

Title: “#5 – What's the evidence for Christianity?”

Purpose: To take a legal route in investigating the incredible claims that Jesus made in the gospels.

INTRODUCTION

Enough evidence

The story is told of Bertrand Russell, (who was an atheist philosopher - someone who doesn't believe in any such notion of a supernatural God), being questioned as to what he would say if he found himself on the great day of Judgment being asked by God:

"Q. Why didn't you believe in Me?"

Russell replied, **"I would say, 'Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!'"**

And it might be that for you, this morning, that is a sentiment that SOMEHOW RESONATES – maybe you would completely agree.

God and unicorns

Some might like to argue that **God AND unicorns** are kind of **“in the same category”** when it comes to evidence.

They would say that the inability to produce a unicorn is a pretty solid reason to not believe in unicorns.

So then – Q. Why should we not adopt the identical standard when it comes to God?

And even if you say: well because He's Spirit and doesn't have a physical body, then:

Q. Why wouldn't He **at least produce an obvious sign that He is there** - how about the words: “I am God, I am here”, written in big fiery letters in the sky?

Parable – The Kings hands are tied

There was once a philosopher who wrote a parable about a king and his love for a lowly maiden (19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard) – it goes like this:

“... there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. **And yet** this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden.
Q. How could he declare his love for her?
In an odd sort of way, his KINGLINESS TIED HIS HANDS. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him.
Q. But would she love him? Q. She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly?
If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage...that too would overwhelm her.
He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal...
For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.”

Q. Would there be enough evidence to convict you?

I remember the first time, many years ago now, when someone asked me the question – (and I did think it quite a penetrating question):

“If **YOU** were to be taken to court accused of being a Christian: **Q. Would there be enough evidence to CONVICT YOU?”**

And it does set you thinking.

This morning, we are dealing with a question that could be phrased in a somewhat similar manner:

“If **CHRISTIANITY** was taken into a courtroom: **Q. Would there be sufficient evidence to demonstrate the AUTHENTICITY of its claims?”**

For quite a lot of people in this world, at least in the West, they would most likely say: “Well that would be a very short case. **SURELY** it would be thrown out of court in the first hour because the judge would have to conclude:

“Sorry – there is simply ***NOT ENOUGH EVIDENCE*** to make any sort of “coherent claim” that **CHRISTIANITY** and its various **CLAIMS** are HISTORICAL and AUTHENTIC”.

So our task for this 5th question in our “**7 of the Best**” series is:

- to take CHRISTIANITY into the courtroom
- to test out whether it can be shown to be properly HISTORICAL
- and to test out whether the large claims that it makes can be verified as being AUTHENTIC

So without further ado – off we go into the courtroom.

Into the courtroom – 2 jokes

The story is told of 3 men, a **lawyer**, a **clergyman** and a **doctor**. They were together floating on a raft for 2 people and one of them had to go and try and swim to the nearby island. To make matters worse, the waters they were in were shark infested.

After a vote the **lawyer** was chosen to attempt to swim to land – and so he dives in and after a short while 2 sharks start to circle him and then they come right alongside him and promptly and without undue ceremony – lift him and propel him safely to shore!

The **clergyman** – cries out “A miracle! Praise God!!”

“No! No!” Cries the **doctor** – “It’s only Professional courtesy – all lawyers are SHARKS!!”

Here lies an honest lawyer

Or perhaps you have heard the account of the lawyer whose surname was “**Strange**” and who was shopping for a tombstone. After he had made his selection, the stonecutter asked him what inscription he wanted on it.

“Here lies an honest man and a lawyer,” he said. “Sorry, but I can't do that,” replied the stonecutter.

“In this state, it's against the law to bury two people in the same grave. However, I could put 'here lies an honest lawyer'.”

"But that won't let people know who it is!" protested the lawyer.

"Certainly will," retorted the stonecutter. "People will read it and exclaim, 'That's Strange!'"

Well apologies to any lawyers in our midst!!

The EVIDENCE BUSINESS

I think one of the first things to say about the law and the courts is that they are all about **the EVIDENCE BUSINESS**.

In the last 6 months I have had to give evidence to the police twice about 2 unrelated incidents – and it is, even in our modern technology driven age, **a laborious and detailed process**.

Witness statements run into many pages and everything has to be written down in some detail.

Standards of proof

So what I want to do this morning is to apply the **LEGAL STANDARDS OF PROOF** to the items of evidence for Christianity.

Now let me state what the **LEGAL STANDARDS OF PROOF** are:

- **FIRST** – we have what is called “**PREPONDERANCE OF EVIDENCE**”

This is the standard that is used in **most civil court cases**.

A preponderance of evidence is where there is **SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE** to make it “**more likely than not**” that the fact the claimant seeks to prove is true.

