

# **COHERENT CONVICTIONS**

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Mark F

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## Introduction

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This paper is a companion essay to Unapologetic, published in April of 2023. While Unapologetic examined philosophical and evidentialist arguments for the existence of God, this paper investigates issues more directly related to the Christian faith, with the goal of establishing the cogent consistency of a traditional Christian worldview.

Following the structure of William Lane Craig's book, Reasonable Faith, the content of this essay has been curated to analyse central doctrinal claims of the Christian faith, and how they integrate into a holistic framework that provides a more compelling and fulfilling explanation of the human condition than naturalism or other religions can afford. Supplementary content is included from other print publications, and online resources.

The urgency of existential philosophy establishes the impetus for discussion and analysis of subsequent topics. Existentialist philosophy addresses deep questions regarding the meaning of life, the value of life, and the paradoxical nature of man. These questions reveal the self-contradiction of a naturalistic framework, showing the human condition to be essentially absurd. Through adoption of a Christian framework this absurdity can be resolved, leading to a more fulfilling understanding of meaning, and a transcendent sense of purpose.

After elucidating the often misconstrued concept of faith, the relationship of faith and reason, along with the role of evidentialist argument is discussed. The principles of reformed epistemology facilitate an analysis of the roles of the Holy Spirit, and how Christians enjoy a "dual warrant" of their faith. This dual warrant encompasses both experiential knowledge of the truths of faith, and the supporting confirmation of evidentialist argument.

The two unique doctrinal truths of Christianity, the incarnation and the trinity, are examined. The distinctiveness of these doctrines, especially when contrasted with other religions, is emphasised. While contending that naturalistic presuppositions against miracles should be discarded, the authority of these central doctrines is analysed through the verification of Christ's miracles. The significance of Christ's miraculous ministry shapes the Christian worldview, leading to deeper understanding and knowledge of God.

The most famous and influential figure of history, the self-identity of Christ is a central topic of Christian theology. His self-identity shaped the preaching of the Apostles, and developed into the formational theology of the early Church. Through analysis of Christ's teaching, implicit evidence reveals that He believed himself to be fully divine, but also fully human. He believed He was the Messiah of Israel, the incarnate Son of God, and the saviour of all humanity.

Classical apologists understood the importance of Christ's resurrection to the foundations of Christian faith. They based an argument for the defence of the



resurrection narrative upon three assertions: the authority of the apostles, the purity of the Gospel text, and the historical credibility of New Testament scriptures.

A response to the Biblical criticism movement and contemporary subjectivist philosophy, modern apologists demonstrate that faith in Christ is justified by defending the resurrection through evidentialist arguments. Analysing historical data regarding the burial of Christ, His post mortem appearances, and the very origins of the Christian faith, the resurrection hypothesis can be shown to be more plausible than any other naturalistic alternative.

For each topic, this paper aims to demonstrate the compatibility of the Christian theological framework with the human condition, illustrating how it not only confirms, but deepens one's existential experience. The objective is to show that even abstract concepts like existentialism and the relationship between reason and faith must be addressed by any comprehensive worldview, advocating for the rejection of those that fail to do so. The condensed summary of some evidentialist apologetic arguments is intended to directly address the question of how belief in the Christian religion can be rationally justified.



## Existential Absurdity

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### *Introduction*

Built upon the cultural, intellectual, and philosophical developments of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment was a period of triumphal rebellion. Scientists and philosophers shattered the shackles of religion which had oppressed western society since the conversion of Constantine. The values of reason, science, and secularism allowed seventeenth and eighteenth century free-thinkers to rise up against religious authority, superstition, and dogma (Craig, 2008, p. 71). God was not yet dead, but had been dealt a mortal blow.

He was not finally killed until the nineteenth century, when the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed His death. God was dead in the lives of modern, enlightened men, who could no longer look to divine authority as the source of a shared cultural system of morality. These men could no longer accept the authority of traditional, religious institutions. The realisation was both liberating, and terrifying; Dostoyevsky concisely writes "Without God, everything is permitted." By killing the creator-father, men were suddenly alone in the universe, becoming cosmic orphans (Craig, 2008, p. 71).

### *Absurdity*

In his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre criticises eighteenth century atheists for their lack of consistency — they denied God's existence but still imagined that man possessed a human nature, indicating "essence precedes existence." Sartre's more consistent atheistic existentialism holds that existence comes before essence, and that humans must define their essence through the exercise of free will, generating meaning *ex nihilo* (Walls & Dougherty, 2018, p. 305).

Unfortunately, the meaning-making capacities of man quickly run into the hard endstop of death. As Sartre writes, "Tomorrow, after my death, some men may decide to establish Fascism... If so, Fascism will then be the truth of man... In reality, things will be such as men have decided they shall be." Even worse still, naturalism holds that all decisions and all truths are ultimately meaningless as the universe is condemned to a slow death of thermodynamic equilibrium (Walls & Dougherty, 2018, p. 306). In fact, humans cannot possibly experience any ultimate meaning without the preconditions of God, and immortality of the human soul. Without immortality of the human soul, a human life is no more or less valuable than the life of an animal (Eccles. 3:19-20). Without God, there is no transcendent purpose that humans can serve, and there is no possibility of ultimate justice, or final reconciliation and fellowship (Craig, 2008, p. 86).

Sartre's observations illustrate the absurdity of life without God and immortality — man must bootstrap his own meaning, but the reality of mortal existence commits any such efforts to an exercise of self-delusion.



Although material reductionists may readily adopt nihilist philosophy and accept the ultimate meaninglessness of life, very few will take the logical next step and assert that human life has no inherent value. In fact, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is written based upon the premise of the inherent dignity of human life. Although the human condition is wretched, and confounded by meaninglessness, every human life still reserves some modicum of nobility. In *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal discusses the enigma of man — creatures that are miserable, but also possess noble greatness.

Man's misery is primarily due to uncertainty and insignificance. If the senses can even be trusted, nothing of nature reveals the existence of God. Through technological augmentation of the senses, man learns he is an infinitesimal speck lost in the immensity of time and space. Ungrounded and uncertain, man pursues an aimless quest for meaning, while his disposition is characterised by inconsistency, boredom, and anxiety. Relationships are distorted by conceit, and society is founded upon mutual deceit (Craig, 2008, p. 66).

But although man is miserable, he at least knows that he is miserable. The greatness of man lies in the gift of thought — the universe may crush a man, but even so, man is nobler than the universe because he knows that it crushes him, while the universe has no such knowledge. Pascal writes: "What a chimaera then is man... what a prodigy! Judge of all things, yet an imbecile earth worm; depositary of truth, yet a sewer of uncertainty and error; pride and refuse of the universe. Who shall resolve this tangle?" Although never achieving refuge from misery, man's nobility lies in the security of awareness of his wretched condition (Craig, 2008, pp. 66, 67).

Pascal's observations illustrate the absurdity of life without God — man is a miserable wretch adrift in the immeasurable cosmos, yet somehow maintains a nobility such that nothing in nature compares to the value of a human soul.

The contemporary philosopher, Thomas Nagel, considers the human condition by considering the gap between the objective, and subjective perspectives of an individual's life. Nagel writes "From far enough outside my birth seems accidental, my life pointless, and my death insignificant, but from inside my never having been born seems nearly unimaginable, my life monstrously important, and my death catastrophic." The conditional probabilities aligning for any individual's birth are vanishingly small — a single life is objectively insignificant if solely for the reason that it probably should have never even occurred. But from the internal, subjective perspective, a person not only has a sense of meaning, but also a sense of purpose and belonging. As Nagel articulates, "Subjectively we feel that we and those we love belong here — that nothing could undermine our right of admission to the universe" (Nagel, 1989, p. 213). This existential sentiment arises from the human capacity for self-transcendence and the ability to see oneself as part of a larger, purposeful endeavour. The inexorable pursuit for meaning and significance often leads



individuals to embed their identities within broader social or cosmic contexts. But when confronted by the uncomfortable reality of their objective insignificance, people try to reassert the value of their life through identification with greater causes or purposes, an attempt, Nagel argues, that ends in absurdity (Walls & Dougherty, 2018, p. 307).

