

No Doubt About It Part II

History, Myth or Propaganda?

May 30, 2021

Good morning everyone!

Whether you're here on campus or watching online, I'm so glad you've taken the time to join us ...

- Especially if this your first time or *your first time in a long time* ...
- And even *more* especially (not sure that makes sense) ... even more especially *if you're not a Christian and you're a bit skeptical about "the faith"* ...
- Or if you *are* a Christian who is wondering if what you believe (or have been taught to believe) is trustworthy – if it's true, if it's real ...

... or, if it's just a made-up story designed to make us all feel better in those times when life is challenging and more than we can bear.

In Real Life

Just a few days ago, I got to witness (again) what that challenge is like when I visited with a friend who, who barring a miracle from God or a long-shot discovery by medical science, probably doesn't have much time left.

And it seems so unfair. He's just a good dude. He's funny. He cares about people. He's done a lot to help those less fortunate than him.

And he's too young to be suffering like he is.

But it's happening. He's facing death and he knows it ... which is why he asked me to come talk with him.

I said, "how can I help you, brother?"

He told me he was still fighting but that he was also anxious and scared.

And he was kind of mad at himself about that, so I said, "you *should* be anxious. You've never died before. This is your first time. So, it's OK."

And then he got to what was really bothering him. He said, "I'm not sure I've made peace with God."

Now, I've known this guy for a while – about 10 years – and I know that he is believer in Jesus.

I said, "Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and that he rose again on the third day?"

He said, "Yes, I do."

I said "good because, remember, it's not about what we do or don't do. It's about what *He* did for us. He lived the perfect life we should have lived. And then he took the punishment that should be ours on the cross ...

"... which means that *all of our sins* – past, present, future, known and unknown – are forgiven because we trust Him."

And then I wrote down a couple of scriptures so he could remind himself of that truth whenever he started feeling anxious.

One was ...

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by "works,"

so that no one can boast.
Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV)

And ...

There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.

And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.

Romans 8:1-2 (NIV)

After I read those to him (plus a couple of others), he said, "So I just need to let him handle it."

I said, "Exactly! And when you get scared about what lies ahead, read these and remind yourself of the truth."

Then we talked for a little bit more. Then I

prayed for him. And then I left.

And, later that day, as I thought about that whole experience, I was so grateful – overwhelmed to the point of tears if you really want to know ...

I was so grateful that what I was telling him wasn't just "an encouraging thought designed to help us make it through the hard times."

I was so grateful ...

- That what I was telling him *is true*.
- That *it's real*.
- That it's based on *something that really happened 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem when God entered into history by taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus of*

Nazareth.

Now, I tell you this story because I want you to understand that what we're talking about in this series isn't merely an intellectual or academic exercise.

This isn't just an "introduction to Christian apologetics."

See, the truth is that we can all debate our intellectual positions and ideas but, in the end, whether it happens quickly or it happens slowly (as in the case of my friend) ...

... all of us are going to come face-to-face with our own mortality.

And when we get there, all the B.S. we've been telling ourselves (and all the B.S. others

have told us) is going to fade away.

And what's going to matter most in that moment is truth and reality. You will want to *know* that what you have believed is *not* make-believe and that what you have committed yourself to is *real*.

By the way, that was the definition of *faith* I gave you last week.

“Faith” isn’t dependent on having all your questions answered ...

... because that’s impossible with *anything*.

“Faith” is having enough evidence to be able to make an ongoing commitment.

And “faith” (in the Christian sense of the word) is having enough evidence to believe in Jesus and commit yourself to Him.

So, last week, we began this series by talking about the evidence that points to the Resurrection of Jesus being true.

And we started with that particular issue because, if *that* didn't happen – if it's just a made-up story – then none of the other questions about Jesus and the Bible and Christianity really matter.

That's because the Resurrection is what makes Christianity "Christian." It's what makes it unique among all religions.

Remove it and what you have left is something that looks like progressive Judaism and modern Deism mashed together, which, I guess, is OK – if that's what you want.

But it's not Christianity. And we really have no reason to be here.

And, if you missed that message, I encourage you to check it out in the media section of our app and website – especially ...

- If *you're not a Christian* and you're skeptical about "the faith" ...
- Or if you *are* a Christian who is wondering if what you believe (or have been taught to believe) is trustworthy.

Another Question

Now, in laying out some of the evidence for the Resurrection ...