(This is a standard which **goes beyond** the idea of something being a “**mere possibility**” – though certainly this is also **a long way short** of being in the realm of “**absolute certainty**”.)

- **SECOND** – we have what is called “**BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT**”

And here, this is the standard that is used **in criminal court cases** – so the more serious cases.

This standard says that no other logical explanation can be derived from the facts except that the defendant committed the crime, thereby overcoming the presumption that a person is innocent until proven guilty.

BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT is the highest standard of proof that must be met in any trial.

It is where the judge or jurors have **no doubt** as to the defendant's guilt, **OR** if their **only doubts are ‘unreasonable doubts’**.

THE CHRISTIAN CLAIM

Let me begin outlining the claim for which we are heading into court:

- our claim is that God came down to earth in human form in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth

- that because of the brokenness of the human race as a whole he came, lived, died upon a cross and then was raised on the third day to secure salvation from our sin
- his death acted as a substitution for each one who looks to that “once for all” sacrifice for him or herself

In summary form

So summarising our approach for these next few minutes - we are seeking to establish, **#1**, the veracity (that is the truthfulness) of the historical **DOCUMENTS** that record the eyewitness statements to, **#2**, the veracity of the **WITNESSES** themselves, to finally **#3**, the veracity of the **CLAIMS OF CHRIST** themselves.

And all of this we are going to do from a legal point of view, from a legal methodology within the context of a law-court:

1] THE DOCUMENTS

Talking about DOCUMENTS we are here thinking about the 4 NT gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (although what we are going to be saying here will also apply to the rest of the NT as well).

The integrity of the NT writings is substantiated through three key sources:

- the ancient Greek manuscripts and various fragments
- the ancient translations
- and also the large number of quotations of scripture by early Christian writers

The Greek manuscripts are by far the most important among these sources.

One of the most powerful evidences that help establish the credibility of the New Testament documents is the sheer multitude of manuscript copies that are on hand.

According to apologist Norman Geisler:

"Counting **Greek copies alone**, the NT text is preserved in some 5,686 partial and complete manuscript portions that were copied by hand from the second (possibly even the first) through the fifteenth centuries."

To add to the Greek copies, there are **over 9,000 various ancient translations in Latin, Arabic, and other languages**. This totals to over 14,000 New Testament surviving copies.

In contrast:

- Homer's Iliad has only 643 surviving copies
- For Caesar's Gallic War...only nine or ten are good
- Of the fourteen books of the Histories of Tacitus only four and a half survive

FF Bruce a renowned British NT scholar concludes:

"... if the **NT** were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt."

In addition, **the early church fathers of the second to fourth centuries compiled 36,289 quotations of the NT.**

If all of the copies of the manuscripts were to be lost, we could reconstruct a huge portion of the New Testament from these alone.

At a legal level

So for these documents to be legally admissible – they need to be able to be shown to go back to near the time of the actual event AND be reliably transmitted.

The age of the manuscripts takes us back to within 1 generation of the Resurrection AND the vast number of manuscripts available, mean that we can, with an incredibly high degree of accuracy, re-construct the original autographs.

So if anyone ever says to you – “Well the bible is nothing like what was originally written.” – then just point out the incredible documentary quality that exists for these ancient documents that make up our bibles – and just perhaps they will quieten down a bit.

If not suggest to them that they should not believe too much of anything they read about the Roman Empire or other classical era history.

Before we head onto the **next rung of our legal examination** let me play you this short video to help nail down this section:

*****Play Video – John Warwick Montgomery – Document Reliability (2 Mins 58 Secs) *****

#1 – The Documents; now #2

2] THE WITNESSES

It seems we cannot simply impeach, or call into question, the validity of the DOCUMENTS, BUT what about THE WITNESSES themselves.

Clearly it doesn't matter how good the DOCUMENTED statements are if the WITNESSES are judged to be, let us say, “**drunken men in a state of stupor**”.

Schoenberg Construct

There is **A SIMPLE CONSTRUCT** used in the performance of law whereby **a witness OR his words** can be ruled out of court and considered inadmissible. It is **a construct** which has **two parts or steps**:

- **FIRSTLY** – you must look at the **WITNESS “INTRINSICALLY”** – Q. **So what does that mean?**

Well it is simply checking that there is nothing about the witness themselves that is flawed.

It would ask questions like – Q. Is this witness known to be a natural born liar? Q. Does this witness have a criminal record? Q. Has this person been subject to psychiatric care? Q. Is there anything at all about the person that makes them suspicious or potentially unreliable?

And we can say from the gospels that the people whose words are recorded there are just very ordinary people.