Nagel's observation of the perceptual gap between objective and subjective reality illustrates the existential absurdity inherent in a life without God. While any given human life is objectively insignificant and statistically improbable, it simultaneously holds a subjective essentiality and enjoys a pre-ordained entitlement to existence.

The word "absurd" has been chosen by existential philosophers to highlight the deep and paradoxical contradictions of the human condition that afflict every person whether they are aware of it or not. These contradictions run so deep that they incapacitate the minds of people who examine them closely and clearly, a condition sometimes described as "existential angst". Most people, however, refuse to examine these fundamental contradictions with any level of rigour, preferring to distract themselves through the escapism of entertainment or travel, the overcompensation of workaholism or fitness obsession, or the destructive addictions of drugs and gambling. Medicated and placated by hedonistic pursuits, most human lives proceed unawares in absurdity.

### *Absurdity Resolved*

How does Christian theism address the meaning of life? Christian theism addresses it through the foundational doctrine of "God is love". This doctrine originates from the Christian narrative of the Fall, then Incarnation, and Atonement. Regarding this narrative, Plantinga writes "This overwhelming display of love and mercy is not merely the greatest story ever told; it is the greatest story that *could* be told. No other great-making property of a world can match this one." The Christian narrative affords a deeply satisfying response to the question of meaning, because every person is an active participant in the most maximally great narrative that can be imagined; man is the beloved of the greatest possible being, the greatest possible lover. Thus Christian theism resolves the absurdity of meaning (Walls & Dougherty, 2018, pp. 312, 313).

How does Christian theism address Pascal's paradox of man? Within the framework of Christian theism, individuals find grounding in the steadfastness of divine love (Ephesians 3:17). This foundation establishes a coherent system of ethics and morality, ascribing value to the human soul as a creation in the image of God. As the pinnacle of God's creation, humanity is intended to hold a position of nobility within the natural order, but his rightful position is distorted by the fall of original sin. Fortunately, the salvific work of Christ redeems the tangled, fallen state of humanity, allowing individuals to assume new identities as children of God. Thus Christian theism resolves the absurdity of the paradox of man.



How does Christian theism address Nagel's perceptual gap? On Christian theism, the objective does not contradict the subjective, but rather elevates the value of the subjective account to levels not possible on naturalism. Biblical doctrine establishes God as a loving Father who observes every sparrow that falls (Matt 10:29); thus the subjective account is elevated as humans have the right to claim a place as children of God, the greatest of His creation. The staggering improbability of any person's birth accentuates divine love, as God ordained the birth and delights in it. On Christian theism man can rightfully claim his subjective perception of belonging in the universe as a beloved child of God. Thus Christian theism resolves the absurdity of Nagel's perceptual gap (Walls & Dougherty, 2018, p. 313).

### *Conclusion*

Although no existentialist argument can ever provide positive proof for Christian theism, the aforementioned absurd contradictions of existence must be addressed by any self-consistent worldview. A failure to confront these profound contradictions is to surrender to the void of absurdity, condemning individuals to lives of superficiality, full of complacency and the regret of unfulfilled potential — severed from the full depth of human experience. Christian theism affords a logical, and deeply fulfilling account of the human condition, while atheistic naturalism struggles in uncertainty and inconsistency (Craig, 2008, p. 69).

The most useful aspect of existentialism is to motivate people to seriously consider their condition, inspiring contemplation about the nature of reality and the existence of God. In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard defines existential despair as an internal struggle against the existential condition that prevents people from actualizing their full potential. Through continual distraction people never address their existential condition, living an unsatisfying life of regret and unactualized potential (Craig, 2008, p. 67). The tragedy of this pitfall is so great, that existentialist authors like Kierkegaard have been described as “jumping out the page to grab the reader by their lapels, shaking them and shouting ‘Do you really believe what you say you believe?!’” (McKay, 2022).

Existentialist argumentation challenges all people to examine their presuppositions and beliefs, and personally wrestle with angst over their condition, to achieve a greater fullness of character.





## Reason and Faith

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Intellectual reasoning is a defining feature of the human experience; more mysterious, but no less powerful, is the force of faith. Religious zealots wage holy wars that have shaped human history, enduring hardships and committing atrocities through the emboldenment of their faith, amongst other depraved motivations. How is faith defined, and what is the nature of the relationship between reason and faith? Why do some people have powerful religious experiences while others hear only the silence of God? What is the function of religious experience, and what is the criteria upon which a belief of faith can be deemed reasonable?

### *Faith*

A typical secular definition of faith is “unwarranted belief”, or “unyielding belief even when one suspects the belief is false”. In actuality, this definition is more accurately an example of “misplaced faith” — a belief that lacks adequate justification. Faith, like any conviction, can either be misplaced or appropriately grounded. In contrast, “reasonable faith” involves belief supported by sufficient epistemic warrant. Craig provides a definition of reasonable faith: “trusting in what you have good reason to think is true”, which reflects more accurately the role of faith in the Christian church throughout history (Craig, 2013). The concept of trust relates to an important part of Christian doctrine regarding free will; God wants humans to walk with him in faith — He does not desire subjugation of will. He does not require absolute certainty in belief of the resurrection as a prerequisite for salvation, but He does require a submission of will; a person must surrender control of their life and trust that obedience to God’s plan is the fulfilment of their ultimate purpose (Grudem, 2009, p. 380).

### *Reason*

Historical thinkers have described the roles of reason and faith as complimentary. The Augustinian tradition was defined by the concept of “faith seeking understanding”. Augustine thought that authority of scripture inspires faith, and faith inspires reason, leading to understanding and knowledge (Craig, 2008, 30). Aquinas’ approach was more intellectual, distinguishing between truths of reason and truths of faith. Aquinas thought truths of reason could be proved through explicit argument, while truths of faith must be inferred because they are not empirically evident. For Aquinas, the existence of God was a truth of reason, while the doctrine of the trinity was a truth of faith. In contrast, the enlightenment thinker John Locke eschewed authority, considering rational, evidentialist arguments a prerequisite for religious belief. He argued that reason is the foundation for faith, and was critical of “religious enthusiasm” — faith not grounded by evidentialist argument (Craig, 2008, pp. 32 - 34).



### *Epistemological Reformation*

Reformed epistemology challenges enlightenment rationalism and its epistemic framework of traditional foundationalism. According to Alvin Plantinga, belief in God can be considered "properly basic;" it is rationally justified without requiring external arguments or evidence. This perspective contrasts with traditional foundationalism, which maintains that properly basic beliefs must meet certain strict criteria.

The criteria of traditional foundationalism places various beliefs into certain categories. For example, an "incorrigible" belief is properly basic because it is immune to error; it usually regards a mental state (e.g., "I am in pain"). Or a "self-evident" belief may be properly basic because it is immediately obvious; its truth is apparent through understanding its meaning (e.g., "all bachelors are unmarried men").

Plantinga's reformed epistemology redefines properly basic beliefs to include those arising from the proper functioning of cognitive faculties. For Plantinga, acknowledgement in reality of the historical past, and belief in the existence of other minds are examples of properly basic beliefs because they naturally arise from the normal operation of healthy cognitive faculties within appropriate environments. Noting that humans (under appropriate conditions) naturally form a belief in God, it is justifiable to label belief in God also, "properly basic". There is no particular reason to distrust the "sensus divinitatis" any more than one might distrust their memory or physical senses. Indeed for some believers, the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit is so powerful that they can be justified in proclaiming knowledge of God's existence. Craig, building on Plantinga's framework, argues that reason serves a supplementary role to faith, useful for pursuing knowledge or showing the truths of Christianity through argument (Craig, 2008, pp. 39-42).