... one of the things that became apparent by the end was that I continually referred to what is recorded in the New Testament writings known as the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John ...

... because that's where we find the greatest amount of data concerning that event.

Of course, using those documents as “evidence” then leads to another rather obvious question – how do we know that *they* are trustworthy?

I mean, it's one thing to test out the veracity of *the story* they collectively tell, but it's another thing to test *their* veracity.

If you've been paying attention at all in recent years, you're aware that this is precisely where several well-known atheists like Bart Ehrman (who wrote the book, *Forged*) and Dan Brown (who wrote *The DaVinci Code*) make their strongest case against Christianity.

In fact, Brown's book, which came out in 2003 and was followed shortly thereafter by a

movie starring Tom Hanks ...

... Brown's book was probably the single greatest factor in the last 50 years in casting doubt on the truthfulness of the Gospels, which was reflected in many of the "doubt cards" that you all turned in several weeks ago.

- Several thought that translation errors have corrupted the original meaning.
- Others said it bothered them that other "Gospels" (like the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary*) had been left out of the New Testament.
- More than a few expressed a concern that the Bible had been "edited" for self-serving purposes.

One person wrote ...

“How can we trust the stories since it was written by man?”

Another wrote ...

“Messed up humans have made God in their own image to control others so who really knows what’s really true?”

And another wrote ...

“Book was written by a bunch of old dudes with an agenda thousands of years ago and the whole premise just seems silly and made up to me.”

So, what about those concerns? What about the claims of Brown and Ehrman and others?

Like everything else in this arena, it comes down to faith – but it’s not *blind* faith ... which,

as I said earlier, is pretty much useless when it really matters.

Instead, it's faith *based on enough evidence to believe that the Gospels are legit* and that we can trust what they are telling us about Jesus.

And over the next few minutes, I want to share just a tiny bit of that evidence with you because that's all we have time for.

But I want you to know that for every book written by a modern atheistic scholar (and *not-so-modern* scholars – these criticisms have been around for a long time and most have already been addressed) ...

For every book written by an atheistic scholar, *there are a dozen or more* written by well-educated and brilliant Christians who make a strong case for the veracity of the Gospels.

Two of those I'm relying on quite heavily in this message.

One is *Cold Case Christianity* by J. Warner Wallace ...

... who *literally* was, for many years, a cold-case detective in Los Angeles.

Wallace was once an atheist, but he became a Christian after applying the investigative techniques he used in his cases to the Gospels. His book follows that format. It's a great read.

The other book is *Can We Trust the Gospels?* by Peter Williams ...

... who is chair of the International Greek New Testament Project and holds a Ph.D. in ancient languages.

In spite of his lofty credentials, Williams writes that his book “seeks to present a case for the reliability of the Gospels to those who are thinking about the subject for the first time.”ⁱ

I highly recommend both of those books to you.

I should also mention that, in preparing for this message ...

I came across a fascinating website called “History for Atheists” ...

... which is the work of Tim O’Neill who, as a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia and a former state president of the Australian Skeptics, is a committed atheist.

What makes the site fascinating is that O’Neill’s purpose is to call out and correct what he calls “New Atheist Bad History” – which is “the use of biased, erroneous or

distorted pseudo history by anti-theistic atheists.”ⁱⁱ

At this point, there are about a dozen very *lengthy* articles setting the record straight regarding some of the most common critiques of the Gospels and how the ancient church handled those and other writings.

Testing The Gospels

Ok, with all of that as introduction, let’s talk about some of the evidence for the veracity of the Gospels and what they tell us about Jesus.

Now, there’s lots of ways to go about this but I think the clearest is to follow J. Warner Wallace’s method.ⁱⁱⁱ

He says that eyewitnesses are typically evaluated in criminal trials by asking four critical questions:

- Were the witnesses really present at the time of the crime?
- Can their accounts be corroborated in some way?
- Have they changed their story over time?
- Do they have a motive that would cause them to lie, exaggerate or misinterpret what was seen?

If you read his book, he goes into a great amount of detail explaining why and how those questions have worked for him and other detectives in solving crimes – even those that have gone “cold” over time.

It’s actually pretty cool.

Anyway ... those same four questions,

Wallace says, can be asked of the gospels. And that's what we're going to do.

So here we go.

First of all, do the gospels represent the testimony of eyewitnesses? Or were they made up later as many skeptics hold?