- **SECONDLY** – you must go a step further and look at the **WITNESS “EXTRINSICALLY”** – Q. **What does that mean?** This is where you conjecture that external conditions were such that the witnesses were placed under extreme

pressure to make them say things that were not what they wanted to say.

But actually we can say that these witnesses put themselves into the place of hostility from the religious authorities because of the fact that they were choosing to not tow the line and reject Jesus as the Messiah.

Their testimony

Ok – so the witnesses themselves are fine – Q. But what about their TESTIMONY?

Let's use the 2 rules again:

- **FIRST “INTRINSICALLY”** – here what we discover is that the 4 TESTIMONIAL ACCOUNTS that we have preserved in the 4 GOSPELS are actually *not* all alike.

And you might think “Oh dear – we have a problem Houston!!” But actually, what you find is that when accounts are too similar, it is a bad thing because experience tells you that the people giving their testimonies had clearly got together and then carefully lined up their statements ahead of time.

It is what is called COLLUSION. And in the gospels we don't find CONTRADICTION and crucially we also don't find any prior COLLUSION.

- **SECOND then looking “EXTRINSICALLY”** – here we amass evidence from any contemporary records of the time and any archaeological evidence that might corroborate things.

Well we don't have much other contemporary writing, as these were the documents that were gathered together by the church and collected into the NT.

However we do have archaeology and as has been said many times over the centuries – “Archaeology is the Bible's best friend.” because time and again, where people have questioned the validity of some history figure or place, after a few centuries people dig up some remains or they uncover some inscription which then confirms what the Bible had been saying all along.

Cross examination

Now you might say:

“Well that is good that we have **reliable documents AND witnesses** that cannot be dismissed from court because their quality is very high – they are both INTERNALLY and EXTERNALLY sound. BUT : Q. What about cross-questioning?”

Normally in court there would be opportunity for these witnesses and their statements to be **cross-examined** by the prosecution lawyers.

Q. So how does that work for the admissibility of the NT in general and the 4 GOSPELS in particular?”

FF Bruce – (one of the primary NT Scholars in the UK), wrote a book in the 1940's called “**The NT documents are they reliable?**” and in Chapter 4 he make this point:

“... it was not only friendly eyewitnesses that the early preachers had to reckon with; there were others less well-disposed who were also conversant with the main facts of the ministry and death of Jesus.

The disciples could not afford to risk inaccuracies (not to speak of wilful manipulation of the facts), which would at once be exposed by those who would be only too glad to do so.

On the contrary, one of the strong points in the original apostolic preaching is the confident appeal to the knowledge of the hearers; they not only said, 'We are witnesses of these things,' but also, 'As you yourselves also know' (Acts 2v22).

Had there been any tendency to depart from the facts in any material respect, **the possible presence of hostile witnesses in the audience would have served as a further corrective.**"

So the presence of hostile witnesses who had **the MEANS, the MOTIVE and the OPPORTUNITY** to discredit the NT writings serves as the equivalent of contemporary court **cross-examination**:

- The religious authorities **had the means** – they themselves were present during Jesus' 3 year ministry
- They also **had the motive** – they clearly wanted to destroy Jesus and all He stood for
- They **had the opportunity** – they were the key people – the movers and shakers in Jewish society and they firmly held the reins of power

So then, thus far – LEGALLY – we have SOLID DOCUMENTS & we have SOLID WITNESSES which leaves us with **thirdly** the CLAIMS THEMSELVES - #3 then:

3] THE CLAIMS

Anyone can make grandiose statements and even outrageous claims, BUT clearly just saying them OR even sincerely believing them yourself is *not* the same thing as **CONFIRMING THE CLAIM**.

Q. So how do we move on to CONFIRM THE VARIOUS CLAIMS OF JESUS?

And the answer is: "**VIA THE RESURRECTION**".

And I wonder whether your "gut reaction" to that might be one of SURPRISE.

But let me urge you to think it through a bit:

- the safest place to begin is by asking: Q. OK - what was Jesus' own approach?

Remember, really early on in Jesus ministry, how he cleansed the temple and then, very understandably the Jews came back and said the following to him:

John 2 verse 18-19 "Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

One other time, later on in his ministry Jesus was challenged by the religious leaders – Matthew 12 v 38-40 "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Once again Jesus points to something which SYMBOLIZES the key evidence that you need if you want to verify

Jesus – everything He does, everything He claims – and the SYMBOL of Jonah in the whale TYPIFIES Jesus – His death (literally being swallowed up into the grave and then 3 days later the resurrection being spat out again unto new life once again).

- Take the approach of the apostles after Jesus ascension as the church starts to be planted and grow.
Q. What did they tend to point at?

