellent full manuscripts of the whole New Testament dating from as early as 350 A.D. (A time span of only three hundred years), papyri containing most of the New Testament writings dating from the third century, and even a fragment of John's Gospel dating from about 130 A.D. There are over five thousand Greek manuscripts, over ten thousand Latin manuscripts, and 9300 other manuscripts, as well as over thirty-six thousand citing's in the writings of the early church fathers.

Work	When Written	Earliest Copies	Time Span (yrs)	No. of copies
Herodotus	488-428 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300	8
Thucydides	c.460-400 B.C.	c.900 A.D.	1,300	8
Tacitus	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1,000	20
Caesar's Gallic War	58-50 B.C.	900 A.D.	950	9-10
Livy's Roman History	59 b.c.-17 A.D.	900 A.D.	900	20

¹ Josephus, Antiquities, XV 63f.

New Testament	40-100 A.D.	130 A.D. (full manuscripts 350 A.D.)	300	5,000+Greek 10,000 Latin 9,300 others
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F.F. Bruce summarizes the evidence by quoting Sir Frederic Kenyon, a leading scholar in this area:

“The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written, has now been removed. Both the *authenticity* and the *general integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”

So we know from the earliest manuscripts that He existed, but who is He?

Martin Scorsese, the film producer, once made a blasphemous film called the Last Temptation of Christ. When asked why he made the film, he said that he wanted to show that Jesus was a real human being. Yet that is not the issue in most people's minds. Few people today would doubt that Jesus was fully human. He had a human body; He was sometimes tired and hungry. He had human emotions. He was angry, he loved, and He was sad. He had human experiences; He was tempted, He learned, He worked, and He obeyed His parents. □ □

Most people say today that Jesus was *only* a human being-albeit a great religious teacher. Billy Connolly, the comedian, spoke for most when he said, “I can’t believe in Christianity, but I think that Jesus was a wonderful man.”

What evidence is there to suggest that Jesus was more than just a wonderful man or a great religious teacher? The answer is that there is a great deal of evidence to support the notion that He was and is the unique Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. □

What did Jesus say about Himself?

Some people say, “Jesus never claimed to be God.” Indeed, it is true that Jesus did not go around saying the words, “I am God.” Yet when one looks at all He taught and the claims He made, there is little doubt that He was conscious of being a man whose identity was God.

1) Jesus’ Teaching centered on Himself

One of the fascinating things about Jesus is that so much of His teaching was centered on Himself. He said to people, in effect, “If you want to have a relationship with God, you need to come to me” (John 14:6). It's through a relationship with Him that we encounter God. In my younger years, I was conscious of a missing piece to my life; an inner void that was longing to be filled. Perhaps you are also aware of an internal dissatisfaction that you try to fill with things. This inner void is acknowledged by some of the leading psychologists of the twentieth century. They have all recognized that there is in the heart of every one of us, a deep void, a missing piece, a deep hunger. □

Freud said, "People are hungry for love."

Jung said, "People are hungry for security."

Adler said, "People are hungry for significance."

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." if you want your hunger satisfied, come to me. If you are walking in darkness, He said, "I am the light of the world."

I was terrified of death as a teenager, partly because of the danger involved in my line of work. I was a commercial fisherman on the east coast of England. I have had many exciting experiences while doing this job, which makes one consider eternity! For example, I have caught unexploded mines in our nets and had to deal with them while they were rolling around on the deck. There was always the question that would come to me—where would I go if I were to die? Hasn't everyone had a thought like that at some time? If you are fearful of death, Jesus said, **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives in me will never die"** (John 11:25-26). This is what I mean by Jesus' teaching being centered on Himself. He pointed to Himself as the answer to the missing piece in life. He did not just give a set of rules, or a philosophy to live by. He told people; "Come to me!"□

Some are addicted to different things, drugs, food, shopping, alcohol, sex, and the list goes on. Jesus said, "if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). Many are burdened with worries, anxieties, fears, and guilt. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. □

He said to receive Him was to receive God (Matthew 10:40), to welcome Him was to welcome God (Mark 9:37) and to have seen Him was to have seen God (John 14:9).□

2) Indirect Claims. Jesus said a number of things, which, although not direct claims to be God, show that he regarded Himself as being in the same position as God, as we will see in one or two examples. Turn in your Bible to Mark 2:3-12:

He claimed that He had the authority to forgive sins:

³Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷"Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? ⁹Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? ¹⁰But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, ¹¹"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ¹²He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:3-12).