After all, it's much harder to tell an elaborate lie in the same generation as those who witnessed the truth.

1. Evidence shows that the Gospels were written early enough to have been cross-checked by those who were still alive and would have known better.

In other words, the written story of Jesus was circulating among Christians close enough to the events they described that they could have easily been debunked if they were false.

How do we know that? How do we know that the Gospels weren't written *long* after Jesus supposedly lived – say, in the second century as some skeptics claim (although that number is shrinking over time)?

Well, if we had the time, I could give you many reasons, but I'll just give you one.

And this is fascinating.

The most significant Jewish historical event of the first century, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 – you gotta remember that date ...

The most significant event in AD 70 *does not show up* in any of the writings of the New Testament^{iv} which is very odd given that Jesus actually predicted it would happen.

In addition, other key events including ...

- The siege of Jerusalem, which was conducted leading up to the destruction of the temple.
- And the deaths of Peter, Paul, and James.

... are not included.

The only reasonable explanation for these omissions is if the book of Acts (the NT text that *ought* to describe these events) was written before AD 61–62.

Now, we know from the introductory lines of the book of Acts (which Luke wrote) that his gospel (which is one of the documents in question) was written prior to Acts.

But how much prior?

Well, the Apostle Paul actually *quotes* Luke's gospel in his first letter to Timothy as well as the first letter to the Corinthians^v which most scholars date in the range of AD 53–57.^{vi}

So, Luke's Gospel had to be written before then.

But Luke tells us in the beginning of his Gospel that he had gathered information from "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word."

... which is why, when you read what he wrote, it's clear that he either refers to or quotes directly from over 500 verses that are found in either the gospel of Mark or the gospel of Matthew ...

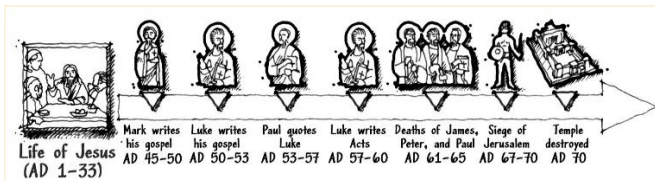
... which means *they* were written before *his*, probably sometime between 45-50 AD – 15 to 20 years after the events, a time when many

of the original witnesses were still alive.

In fact, one of the things that's interesting about Mark's Gospel is that many of the key players named in the other Gospels are unnamed in his.

It's likely they're still in danger and Mark was protecting their identities!

Now, that's a lot of words, so let me show you a picture which illustrates it better.^{vii}



Let's work it backwards. <explain>

Now, here's the point:

While skeptics would like to claim that the Gospels were written well after the alleged

life of the apostles and much closer to the church councils that affirmed them *hundreds of years later*, the evidence indicates something quite different.^{viii}

Ok, second question: can the Gospel accounts be corroborated in some way?

In other words, are there external source or internal clues that verify that they're historically legit?

Oh, my goodness! How much time do we have?

2.I say that because the evidence shows that the Gospel accounts are better corroborated than any other ancient historical account.

We could spend all day on this one talking about how ...

- Archaeology increasingly corroborates many people, locations and events described in the Gospels. Almost daily there is a new find that backs up what we read in the NT.

We could talk about how ...

- Ancient Jewish, Greek and even pagan accounts corroborate the basic outline of Jesus' identity, life, death and resurrection. Though it is brief, Jesus shows up in non-Christian historical accounts of that era.

And how ...

- The Gospel authors correctly identify minor, local geographic features and cities in the region of the accounts which is important because ...

Most of our manuscripts come from *outside of the region* where it all took place. They're from Egypt, Italy, Greece, and Turkey.

And it's hard to believe that scribes in those location could come up with so much *accurate* Palestinian cultural knowledge. That knowledge is corroboration that the authors were actually there.

Anyway, I could go on and on but, in the interest of time, let me just focus on two examples of corroboration.

The first is what might be called "undesigned coincidences" which is when the observations of one eyewitness fill in the gaps that exist in the observations of another eyewitness.

According to Wallace, that's why it's so important for eyewitnesses to be separated before they are interviewed.

"True, reliable eyewitness accounts are never completely parallel and identical," he says.

Instead, they are different pieces of the same puzzle, unintentionally supporting and complementing each other to provide all the details related to what really happened.^{ix}

Now what's fascinating about this is that way back in 1847 a Professor of Divinity by the name of J.J. Blunt identified over forty locations in the New Testament where one eyewitness unintentionally supported another.^x

For example, in Matthew 8, we read that ...