Remember, right at the start of the Acts of the Apostles when they had to replace Judas Iscariot with another who would become an apostle – [Acts 1 verse 22](#) says: “Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must **become a witness with us of his resurrection.**”

Or you could take that great and early credal confession of the church that Paul quotes in [1 Cor 15 and verse 3-5](#) “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.”

So let us focus down on what the documentary evidence gives us regarding the Resurrection

We have Jesus appearing, over a 40 day period, to numerous people, appearances that were publically verifiable.

Credal confession 1 Corinthians 15

There was a very early credal confession that the infant church used and the apostle Paul gives it to us in [1 Corinthians 15 verses 3-8](#):

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

What Paul is saying here is that if you want to check out the reality of the Resurrection – all you have to do is to go and find one or more of these 500 because a good proportion of them are still alive.

In [Acts 26](#), when the apostle Paul is on trial before King Agrippa, we get a good insight into the way things were regarding the various happenings in connection to Jesus, his ministry, his death and his resurrection – I’ll read you a couple of verses:

“I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that **the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead**, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is **true and reasonable**. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, **because it was not done in a corner.**”

Explaining away the missing body

Now if you simply want to insist that the Resurrection never happened then you are necessarily left with explaining away the absence of the body.

Q. Who would have taken the body?

Well you have 3 interest groups to choose from and in none of their cases is it in their interest to steal it away:

- you have **the Romans** – and for them, their PRIMARY concern was to keep the peace.
Think about it: Q. Why did Pontius Pilate finally consent to having Jesus crucified in the first place given he knew perfectly well that he was innocent?

Well simply because it would lead to further rioting and discontent amongst the Jewish people.

- you have **the Religious Jewish Leaders** – the Pharisees, the Sadducees – and they had every reason to avoid starting a rumour that Jesus, this “upstart Messiah”, had actually Resurrected and so therefore there was no body to be found.

I mean in those days they didn’t even have to exhume a body – they only had to roll back a stone and unwrap a few layers of body wrap to confirm that Jesus was definitely dead.

Q. Do you seriously think that they would have not done exactly that, IF THEY COULD, when rumours started to go around that Jesus was alive?

This is why the gospels record that they put around a different explanation – that the disciples had come along and stolen the body to make it appear that way.

- so **what about the disciples** – well again it does not make any sense.
The disciples had given everything they had into the cause of Jesus and when they saw Jesus crucified, when they saw the body of Jesus speared by a Roman Centurion to make completely sure he was dead – Q. What was their reaction?

Well they were completely downcast. They were utterly gutted, to put it mildly.

Q. So why would they suddenly go from that state to one of boldness and irrepressible joy – if none of them saw Jesus alive again and they full-well knew that the body of Jesus had been stolen by some from their own number?

Q. Why would they go through many years of persecution, all the way to certain death, on account of one who was very publically put to death and whose claims very evidently were *not* satisfied?

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by simply reading you 2 quotes & then 2 verses from [Isaiah 45](#)

Firstly, [Blaise Pascal](#), the French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer & Christian philosopher who wrote the

famous **Pensees**, this is part of statement #430, he says:

“God has not made himself manifest because he has willed to abandon those people who do not want happiness. He is manifest to those who seek him, he is not manifest to those who do not seek him.”

Second, Simon Greenleaf, American Lawyer in the 1800’s and one of the principal founders of the **Harvard Law School** & author of the book “***The Testimony of the Evangelists, Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice***” – he writes:

"All that Christianity asks of men on this subject, is, that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals.

Let the witnesses be compared with themselves, with each other, and with the surrounding facts and circumstances; and let their testimony be sifted, as if it were given in a court of justice, on the side of the adverse party, the witnesses being subjected to a rigorous cross-examination.

The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability and truth ... Either the men of Galilee were men of superlative wisdom, and extensive knowledge and experience, and of deeper skill in the arts of deception, than any and all others, before or after them, **OR they have truly stated the astonishing things which they saw and heard.**"

Verses from Isaiah

Wrapping it up - 2 verses from Isaiah chapter 45.

Recognize that these verses do **not** contradict each other, **they are peas in the same pod, they just show 2 sides of the same coin.**

***** And I want you to decide which of the 2 sentiments from this coin is UPPERMOST for you *****

Here’s what we might call **the “TAILS SIDE”**:

Isaiah 45 verse 15 “**Truly** you are a God who **HIDES HIMSELF**, O God and Saviour of Israel.”

Alright – now **the “HEADS SIDE”**:

Isaiah 45 v 19 “I have ***NOT* SPOKEN IN SECRET**, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have ***NOT* said to Jacob’s descendants, ‘SEEK ME IN VAIN.’**

I, the Lord, **speak the truth;**
I **declare what is right.”**

AMEN