### *Mechanisms and Function of Religious Experience*

Human cognitive faculties function through an interplay of logical reasoning and intuitive belief formation, enabling individuals to make decisions of faith based upon their best understanding of reality. Craig argues, however, that the witness of the Holy Spirit, sometimes referred to as "religious experience" is actually the basis of faith, providing experiential knowledge of salvation (Craig, 2008, p. 43). How does the Holy Spirit reveal knowledge of God to individuals, and what is the purpose of the Spirit's work?

It is important to note that different individuals will experience the work of the Spirit in diverse ways. This is because human cognitive faculties are uniquely configured, resulting in a distinct perception of reality shaped by any particular balance of reason and intuition. While some individuals may experience direct, special revelations from God, others may only feel the tuggings of conscience. Others may have to work even harder, and find the revelation of truth deep within the study of philosophy and theology. Nevertheless, the Spirit manifests the presence of God in the world, and so



in some ways is universally accessible to both believers and unbelievers (Grudem, 2009, pp. 552, 558). Some specific mechanisms through which individuals experience the Holy Spirit can include:

- **Conviction of guilt/sin** — The Holy Spirit convicts non-believers of sin, divine righteousness, and condemnation before God (John 16:7-11). This conviction highlights humanity's fundamental inadequacy to achieve righteousness, pointing to Jesus' atonement as the sole means of salvation.
- **Guidance** — Upon reflection some people describe a sense of guidance through their life. This aligns with the role of the Holy Spirit described in scripture that guides people to fulfil God's purpose (Ephesians 2:10, Gal 5:16-18).
- **Inner peace** — With strong faith, some people achieve a supernatural sense of peace that is afforded by the Holy Spirit. For example the American Confederate general, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, once said "My religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed" (Philippians 4:7).
- **Assurance of salvation** — Believers can have confidence in their salvation as the Holy Spirit provides assurance of belonging as children of God (Romans 8:16). This knowledge is experiential and gives confidence that God will sustain the believer in faith.
- **Transformation and renewal** — The Holy Spirit empowers people to become radically transformed. This is often seen when unbelievers trade lifestyles of addiction and disorder for purpose and mission through newfound faith (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- **Desire for relationship with God** — The witness of the Holy Spirit is the only reason anybody comes to know God at all (Craig, 2008, p. 46). Man does not naturally seek God, but is brought to awareness of his desire for relationship with God through the Holy Spirit (Romans 3:10-11).

The function of such religious experience is to give knowledge of the truth of Christianity, and convict unbelievers to come to faith. It empowers believers to live spirit-filled lives in obedience to God. The basis of faith for a spirit-filled Christian is their experiential knowledge of God, argument and evidence are supplementary. In this way, nobody can fail to know God because of a lack of good arguments. One only fails to know God by making an intentional decision to ignore, or reject the witness of the Holy Spirit (John 3, 19-21, Craig, 2008, p. 50).

### *An Objection*

But of so many religions, how can Christians confidently claim knowledge of truth through the Holy Spirit? Is not Muslim or Mormon religious experience equally self-authenticating, or alternatively does it discredit all religious experience as



subjective and spurious? Should not false religious experience undermine a Christians confidence in their own faith? Craig argues not, because Christians enjoy a dual warrant of their belief. Not only does the Holy Spirit provide experiential knowledge of truth, but evidential argument and reason provides sound arguments for the very existence of God, and the historical credibility of the Gospel. Christianity is outstanding amongst religions as it enjoys the unique case of overwhelming evidentialist argument for its claims, emboldening Christians to share their faith with greater confidence (Craig, 2008, pp. 49, 50).

### *Conclusion*

It is critical to establish the concept of faith not as a blind leap, or unyielding belief, but rather as actionable trust and confidence in what one has good reason to believe is true. Although evidentialist argument is one example of a reason for faith, reformed epistemology argues that Christian faith is fully warranted as a basic belief. There are many other simple, valid reasons for faith, such as: “I trust the teachers God has put in my life to instruct me in the way of truth”, or “I see God working in my life and the lives of those around me”. Craig emphasises Martin Luther’s concept of the ministerial use of reason to support faith. Magisterial application of reason judges faith based on naturalistic metrics, while the ministerial application of reason better captures the full depth of human experience by using reason to support intuitive truths of faith. Though nonuniform, and varying in manifestation for every individual, human religious experience is universally accessible in some form, as the Spirit of God works continuously to reconcile humanity with its creator.



## Historical Foundations and Miracles of Christianity

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Christianity is a faith grounded in historical claims, supported by a verifiable historical narrative, and affirmed through the divine intervention of Christ's miraculous ministry. Although historical relativists maintain that historical knowledge is unattainable, their position is tenuous and self-contradictory (Craig, 2008, pp. 230, 231). The development of the historical method emerged from the narrative-style writing of ancient authors into a flourishing science during the enlightenment, as historians such as Voltaire, Gibbon, and Hume attempted to establish the true context of historical events. During the nineteenth century the systematic methodologies of sociology, archaeology, and anthropology were implemented as tools of data collection for the formation of historical hypotheses. By using the modern tools of the historical method, Christians today enjoy an evidentialist source of warrant for their faith, by scientifically evaluating the historical and miraculous claims of the Christian religion as testable hypotheses.

### *Historical Assertion*

To evaluate truth claims of any religion, their origin must be examined. Many eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism are based on central tenets that are primarily metaphysical; their historical legends are not constitutive. Consequently they cannot be verified through the methods of historical science, and can only be examined philosophically. Some other religions, like Islam and Judaism are based on truth claims of historical events, but contain key errors in their accounts and interpretation of these events. Most critically, Islam and Judaism fail to accommodate the best-established fact of the historical Jesus — His crucifixion and resurrection (Craig, 2015).

Christianity is the only religion grounded in historical events which also passes the rigorous tests of historical science. The supporting narratives of Christianity, the Gospels, enjoy exceptional credibility as ancient texts in the genre of historical writing (Craig, 1998, Craig, 2007). The two most unique, and distinguishing claims of the Christian faith, the incarnation and the conception of the Trinity, are not shrouded in mystery or mysticism but are firmly anchored in historical reality (Green, 1977, p. 101). Consequently, these claims can be evaluated using the methodologies of historical sciences.

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation describes the decisive revelation of God to humanity, becoming incarnate in the figure of Jesus Christ (Grudem, 2009, ch. 26). Incarnation doctrine passes the historical test; Jesus of Nazareth's historical existence is broadly affirmed by modern scholars (Ehrman, 2012). In Buddhism, the Buddha guides followers on the path to Nirvana. In Islam, the prophet Muhammad imparts divine laws and moral values to achieve atonement with God. Judaism emphasises a combination of repentance, prayer, charity, good deeds, fasting, and study of the Torah for atonement and forgiveness. These religions are characterised



by man reaching out towards God, by trying to follow divine law or prophetic teaching. Christianity uniquely features God reaching out to man, becoming incarnate in the person of Christ (Bauckham, 2008).

The Christian trinitarian conception of God is totally unique compared to other monotheistic religions (Samples, 2000). While Judaism and Islam profess the absolute oneness of God, Christianity describes God as one being in essence, but three in person: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Trinitarian doctrine serves to reconcile another uniquely Christian doctrine, that “God is love”. This doctrine holds that God’s essence is the definition of love, and that because God is a tripartite, relational being, love is a necessary part of His nature (Bray, 2015). Although trinitarian doctrine is not explicit in New Testament writings, the teaching of Jesus implicitly establishes a trinitarian conception of God (John 10:30-38, Matthew 28:18-20, John 14:9-17). Christ’s entire ministry was public and multiply attested by ancient authors; His teachings can be examined as credible historical data.