When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.

Matthew 8:16 (NIV)

Question – why did people wait until evening to come to Jesus?

Well, in Mark's version of the story we get all the same details but one more.

He writes ...

*As soon as they left the
synagogue, they went with
James and John to the home of
Simon and Andrew.*

Mark 1:29 (NIV)

The reason people didn't come to be healed until evening was that it was the Sabbath. That's why they were in the synagogue.

Again, there are forty of these where one author fills in and corroborates the story of another. That one was very simple but some – like the feeding of the 5,000 – are much more complex and involved.^{xi}

The second example of corroboration is how the Gospel authors use the correct names for that location and time.

And this is amazing.

Several years ago, a Hebrew scholar by the

name of Tal Ilan assembled a lexicon of all the recorded names used by the Jews of Palestine between 330 BC and AD 200.

From many different sources, she discovered that the most popular men's names in Palestine (in the time span that encompassed the gospel accounts) were Simon and Joseph. The most popular women's names were Mary and Salome.

Later, another researcher using her work found that the New Testament narratives closely match the same percentages found in all the documents she examined.

More specifically, the most popular names found in the Gospels just happen to be the most popular names found in Palestine in the first century.

Here's why that matters: If the gospel writers

were simply guessing about the names they were using in their accounts, they happened to guess with remarkable accuracy!

A more reasonable explanation is that the use of these names by the gospel writers is consistent with their claim that they were eyewitnesses.

Furthermore, they knew enough to differentiate the most common names.

For example, the gospel writers introduce us to Simon "Peter," Simon "the Zealot," Simon "the Tanner," Simon "the Leper," and Simon "of Cyrene."

... which is something you would expect if the gospel writers were truly present in Palestine in the first century and not making up a story at a later date.^{xii}

By the way, this is part of the reason why other “Gospels” – like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary – were never accepted as valid. *The names of the major players in those stories didn’t fit the time and place in which it supposedly happened.*

So, contrary to what Dan Brown promulgated in his book and movie, those writings were not “banned” by the church. They didn’t have to be because it was clear from the very beginning that they were not legit.

Let’s move to the third question, which is one that a lot of people have ... were the gospel accounts changed over time?

3. Evidence shows that the Gospels as we have them today have changed very little since the first century ...

... which, quite frankly, is almost close to miraculous.

How do we know this?

Again, we could spend hours on this but I'm going to focus very briefly on just two ways we know.

The first is from J. Warner Wallace describing what he calls "The Chain of Custody." And instead of me trying to explain it, I'm just going to show you a video and let him describe it.

Ok, so here we go.

So, the point is that when you look at the writings of those down the line from John – those directly under his influence – what they say *hundreds of years later* about Jesus is exactly what John's Gospel said ...

... which is what you would expect if there had been no changes.

And Wallace says you can do the same kind of tracing on Paul's disciples and Peter's disciples and get the same result.

That's pretty impressive.

What else is impressive – and this is my second example of how we know very little has changed ...

... is that in 1515, a guy by the name of Erasmus produced the first published and printed edition of the New Testament in Greek.

For the Gospels, he had *only two manuscripts* available to work with, both from the twelfth century.

In other words, there was a gap of over 1,000 years between Erasmus's manuscripts and the time the Gospels were written.

Since Erasmus's time, a couple thousand *additional* Greek manuscripts containing complete editions of all four Gospels have been discovered or identified. Among those manuscripts are two which date from approximately AD 350.

Furthermore, *partial* manuscripts of all four Gospels from the third century have been discovered with additional fragments from copies of Matthew and John possibly dated from the second century.

Point being ... the gap between the earliest available manuscripts and the writing of the Gospels has narrowed massively since Erasmus's day.

He was working with copies from the 1100s. We now have partial manuscripts from the 100s and complete manuscripts from the 200s.

Guess how much changed between the scripts of the 200s and the copies from the 1100s?

Very little.

35 verses at the end of Mark's Gospel, and twelve verses in the middle of John's, appear to have been *added* to the text – not removed.

That's a stunning level of consistency, but not only that.

It shows that the idea – the claim, the criticism – that “the church” through the ages made changes to the text simply doesn't hold water.

Ok, so we've looked at the first three questions. Let's look at the final one.