This claim to be able to forgive sins is indeed an astonishing claim.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, puts it well when he writes, □

One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe, and I forgive you, you steal my money, and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give his conduct. Yet, this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the person chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws were broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivaled by any other character in history.²

He claimed to be the Judge of the World.

Another extraordinary indirect claim is that He would one day judge the world (Matthew 25:31-32). He said He would return and “sit on His throne in heavenly glory” (vs.31). All the nations would be gathered before Him. He would pass judgment on them. Some would receive an inheritance prepared for them since the creation of the world and eternal life, but others would suffer the punishment of being separated from Him forever.

3) Direct Claims

His direct claim to be the Messiah or Christ (John 20:26-29).

²⁶A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”
²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”
²⁸Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”
²⁹Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:26-29).

Jesus didn't say, "Hey, hang on a second; you've gone a bit too far there. He basically said you were a bit slow to get the point, “stop doubting and believe!”

His direct claim to be God the Son.

⁶¹Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”
⁶²“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”
⁶³The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked.
⁶⁴“You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death (Mark 14:61-64)

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Printed by HarperSanFrancisco, 1952. Page 51

If you only had one opportunity to take people to one passage of scripture to show them a direct claim to be God by Jesus, it is John 10:30-33:

³⁰I and the Father are one.” ³¹Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, ³²but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” ³³“We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (John 10:30-33).

Claims like this need to be tested. All sorts of people make all kinds of claims. The mere fact that somebody claims to be someone does not mean the claim is right. Some people are deluded, thinking they are Napoleon, the Pope, or the Antichrist.

So how can we test people's claims? Jesus claimed to be the unique Son of God; God made flesh. There are three logical possibilities. If His statements about Himself were untrue, either He knew they were false, in which case He is an imposter and an evil one at that. That is the first possibility. Or He did know, in which case He was deluded; indeed, He was mad. That is the second possibility. The third possibility is that the claims were true.

C.S. Lewis put it like this:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse...but let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.³

What evidence is there to support what He said?

1) His Teaching. The teaching of Jesus is widely acknowledged to be the most significant teaching that has ever fallen from anyone's lips. "Love your neighbor as yourself." "Do to others as you would have them do to you." "Love your enemies," "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5-7)

Bernard Ramm, an American Professor of theology, said this about the teachings of Jesus:

They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken...Their greatness lies in the pure, lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast...No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words because no other man can answer these fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them. They are the kind of words and the kind of answers we would expect God to give.□

Could this teaching come from a con man or a madman?□

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Printed by HarperSanFrancisco, 1952. Page 52

2) His Works. Some say that Christianity is boring. It would not be boring being around Jesus. When He went to a party, He changed a considerable amount of water into “Châteaux Lafite- 45 BC.” (Three bottles of Châteaux Lafite-Rothschild 1869 were just sold at a Hong Kong auction by Sotheby’s. The hammer price was \$232,692 a bottle).

What about when He went to a funeral? "Take the stone away! Unbind him and let him go!" (John 11:44).□

What about going to a picnic with Jesus when all they had was five loaves and two fish? (John 6:1-14).

What about going to the hospital with Jesus, when a man was lying there who had been invalid for 36 years? He told him to get up. He healed him completely (John 5:5).

What about His death—laying down His life for His friends? (John 15:13).

3) His Character.

Bernard Levin wrote of Jesus:

Is not the nature of Christ, in the words of the New Testament, enough to pierce to the soul anyone with a soul to be pierced?...he still looms over the world, his message still clear, his pity still infinite, his consolation still effective, his words still full of glory, wisdom and love.

The Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham, describes the character of Jesus in his autobiography, *The Door Wherein I Went*, how the person of Jesus came alive to him when he was in college:

The first thing we must learn about him is that his company should have absolutely entranced us. Jesus was irresistibly attractive as a man...what they crucified was a young man, vital, full of life and the joy of it, the Lord of life itself, and even more the Lord of laughter, someone so utterly attractive that people followed him for the sheer fun of it. The Twentieth Century needs to recapture the vision of this glorious and happy man whose mere presence filled his companions with delight. No pale Galilean He, but a veritable Pied Piper of Hamelin who would have the children laughing all around Him and squealing with pleasure and joy as He picked them up.

4) The fourth piece of evidence is His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Wilbur Smith, the American writer on theological topics, said:

The ancient world had many different devices for determining the future, known as divination, but not in the entire gamut of Greek and Latin literature, even though they used the words prophet and prophecy, can we find any real specific prophecy of a great historic event to come in the distant future, nor any prophecy of a Savior to arrive in the human race...Islam cannot point to any prophecies of the coming of Mohammed uttered hundreds of years before his birth. Neither can the founders of any cult in this country rightly identify any ancient text specifically foretelling their appearance.