### *Miraculous Verification*

The Gospel accounts of Christ’s miracles can be assessed for historical credibility. Such analysis is important because it provides understanding and insight into the nature of God. Unfortunately the problem of miracles is a stumbling block for many people, because they presuppose a naturalistic worldview. Under naturalism, miracles are nonsensical; but it is a fallacy to discount the testimony of miracles based upon naturalistic presuppositions (Craig, 2008, p. 281). If there is even a possibility that God exists, then miracles are also possible. Sceptics may wish to dismiss accounts of miracles until God’s existence is proven, however the burden of proof rests on the sceptic to demonstrate God’s nonexistence before disregarding miraculous testimonies (McDowell & McDowell, 2017).

Even without considering the gospel accounts, there is good evidence that Jesus performed “miracles”, regardless of how one wishes to interpret them. There are multiple extra-biblical sources that discuss the figure of Christ, and confirm His reputation as a miracle worker. The Babylonian Talmud describes the execution of Christ on passover eve, on charges of sorcery and apostasy (Sanhedrin 43a:20). Jewish religious authorities of antiquity, adversarial to the Christian faith, sought to discredit Christ by labelling him as a practitioner of sorcery rather than acknowledging him as performing supernatural miracles under divine authority. This adversarial testimony demonstrates Jesus’ contemporary reputation as a miracle worker. The Roman historian Josephus is even more explicit, writing “At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For He was a doer of startling deeds...” (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.63). Writing less than 100 years after Christ’s death, Josephus indicates that Christ was a miracle worker. Both the Talmud, and Josephus enjoy credibility as accounts of hostile testimony. As opponents of Christianity, they considered the Gospel narratives of Christ biased and inaccurate.





But by accidentally corroborating the Gospel accounts, these sources indicate that the Gospel records of Christ's miracles can be accepted at face value.

Christ's miracles are distinguished in ancient literature by their unique and extraordinary nature. The specific details of Christ's ministry and miracles are worth assessing, as they directly reveal truths about the nature of God and His plan for humanity.

Attestation of the way Christ performed miracles indicates His divine authority. Unlike the wonders performed by Hellenistic magicians, or Jewish holy men, Christ always affects the miracles personally. He does not require divine assistance through prayer, but can perform supernatural actions directly (Craig, 2008, p. 324). Having authority to heal, forgive sins, or cast out demons supports Trinitarian doctrine, by emphasising the co-equal and co-eternal nature of Jesus with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christ's directness in miracle-working attests to inherent divine power, distinguishing Him as fully divine, unlike other religious figures.

Miracles verify Christ's identity as the Messiah. Over 300 Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled by Christ, including the virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14), lineage from David (Genesis 22:18), birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), and specific details of His crucifixion (Psalm 22). Fulfilment of prophecy through the miraculous circumstances of Christ's ministry strengthens the Christian doctrine of Christ as the Messiah and Savior. This affords a robust framework for Christian apologetics, demonstrating the continuity and fulfilment of God's covenant through Jesus.

The miracles of Christ function as manifestations of the inbreaking kingdom of God, signifying decisive revelation through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, aimed at achieving salvation (Craig, 2008, p. 324). This also establishes Christianity's doctrinal premise of salvation through grace — a concept unique from all other major religions as previously discussed.

The nature of Christ's miracles also demonstrate God's compassion, as every act of healing or restoration is a foreshadowing of final redemption. These miracles are not merely demonstrations of divine power but are profound expressions of God's love and commitment to humanity, as He reconciles the pain and suffering of man through the blood of Christ. The numerous healings, exorcisms, and provisions of Christ illustrate the doctrinal truth of "God is love", while also foreshadowing the eschatological reconciliation of humanity with God in the coming New Creation, embodying the hope of eternal life and restoration (Wright, 1996, ch. 5.4.iv.b).

### *Conclusion*

The core tenets and doctrines of the Christian faith can be investigated by evaluating the historical assertions of the Gospel accounts. Christianity presents a narrative where God decisively interacts with humanity through falsifiable historical events. Christ's miracles are significant because they verify Jesus' authority, Messianic



identity, and foreshadow the redemption of New Creation. Abandoning naturalistic presuppositions, miraculous verification should not be astonishing, especially when considering the context of Christ's ministry as the culmination of God's redemptive plan. By better understanding and appreciating the miracles of Christ, one can achieve a greater appreciation of God's love and commitment to humanity.





## Claims of Christ

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Although Buddhism could exist without Buddha, Islam without Mohammed, or Judaism without Moses, the Christian religion is contingent upon the person of Christ, His claims, and His resurrection. teaching illustrations and parables, Christ did not make explicit messianic claims; however, He implicitly revealed His self-understanding as the fully-human, fully-divine Saviour. Evidenced through His unusual and authoritative preaching, teaching, exorcisms, forgiveness, and miracles, Christ believed that His ministry represented a turning point in history, as God enacts the ongoing processes of restoration, reconciliation and transformation to New Creation.

Who did Jesus think He was, and what public claims did He make about His identity?

### *Christ as Messiah*

The earliest Christian sources (and even contemporary, non-Christian sources) describe the worship of Christ as God, and Messiah. The Gospel of Mark is explicit in noting that Jesus tried to conceal His identity, so how did the belief in Christ as messiah originate? The answer lies in Christ's explicit and implicit Christology recorded in the Gospel accounts. The name Christos (messiah) rapidly became almost a surname for Jesus, and became the name of His followers less than 12 years after His death (Acts 11:26).

The question of critical importance to establishing Jesus' self understanding is: Did Jesus proclaim himself as messiah, or was it a title bequeathed by His followers? Sceptical scholars try to argue that Christ's implicit messianic self-identity present in the gospels is a product of early Church theology, as they amended the original texts. But this explanation does not account for the very origin of the disciples' belief in Christ as messiah. Prior to the Easter resurrection, there was no Jewish tradition for messianic identity evidenced through crucifixion. Consequently, the disciples would only come to believe in Christ as messiah if Christ himself believed and behaved with a messianic self understanding (Craig, 2008, pp. 300-310).

### *Son of God*

A divine self-understanding of Jesus is multiply attested in the synoptics, the gospel of John, and even the apocryphal gospel of Thomas. The parable of the wicked vineyard tenants appears in all these sources, and has credibility of authenticity because it coheres with the contemporary Jewish cultural milieu, and contains Aramaic linguistic cues. The parable demonstrates that Jesus considered himself the Son of God, not merely a prophet, and God's final messenger.



Jesus' identity as the Son of God is implicitly and explicitly established by numerous sayings attributed to him; several include:

- "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30)
- "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?" (John 14:10)
- "... baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matthew 28:18-20)
- "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27)

By referencing the Father (God), and the Son (Himself), Christ's statements implicitly establish Christian trinitarian doctrine. Jesus considered himself the unique Son of God, and the incarnate revelation of God the Father to mankind (Craig, 2008, pp. 310-314).

### *Son of Man*

The Son of Man was Jesus' favourite self-title — frequently whenever people called him the Messiah, He would intentionally refer to himself as the Son of Man. This was a bold title to claim, because of the cultural and historical significance of that title.

The Son of Man is a figure most famously represented in Daniel 7, from the dream of the four beasts. This dream is a condensed summary of the whole Biblical narrative, written in the picture language of humans and beasts. In Genesis, humans were created by God to occupy the second divine throne, and rule beside him over creation. Humans were supposed to rule over the animals of creation, but an animal itself tempted the humans to fall into sin. Thinking that they could become exalted and rule creation on their own terms, humans ate the forbidden fruit and consequently forfeited the primary calling of their human existence. Rather than ruling the animals, humanity began enacting violence, becoming beastlike.