Did those who were part of the very beginning of the movement have a reason to lie and make the whole thing up?

That's a great question because answering it will also answer the theory that the early Christians stole the story of "dying and rising gods" venerated by pagan religions of that time and place and simply put Jesus in their place.

For them to do such a thing, there would have to be a really good reason – a really good motive.

According to Wallace, who worked countless

murder cases in his career, murders happen for only three broad reasons: *money, sex, or power.*

That's it. Nothing more.

"When I enter a murder scene," he writes, "I simply ask myself a question: *Who would have benefited from the perspective of money, sex or power?*"

"My suspect," he concludes, "will eventually fit into one of these three categories."

He goes on to say that these three motives are also the same driving forces behind other types of misbehavior. They are the reasons why we sometimes ...

- Think what we shouldn't think.
- Say what we shouldn't say.

- Or do what we shouldn't do.^{xiii}

So, what about the Gospels and those who were responsible for writing them down and disseminating them? Were they motivated by any of these things?

In a word ... *no*.

4. Evidence shows the founders of Christianity had nothing to gain from lying about Jesus when writing the Gospels.

Everything we know about the earliest leaders whether from the NT itself (Acts and letters from Paul and Peter) makes it very clear that ...

- No one was getting rich.
- No one was acting in scandalous matters with the opposite sex.

- And there was very little power to be had given that Christianity was an outlawed religion, and its leaders were in constant danger.

Given the situation, they simply *couldn't* benefit from lying about what they saw.

In fact, based on what happened to so many of them, they would have been far better off if they had kept their mouths shut.^{xiv}

Conclusion

So, there you have it: just a tiny bit of the massive amount of evidence that points to the trustworthiness of what you can go home and read this very day should you choose to do so.

And if you're not a Christian and you're truly seeking to know more about Christianity, I

suggest you do just that.

Download the YouVersion Bible to your smartphone or tablet. Or if you prefer a website, go to www.biblegateway.com.

And then read one of the Gospels. It'll take about as much time as binge-watching two or three of your favorite shows.

- Mark is the shortest.
- Luke is the most detailed and written for people who aren't Jewish (like most of us).
- John is the deepest.
- Matthew is kind of the middle ground of all the others.

By the way, if you've never read the Bible before, don't start at the beginning with

Genesis!

And we'll talk about *why* in the message next week. Instead, start with one of the Gospels.

And then maybe check out Wallace's book and/or Williams' book. You owe it to yourself to get a fuller picture of what it is you're questioning.

Now, *if you're a Christian who is doubting if what you've believed about Jesus is true or not*, I hope that what you've heard today will inspire at least a little bit of confidence that ...

- We really do have access to the most important parts of the story of Jesus.
- We really do have a record of the most important sayings of Jesus.

And that is evidence enough to believe in Him

and to be committed to Him because, again, that's what this is all about.

We're not just trying to make a case or prove a case so we can be "right."

Instead ...

- We're trying to live a life that matters.
- We're trying to build a foundation strong enough to withstand the storms that are coming (if they haven't already).
- We're trying to be prepared to give an answer to those who want to know why we have a hope that they do not.

So, I want to challenge you, too, to take some time this week and read through just one of the gospels.

For me, it's been a long time since I've read

John all the way through, so I'm going to do that one.

And if you'll join me in reading one of the Gospels, I think you'll discover once again what an amazing person Jesus was ... and that there is enough evidence not only to trust Him but to worship and obey Him.

As we close this morning, we're going to sing a worship song together that expresses that kind of trust and commitment.

So, let's stand together and do that. (And if you're not there yet, it's OK, feel free to just listen).

Let's pray.

Endnotes

ⁱ Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Crossway. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ <https://historyforatheists.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ This is succinctly outlined @

<https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/is-the-bible-true-the-cumulative-case-for-the-reliability-of-the-gospels-free-bible-insert/>

^{iv} Wallace, p. 161

^v This actually the second of three. The first one (which Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians) has apparently been lost.

^{vi} 1 Tim. 5:17–18, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

^{vii} Wallace, pg 170

^{viii} Wallace, pg 171

^{ix} Wallace, p 183

^x Wallace, p 185

^{xi} Wallace, pg 187

^{xii} Wallace, p 192-194

^{xiii} Wallace, J. Warner. *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (p. 240). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

^{xiv} Wallace, J. Warner. *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (p. 251). David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.