In the case of Jesus, He fulfilled more than three hundred prophecies, written about Him, including 29 of them in a single day—the day He died. He could not control many of them. Some perhaps would say that He set out to fulfill them on His own. But how do you manage the place of your birth in Bethlehem? It was written hundreds of years previous as to the location of His birth. What about where He would be buried? What about the prophecy that the Roman soldiers would cast lots for His clothes while He was hanging on the cross? □ □

5) The fifth piece of evidence is His Resurrection

a) **His absence from the tomb.** Some people say that He didn't die. He just swooned on the cross and later woke up in the tomb. Let's think about that for a minute. First, the Scripture says that out of His body came blood and water (John 19:34), which we now know to be a separation of clot and serum, medical evidence in any courtroom for death. □ □

Can we really believe that Jesus deceived the Roman soldiers at the cross and feigned death? If Roman soldiers allowed someone condemned to die to escape—it was their life instead. Christ was stabbed in the side with a spear just in case. Jesus had been whipped and had his back flayed; He did not have the strength left to carry His cross. Then He hung bleeding from the wounds of the thorns in His head, and then the spear in His side. Of course, we know that Peter warmed his hands by the fire just a few hours earlier, so we see that it was very cold that day. Could it logically be possible that He shrugged off the cold in the tomb, moved the one-and-a-half-ton boulder across the entrance of the tomb, fought off or bribed the soldiers outside and then ran off?

What about when Peter and John ran to the tomb—what did they see that caused them to believe?

³So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) (John 20:3-9).

Some people believe that the disciples stole the body. Let's think about that. The disciples were greatly disillusioned at the death of their master. Can we believe that after three days they would try to steal the body under the noses of the guards at the tomb? Why would they do that? Could Peter have got up on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14) and preached to more than 3000 people for the sake of a lie? Many of them gave their lives for what they believed.

Maybe the authorities took the body? That is highly unlikely because when the disciples started preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead, they would have just produced the body.

b) **The second piece of evidence for the resurrection is His appearances to the disciples.** Were they all hallucinating? Thomas was entirely convinced when Jesus presented Himself to them alive. After the resurrection, Jesus appeared on more than ten separate occasions to different disciples, on one occasion to more than 500 people at the same time (Luke 24:36-43). Twice we

read that He ate with them—if Jesus was just a spirit, how could He eat in the presence of His disciples? (John 21:12-15, Luke 24:41-44).

c) **The immediate effect.** The changed lives of millions of people over the last 2000 years.

Michael Green, the writer of many famous and scholarly works, said:□

"(The) Church...beginning from a handful of uneducated fishermen and tax-gatherers, swept across the whole known world in the next three hundred years. It is a perfectly amazing story of a peaceful revolution that has no parallel in the history of the world. It came about because Christians were able to say to inquirers: "Jesus did not only die for you. He is alive! You can meet him and discover for yourself the reality we are talking about!" They did and joined the church and the church, born from that Easter grave, spread everywhere."□□

Christian experience.

C.S. Lewis sums it up like this:

"We are faced then with a frightening alternative. The man we are talking about was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that he was neither a lunatic nor a fiend; and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God. God has landed on this enemy-occupied world in human form."□

Are you yet convinced? If you are, please do not put off responding to this message today. The God we are talking about knows everything about you and loves you with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). He has gone to extraordinary means—coming in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus, to pay the debt of sin that you and I have deserved due to our sinful lives on Earth. The Bible says that whoever calls upon the Name of the Lord, shall be saved (Romans 10:13). If you sincerely turn to the God who made you, turn from sin, and invite the Lord Jesus Christ into your life to forgive you your sins, the Bible says that you will be saved. There is no better time than the present time.

Here is a prayer you may like to pray:

Father, I come humbly to you today being aware of the great love that brought the Lord Jesus Christ to earth to pay the penalty in my place for sin. Although He did not deserve the kind of death He died, I see that He did it for me, taking my place and dying for me at the cross. I turn around from my life of sin and come to you. Forgive me my sin and come into my life—I want to live for you from this moment. Thank you for the free gift of life that you offer me in Christ. I receive that gift of life today. Amen!

I would encourage you also to read the study following this one, entitled, “Why Did Jesus Die?”

Many of the thoughts of this study are from the Alpha Course by Nicky Gumbel. I would recommend his book, Questions of Life, printed by Kingsway Publishers.

For further study, I would also recommend the book, Evidence that Demands a Verdict by Josh McDowell.

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