The Old Testament continually uses the language of humans acting like beasts to describe actions, consequences, and how God can redeem beastly violence for His own good purposes. But no human in the narrative is ever worthy of re-ascending to the second, empty, divine throne and reclaiming humanity's place as co-ruler of creation. In the dream of Daniel 7, however, Daniel prophetically sees a "divine" human, the Son of Man, ascending to the throne and being worshipped like God.

By placing Himself at the centre of the Old Testament narrative and prophecy, Jesus is making a claim to divinity and authority as the rightful heir of all creation (Mackie & Collins, 2019, (Craig, 2008, p. 317).



### *Implicit Christology*

Through Jesus' preaching, teaching, actions, and prayers (among other features) it is evident that He considered Himself the divine Son of God, fulfilment of prophecy, and saviour of the world.

Jesus continuously preaches about the inbreaking kingdom of God, and His central role in its arrival. By choosing a symbolic number of 12 disciples whose role would be to "also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28, Luke 22:28-30), Jesus implicitly states that He is destined to be the true King of Israel. Jesus is not merely a herald of the kingdom, He considers Himself its rightful heir (Craig, 2008, p. 319).

Jesus speaks and acts with confidence of divine authority. While Jewish first-century religious teachers were focussed on interpreting the Torah, Jesus added His own teachings to the Mosaic law, and in some cases directly opposed the Torah. Unless Jesus was truly the Son of God, alteration of the divinely revealed Mosaic law would be blasphemous. Jesus' continual usage of "Truly, truly I say to you..." further indicates His authority; Jesus is not merely interpreting the word of God, but is speaking on His own behalf. In so doing He indicates His words have divine authority and inspiration (Craig, 2008, pp. 320, 321).

When Jesus acts as exorcist, He demonstrates His self assurance of divine authority. The consensus of New Testament scholarship is that Jesus believed in His ability to exorcise demons, demonstrating a claim of authority over spiritual forces of evil. It also shows Jesus' belief in the present arrival of God's Kingdom, and the expulsion of Satan marking the dawn of a new era (Craig, 2008, pp. 321, 322).

The forgiving of sins is another action which demonstrates Christ's divine self-understanding. The most incontestably historical of Christ's parables (such as the prodigal son and the lost sheep) shows that He extends mercy and forgiveness to people who are lost in sin. First century Jewish religious authorities realise that only God has authority to make such a proclamation, so unwilling to recognise Christ as divine they called His claims blasphemous (Craig, 2008, pp. 322, 323).

Christ's ministry represented the culmination of God's plan to redeem humanity; within this context Jesus performed divine miracles. He never prayed for assistance like the prophets or other religious figures of history, but is recorded as effecting the miracles directly himself. Regardless of whether Christ's miracles are explained naturally or supernaturally, it is evident that Christ believed He had physically healed people, and even raised the dead (Matt. 11:4-5, Craig, 2008, pp. 323-325).

### *Conclusion*

Through the use of explicit Christological titles, and the implicit assurance of divine authority demonstrated by Jesus' preaching, teaching, actions, and prayers, it is possible to confidently conclude that Jesus believed He was the divine son of God.



Was Jesus correct in this self understanding? To say that Jesus was either a lunatic or charlatan is inconsistent with the image of a wise and loving Rabbi developed by the Gospel accounts. To avoid acknowledging Christ as the son of God, the preferred recourse of sceptics is to declare him a product of legendary development. Nevertheless, this rationalisation fails to account for the historical and textual evidence which affirms Christ's self understanding as God incarnate.



## Classical Apologetics

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The Christian religion stands or falls upon the resurrection of Christ. If Christ rose from the dead, His resurrection is a demonstration of power over death and gives hope for future salvation. Without the resurrection, Christian faith is futile and all should despair in their meaningless existence. How did historical Christian thinkers justify their faith in the resurrection? Traditional apologetics relied upon establishing three premises: the Gospels have authentic, apostolic authorship, the text of Gospels is pure, and the Gospels are historically reliable.

### *Authenticity of the Gospels*

As four independent attestations of a historical narrative, the gospels are of outstanding quality compared to other ancient sources. In favour of their apostolic authorship, the writing style of the Gospels is simple; they have characteristics of eyewitness testimony such as vivid descriptions, names, personal recollections, and a lack of literary embellishment. Each gospel is written in a style appropriate of its respective author; e.g., Luke writing is more polished and sophisticated demonstrating an educated background, while Mark is a straightforward transcription of Peter's oral testimony, accessible to a broader gentile audience. There is no particular reason to suspect the Gospels were not written by their traditional apostolic authors any more than one might suspect the writings of Josephus to be forgeries (Craig, 2008, pp. 335-336).

As Christianity spread, it is reasonable to assume the disciples disseminated writings to teach believers beyond Judea. In *Evidence of Christianity*, William Paley presents 11 points indicating authenticity of apostolic authorship, beginning by tracing the line of authors who cite the Gospels and the book of Acts. Citation testimony is a tool regularly employed by historians to determine the authorship of secular works; using this metric apostolic authorship is better established than authorship of any other work of classical antiquity (Paley, 2009, pp. 172-216, Craig, 2008, p. 335).

Paley notes that the scripture was rapidly collected into a distinct volume. Ignatius references the "Gospels and Epistles", and according to Eusebus, the Apostolic Father Quadratus distributed the Gospels to converts during his travels. Both Irenaeus and Melito refer to collections of writings which later became the New Testament. The writings were given titles of respect, with early Church fathers referring to them as Scriptures and divine writings. They were also read publicly, and disbursed through copies, commentaries, and harmonisations. Aside from Clement's commentary on the Revelation of Peter, there are no commentaries on any books other than the Gospels until three hundred years after Christ (Paley, 2009, pp. 226-233, Craig, 2008, p. 335).

Early authors like Origen indicate the authorship of some Epistles (e.g., Hebrews) is disputed, but are explicit in reporting that the four gospels are unanimously received



as authentic by the whole early church (and even some heretical groups). Even early opponents of Christianity, such as Celsus, did not attempt to dispute the authorship of the gospels, but rather treated them as the testimony accounts upon which the religion was founded (Craig, 2008, p. 336).

Catalogues of authentic scriptures were published by early church fathers, as attested by Origen, Athanasius, and Cyril. The apocryphal books were never given any consideration in such collations; no apocryphal gospel is quoted by any author in the first three hundred years after Christ. Paley concludes that even if apostolic authorship is denied, the gospels must be granted as a reliable telling of the historical narrative and eyewitness testimony of the apostles themselves (Paley, 2009, pp. 269-276, Craig, 2008, p. 336).

### *Purity of the Gospel Text*

If the Gospels' authenticity is accepted, can it be determined if they match the original writings? As instructional material for personal growth and devotion, the Gospels were widely copied. Copies agree with remarkable accuracy, as orthodox Christians were careful to protect against textual corruption. No other ancient texts have been so widely copied, making the Gospels and Epistles an outstanding resource for providing an archaeologically accurate view of the first century world. It is impossible for deliberate falsification of Gospel texts to have occurred, because there existed too many copies for them all to have been tampered with. Additionally, the Gospels are cited in regular succession by early Church fathers, indicating no possible time for falsification to have occurred. The texts could not have been falsified before copies were distributed, because the Apostles would have been alive at that point to disavow textual alterations (Craig, 2008, p. 336-337).

### *Reliability of the Gospels*

Granting apostolic authorship and textual purity, can it be determined if the gospels are historically accurate narratives of real events? To argue the Gospels are false presents a dilemma: either the Apostles were deceivers, or deceived.

Were the Apostles deceived? It is implausible to hypothesise deception due to the number, and quality of witnesses to the resurrection. Christ appeared to not just one person, but many witnesses. These witnesses saw Christ together, and agreed upon details of the appearance. Resurrection appearances occurred multiple times over a period of forty days. Appearances were not merely visions, but witnesses recall touching, conversing, and eating meals with Christ. Perhaps a small group could hallucinate a single religious encounter, but the conditions of resurrection appearances described in the gospels cannot be attributed to imagination, hallucination, or religious fervour (Craig, 2008, pp. 337-338).

It is also important to note the consistent theme of counterintuitive authenticity throughout the gospels. Since women's testimony was not considered reliable in first



century culture, the Gospels' inclusion of these details increases their credibility through the criteria of embarrassment (Craig, 2008, p. 338).

The nonproduction of Christ's body also indicates the Apostles were not deceived into fabricating their testimony. The religion of Christianity could not possibly have flourished if Christ's body still lay in Jerusalem. To prevent the religion from spreading, opponents of Christianity could simply have produced the body of the crucified man. Religious authorities in Jerusalem at the time had vested interest in quashing Christian faith, but their only response was claiming the disciples had stolen the body. Theft and conspiracy, however, is unlikely due to the nature of conditions described in the Gospels, and the credible nature of the Apostles themselves (Craig, 2008, p. 338).

Were the Apostles deceivers? Did they orchestrate a conspiracy to create the new religion of Christianity? The persistence and spread of Christianity suggests the Apostles embraced a life of missionary sacrifice to ensure its establishment. Historical evidence indicates the Apostles endured lives of suffering and martyrdom in service of the faith. It is highly improbable that any group of conspirators would voluntarily undergo such hardship, knowing the falsehood of the conspiracy they preached (Craig, 2008, pp. 338-339).

Early Christians faced opposition from Jewish authorities as heretics, and from Roman magistrates as political and religious rivals. Tacitus records how Nero, only seventy years after Christ's death, persecuted Christians through *Damnatio ad bestias*, execution in public venues, and burning at the stake. The only viable motivation for early Christians to endure such suffering was that they suffered for a miraculous story of resurrection. Early Christians at least thought that Christ was the Messiah, that He performed miracles (as attested by writings from Josephus, letters of Barnabas and Clement, and other early Church fathers), and that He had been raised from the dead (Craig, 2008, pp. 339-340).

The Apostles' nature and cultural upbringing makes the possibility of conspiracy improbable. They were simple, common men, not conspiratorial deceivers. They had no motive to promote a fabricated religion, and actually violated Jewish laws against deceit and false testimony in their proclamation of Christ's resurrection. The Christian conception of Messianic resurrection was a foreign concept to first century Jewish culture; it is unlikely the Apostles fabricated it on their own (Craig, 2008, p. 340-341).

The Apostles' testimony developed in such close proximity to the historical events, that conspiracy or deception would have been impossible. False claims about an empty tomb could not have been taken seriously if people could easily verify the claims as fraudulent. Quite the opposite, however, even opponents of Christianity bore witness to Christ's resurrection. Jewish religious authorities never denied the Apostles' charges that the Roman guards at the tomb were bribed to keep silent about the events. Had the charges been false, Jewish authorities would have





discredited them. By not denying charges of bribery, the authorities reveal that some conspiracy did in fact exist, for the purpose of concealing the supernatural resurrection of Christ (Craig, 2008, p. 341).

Theft of the body (as Jewish authorities tried to claim) is improbable, since Jewish authorities had the means (and motivation) to post the tomb with Roman guards. With a posted guard, the disciples could not have stolen the body. The disciples' attitude shift is also unexplained by a theft conspiracy. Rather than despairing the death of their Messiah, the disciples boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Christ to the point of enduring suffering and martyrdom. This attitude and behaviour would not be expected from grave robbers and religious conspirators (Craig, 2008, p. 341).

### *Origin and Growth*

As Aquinas notes, the very existence of the Christian religion indicates the veracity of the Apostles' testimony. Had no supernatural miracles surrounded Christ's ministry, how could a dozen unlearned men establish a world-changing religion in the face of extreme persecution and suffering? That the religion spread throughout a hostile culture, upended empires, and encompassed the world indicates that it must have supernatural origins and impetus (Craig, 2008, p. 342).

### *Conclusion*

Due to multiple attestation, and reliability of the Gospel accounts, the New Testament narrative can be treated with a high degree of historical credibility. Apostolic authorship is confirmed through citation testimony, and there is no particular reason for scepticism, other than religious prejudice. From numerous copies and citations, it is evident that the Gospel texts were preserved without tampering or legendary embellishment. For numerous reasons the Apostolic authorship can be considered reliable, and even the very existence of the Christian Church today affirms the truth of the Gospel message.





## Modern Apologetics

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The Biblical criticism movement of the late eighteenth century attempted to undermine the credibility of classical apologetics. The deist movement led to the development of Biblical criticism, which refuted the horns of the “deceivers or deceived” dilemma by arguing that the Gospel narratives were already theologically-tainted legends when they were first written down by the Apostles (Craig, 2008, pp. 342-347).

The response of modern apologetics is to create a two-step argument for the bodily resurrection of Christ, the miracle upon which the Gospel narratives hinge. The first step is to assess historical evidence for the Gospel narratives, and the second step is to assess the resurrection hypothesis in comparison to rival hypothesis (Craig, 2008, p. 350).

The argument for Christ’s resurrection rests upon three independently established facts: the empty tomb, resurrection appearances, and the origins of the Christian faith (Craig, 2008, pp. 360-361).

### *Evidence for the Empty Tomb*

How can a person of the twenty-first century, two thousand years removed from the actual events, have confidence in the ancient gospel narrative of the empty tomb?

1) Christ’s burial narrative is evidence for the discovery of an empty tomb.

The story of Christ’s burial, which holds historical credibility due to its many specific, and historically accurate details, substantiates the claim of the empty tomb. Given that the location of Christ’s tomb was known in Jerusalem, it must have been vacant when the disciples began proclaiming Christ’s resurrection, otherwise their adversaries would have dismantled the claim by investigating the occupancy of the tomb. In first-century Jewish culture, the concept of resurrection invariably referred to the physical, bodily resurrection of all Jews at the end of days. In contrast, the disciples preached the physical, bodily resurrection of a single man. This claim would have created motivation for opponents of Christianity to discredit the disciples by showing occupancy of the tomb, or even exhuming/producing a body, but no such disputes over identification of Jesus’ corpse is ever recorded (Craig, 2008, pp. 361-362).

The burial of Christ is one of the most historically credible facts about the gospel narratives. It is attested in the Gospels themselves, Gospel source material, the book of Acts, and the extra-biblical *Gospel of Peter*. By the criterion of embarrassment, the provision of a tomb for Jesus’ burial by Joseph of Arimathea, a Sanhedrist, is most probably based in historical fact, and not a Christian invention. Since the burial of Christ is so well attested, the reality of the empty tomb must also be given genuine consideration (Craig, 2008, pp. 362-364).



2) The discovery of an empty tomb is multiply attested in early, independent sources.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul quotes an early Christian tradition referencing Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and resurrection appearances. Since first-century Jewish culture only had the conception of physical resurrection, the reference of burial and resurrection implies an empty tomb. The phrase "on the third day" also indicates an empty tomb, because this is the day upon which the women visited the gravesite for embalming procedures, and discovered it empty.

The Gospel of Matthew indicates an alternate, independent source for the empty tomb since his narrative includes unique details such as the story of the guards at the tomb. Matthew's comment "This story has been spread among Jews till this day" (Matt. 28:15) indicates that it references an earlier, independent Christian tradition. Luke also represents an independent source, relating details of two disciples returning to the grave to verify the women's report; the same story is also independently attested in John. In Acts 2:29-32, Peter references the empty tomb while describing Christ's resurrection. Six independent attestations of the empty tomb are recorded by Biblical authors, some of which include the earliest source material of the New Testament, written within 40 years of the death of Christ (Craig, 2008, pp. 364-366).

3) The simplicity of the Markan account is evidence for the empty tomb.

The Markan account is simple and plain, without evidence of legendary embellishment from later Christian authors. The Markan account can be contrasted against the extra-biblical gospel of Peter, which vividly describes Jesus' resurrection using absurd theological symbolism and retroactive apologetic details (Craig, 2008, p. 367).

4) The discovery of the empty tomb by women is credible by the criteria of embarrassment.

In first-century Jewish society, women were not regarded as credible witnesses. Women were considered second-class citizens, and were not even allowed to give legal testimony. Had the empty tomb narrative been a fabrication of the gospel authors, it would have been more sensible for them to place male disciples at the tomb on Easter Sunday. The role of the female witnesses lends credibility to the account of the empty tomb (Craig, 2008, p. 367-368).

5) The earliest Jewish polemic indicates the discovery of an empty tomb.

Matthew 28:11-15 represents the earliest Christian effort to refute Jewish authorities in their response to the resurrection proclamation. Matthew describes how the Roman guards posted at the tomb accepted bribes from the Jewish chief priests to publicly claim that Jesus' disciples had stolen His body while they slept at night. He concludes by stating that "this story has been spread among the Jews to this day", indicating that conspiracy to hide the body had been a widespread Jewish



explanation of the resurrection mystery. Rather than attempting to produce a body, or discredit the disciples' resurrection proclamations, the Jewish authorities realised they could not refute the physically empty tomb, and so entangled themselves in a web of conspiracy and obfuscation. Since the earliest opponents of Christianity presupposed an empty tomb, there is compelling evidence to accept the Gospel narratives at face value (Craig, 2008, pp. 369-371).

Establishing with historical credibility the vacant tomb of Christ invites speculation about how the grave came to be unoccupied. Sceptics have proposed many alternate hypotheses, but only the traditional Christian resurrection hypothesis fully accounts for every historical detail known about the Gospel narratives.

### *Evidences for Resurrection Appearances*

After the discovery of the empty tomb, the Gospel narratives record multiple postmortem appearances of a physically transformed Jesus. The appearances are also referenced in the book of Acts, and the Epistles of Paul. There are three primary reasons to consider the scriptural accounts historically credible, including Paul's list of eyewitnesses, the Gospel accounts, and the physical, bodily nature of the resurrection appearances.

#### 1) Paul's list of eyewitnesses evidences the resurrection appearances.

The Apostle Paul recounts a resurrection appearance to Peter, which is mentioned, although not detailed in the gospel accounts (Luke 24:33-34). Paul quotes from a Christian tradition which originated in the Jerusalem church, and Paul vouches for its authenticity after having spent two weeks with Peter in Jerusalem, three years after his Damascus road conversion (Craig, 2008, p. 378).

Paul also recounts Christ's appearance to the twelve disciples; his quotation of early Christian tradition is verified as Paul personally spends time with members of the twelve. Independent attestations of this story also appear in Luke 24:36-42 and John 20:19-20. An important feature of this appearance is the physical demonstration of Christ's body, as He showed His wounds and ate with the disciples. This was intentional, to show the corporeality of Christ's resurrection body (Craig, 2008, p. 378).

Paul further recounts an appearance of Christ before five hundred brethren. Paul's comment that "most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep", indicates that Paul had personal contact with members of this group. Paul makes this remark to highlight that many living witnesses of Christ's appearance are still around, and their accounts can be cross examined by anybody who is interested. Paul would not have made this remark had neither the appearance actually occurred, or if there had not been witnesses to verify it (Craig, 2008, pp. 378-379).

The appearance of Christ before His brother James, is specifically highlighted in 1 Corinthians 15:7, to illustrate his conversion. During Jesus' ministry, none of Jesus'



brothers believed He was the messiah, a historically credible fact by the criterion of embarrassment. Nevertheless, in Gal. 2:9 Paul lists James as one of the three pillars of the Church, and Acts 21:18 indicates that James is the head of the church in Jerusalem. Josephus records that in a.d. 60, James was illegally stoned by the Sanhedrien for his faith in Christ (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.200). In the same verse in Corinthians, Paul claims that Christ appeared to “all the apostles”, indicating a group of Christian missionaries wider than just the twelve disciples (Craig, 2008, pp. 379-380).

The appearance of Christ to Saul of Tarsus is established beyond doubt through Paul’s testimony, and through the circumstantial evidence of his life trajectory. Saul was a powerful Jewish religious leader, who actively engaged in the prosecution and execution of Christian “heretics”. After the miraculous event of his conversion, He forfeited his position in Jewish society and became a Christian missionary, trading respect and prestige for a life of suffering and uncertainty. He was finally martyred for his faith in Rome — the same faith he had previously prosecuted. Paul’s conversion and personal testimony through the Epistles are powerful evidence for Christ’s bodily resurrection appearances (Craig, 2008, p. 380).

2) The Gospel accounts themselves also provide independent attestation of Christ’s bodily resurrection appearances.

The appearance to the twelve is recorded in both Luke 24:36-43, and John 20:19-20; the historicity of this event is highly credible. The appearance to the women disciples is recorded in Matt. 28:9-10, and John 20:11-17, and can also be considered credible through the criterion of embarrassment. It is likely that Paul deliberately excluded this appearance from his list due to discomfort in citing female witnesses. The appearance of Christ to the disciples in Galilee is attested in Mark 16:7, Matt. 28:16-17, and John 21 (Craig, 2008, p. 381).

3) The resurrection appearances are physical, bodily manifestations of Christ.

Critics may want to disregard resurrection appearances as hallucinations, but it cannot be disputed that some event actually occurred. New Testament accounts are intentionally explicit in recording that Christ’s appearances were physical, and bodily in nature. Christ demonstrated this by eating with the disciples, and showing His wounds to them. New Testament authors are careful to distinguish physical resurrection appearances from “visions” of Christ, which continued through the early Church. This makes a hallucinatory explanation of the appearances highly unlikely. The resurrection hypothesis is the most sensible explanation for the credible historical accounts of the bodily resurrection appearances recorded by Paul, and in the Gospel narratives (Craig, 2008, pp. 382-384).



### *Analysis of Origin of the Christian Faith*

It is undisputed by New Testament scholars that the disciples at least believed in Christ's resurrection, even if critics argue this belief was misguided. How did this belief evolve among Christ's first-century disciples?

The belief could not have evolved from later Christian influences, as the first disciples and early Christians proclaimed Christ's resurrection from the very beginning. This early and authentic tradition is evidenced by the "died, buried, resurrected, appeared" formula, which is quoted in the Gospel of Mark, by Luke in Acts, and by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. These sources illustrate the foundational nature of the resurrection belief within the Christian community, demonstrating that it was an integral part of early Christian doctrine and not a later development (Craig, 2008, p. 390).

Pagan influences could not have inspired belief in Christ's resurrection. No parallel to the Christian resurrection tradition is found anywhere in Greco-Roman literature; indeed the only pagan references to dying and rising gods is in the context of seasonal cycles. This contrasts against the Christian narrative of a single decisive act of God as the culmination of Christ's ministry, and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Craig, 2008, p. 391).

Jewish influences could not have established the Christian concept of resurrection. First century Jewish culture had a very particular concept of resurrection — specifically that it would occur after the end of the world, and that it would involve all people being resurrected for judgement. Although resuscitations of dead people are found in Jewish literature, all accounts involve a resuscitation back to earthly existence. This contrasts with the New Testament accounts, which describe Christ's resurrection to glory. In 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, Paul is explicit in describing the differences between earthly, and resurrection bodies. When the disciples discovered an empty tomb, it is more likely that they would have presumed Christ was "translated" to heaven, like other figures from the Jewish tradition such as Enoch, or Elijah (Craig, 2008, p. 393-394).

The origin of the disciples' beliefs cannot be explained through Christian, pagan, or Jewish influences. The resurrection hypothesis, that Christ actually rose from the dead, is the most sensible explanation of the early Christian resurrection tradition.

### *Credibility of Alternate Hypothesis*

Sceptics have proposed several alternate hypotheses to counter the traditional Christian resurrection hypothesis. Some of the most frequently defended explanations include the conspiracy hypothesis, the swoon hypothesis, the wrong tomb hypothesis, and the hallucination hypothesis.

The conspiracy hypothesis posits that Jesus' disciples stole His body from the tomb, then proceeded to proclaim His resurrection. This hypothesis fails to account for the



previously discussed transformation of the disciples from fearful fugitives to bold evangelists. It fails to account for the presence of Roman guards posted at the tomb, who could have prevented theft; the presence of these guards is historically credible (Craig, 2008, p. 341). Finally, it fails to account for the bodily resurrection appearances to a large and diverse group of witnesses. Its explanatory scope is so limited, that the conspiracy hypothesis is no longer seriously defended by modern scholars (Craig, 2008, p. 373).

The swoon hypothesis posits that Christ did not actually die on the cross, but fainted and later revived in the tomb, before rejoining His disciples who worshipped him as a resurrected Messiah. Firstly, it is highly implausible that Roman executioners, who were adept at their task, failed to ensure Jesus' death. The Gospel narratives specifically record the Roman executioners thrusting a spear into Jesus' side, a practice that would have assured death (John 19:34). This hypothesis encounters further challenges, such as how a severely wounded man, sealed in a tomb, could have escaped. Moreover, it is improbable that the reappearance of a beaten and critically injured man in need of medical attention could have inspired His disciples to proclaim him as the resurrected Son of God. Consequently, like the conspiracy hypothesis, the swoon hypothesis is not seriously defended by contemporary scholars (Craig, 2008, pp. 373-374).

The wrong tomb hypothesis posits that the disciples' resurrection proclamation was based upon a mistake — the disciples visited the wrong tomb, and found it unoccupied while the body of Jesus still lay in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. The wrong tomb hypothesis fails to account for the resurrection appearances of Christ, and also fails to explain the origin of the Christian faith. If the disciples had visited the wrong tomb, the Christian religion could never have taken root in Jerusalem as its opponents would have quickly exhumed Jesus' body as evidence of the error. The wrong tomb hypothesis is an implausible explanation of the Gospel narratives (Craig, 2008, 374-375).

The hallucination hypothesis posits that the disciples' resurrection proclamations were inspired by visions of Christ, hallucinated by the disciples while in a state of religious fervour. The hallucination hypothesis has a narrow explanatory scope; it fails to account for any evidence regarding the empty tomb, and the nonproduction of the body. It fails to account for the actual origin of the disciples' belief in resurrection — in a Jewish context the disciples should have been more likely to assume their visions meant Christ had been translated/assumed into heaven, as opposed to a bodily resurrection (Craig, 2008, p. 394). The nature of the resurrection appearances challenge the hallucination hypothesis. Christ appeared to many people simultaneously, which would require a group hallucination to explain the narrative. Christ appeared multiple times, decreasing the likelihood of the disciples being deceived by a hallucination. Finally, scriptural sources are explicit in recording the physicality of Christ's resurrection appearances - the disciples touched Jesus,



conversed with him, and ate with him. Although the hallucination hypothesis still has contemporary defenders, it remains an implausible explanation (Craig, 2008, p. 387).

### *Conclusion*

The resurrection of Christ is evidenced by the historical credibility of the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances recorded by Gospel authors and the Apostle Paul, and the very origins of Christian belief in Christ's physical resurrection. The Christian resurrection hypothesis has been challenged by sceptics, but so far none have created a comprehensive, naturalistic explanation that accounts for all details of the narrative. In light of the combined facts known about the post-mortem appearances, and the nonproduction of Christ's body, many scholars argue that supernatural resurrection is the most compelling hypothesis.





## Conclusion

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A live, Christian faith is not marked by dogmatism and closed-minded belief, but should demonstrate exercise of the God-given gifts of thought, analysis, and reason to gain a deeper understanding of the truths of reality, God, Christ, and one's personal relationship with the Creator.

The existential philosophy of authors like Sartre, Pascal, and Nagel highlight man's destitute condition, and essential dependence upon God. Existentialists like Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky show that it is impossible to live a genuine and fulfilling life apart from God; those who reject their Creator leave themselves only an exercise of self-deception as they attempt and fail to create meaning ex nihilo. Existentialism confirms no specifics of the Christian faith, but inspires people to awake from the self-placating slumber, and seriously consider the ramifications of their worldview (or lack thereof). It may provoke interest in arguments for the very existence of God, a topic which is covered in the companion piece to this essay, "Unapologetic".

Within Christian theology, faith is best described as "trusting in what you have good reason to think is true", and can consequently be justified by numerous reasons, or life experiences. For most of human history, Christians have never been able to access the scholarly resources of philosophy and history; theological and evidentialist argument are only two possible ways that faith can be justified. In fact, Plantinga argues that faith can be justified as a basic belief, a tenet supported by the scriptural analysis of the roles of the Holy Spirit. Evidentialist argument serves as a secondary source of warrant, to increase the faith of those who are fortunate enough to encounter it, emboldening them to share their faith and witness to others.

The uniqueness of the Christian faith, and its central doctrinal premises are established through miracles recorded in the ministry of Christ. While most religions have origins in mystical or unreliable legend, the Christian doctrines of incarnation and the trinity are founded in historically credible miraculous events. Naturalistic prejudice against miracles should not be used to discredit eyewitness testimony, because the miracles of Christ demonstrate God's love and illustrate His redemptive plan to reconcile humanity in New Creation.

Christ undisputedly existed as a historical figure, who walked in the lands of Judea about two thousand years ago. He understood himself as the Messiah of Israel, the very Son of God, and the coming Son of Man who has the authority to rule with God as the heir of all creation.

Why should the Gospel narratives be accepted at face value, and how can Christians justify specifics of the faith? The Gospels, as ancient historical texts, offer four independent attestations to a singular narrative, lending them a high degree of credibility. The textual integrity of the Gospels has been rigorously established





through the abundance of manuscript copies and early citations, demonstrating that the text has remained consistent over time, and that the contemporary Bible reflects the original accounts recorded by the ancient authors. The very unlikely origins of the Christian faith indicate that it had divine guidance as it overcame opponents, persecution, and conquered empires, driven by Christ's message of love and salvation.

Even disregarding the authority of apostolic authorship, the resurrection of Christ, upon which the Christian religion stands or falls, can be examined through historical, evidentialist argument. The narrative of Christ's burial and the discovery of the empty tomb hold a high degree of historical credibility, as do the many physical resurrection appearances recorded in the Gospels and by the Apostle Paul. The Christian belief in resurrection would not have even developed save for the reality of Christ's resurrection appearances. Sceptics have tried to propose alternate explanations to dismiss the resurrection hypothesis, but all naturalistic hypothesis fail to account for multiple distinct, historically credible details of the Gospel narratives.

In light of the evidence supporting the resurrection of Christ, and the historical credibility of the Gospel narratives recording His life and ministry, a specifically Christian faith is fully justified and rationally warranted. This justification and warrant may encourage individuals to lead lives of devotion to their faith, seeking out spiritual formation, pursuing deeper relationship with God, and focussing on a lifestyle of discipline, service, and obedience to achieve fulfilment of Divinely-ordained purpose. A Christian faith should not be a binding set of rules, or a cultural identity, but should empower individuals; the transformation of the Holy Spirit brings freedom from vice, and produces Fruit of the Spirit. Through the atonement made possible by the incarnation of Christ, God can work in such an individual, transforming them into an implement of Divine love to accomplish great things, and unleash radical transformative power in the world.



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