

“CHRISTmas Questions”

“Are you the Messiah we’ve been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?”
(Matthew 11:3) ¹

Dr. Franklin Owen was the Executive Secretary of the Kentucky Baptist Convention for many of the twenty-five years I served in Kentucky, and he was a wonderful storyteller. Dr. Owen was an Army Chaplain during World War II, and I never think of him without remembering a story he told about an experience he had in garrison overseas.

Chaplain Owen was walking through the tents one night and heard several voices coming from one of them. One voice said, “Amen,” then another did, and then another. Dr. Owen was pleased to have come upon a prayer meeting, and peeked in the tent, where he saw several soldiers playing cards. These Southern Soldiers had been saying, “Ah’m in,” not “Amen”!

The idea for this sermon came from an editorial Dr. Owen wrote in the Kentucky Baptist *Western Recorder* in December of 1980. The editorial was entitled, “Christmas Questions,” and I want to think with you this morning about three of the questions he raised: (1) Has God appeared in Jesus Christ?; (2) If God has not appeared in Jesus, how do you explain the Church?; and (3) If you will not receive God in Jesus, then in what manner of revelation would you receive Him?²

These questions are of more than passing interest. Warm sentiment and nostalgia about a baby born in long-ago Bethlehem has no more value than grocery store tabloids unless this child is Who He said He was. And so we ask

Has God appeared in Jesus Christ? *The whole Christian message stands or falls with the answer to this question.* Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the Eternal God in human flesh. Other world religions have their deities and their sages, of course, but only Jesus has claimed to actually be God.

As I’ve told you many times, it seems to me (with C.S. Lewis) that there are only three options if a man (or a woman, for that matter) claims to be God: (1) he is insane, (2) he is lying, or (3) He is telling the truth. If a man is insane or lying, then he obviously has no claim on us; but if He is telling the truth, then anything He says is of incalculable importance. So how can we decide?

Our first source of evidence is the Bible, every word of which either points forward to Jesus of Nazareth, tells us about Him, or points back to Him. There is much more to say about this than can be said in so short a time, but let’s look at just a bit of the massive evidence that supports the Bible’s trustworthiness.

For the sake of brevity, we’ll focus just on the New Testament. How do we even know what the original documents actually said, since we have none of them? I think that God intentionally allowed the original documents—known as the “autographs”—to be lost, because if we had them, we would certainly venerate and perhaps worship them; but their purpose is to point, not to themselves, but to Jesus. Scripture is our compass, our guide, not our destination and our home.

In order to adequately appreciate the magnitude of the miracle that is the New Testament you hold in your hand, it’s necessary to know a little bit about navigation. Whether we’re

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 27, 2016. The first Sunday of Advent.

² Franklin Owen in the Kentucky Baptist *Western Recorder*, December 24, 1980, 7.

walking, driving, flying, or sailing, the only way to know our position is with reference to known positions. The ancients took bearings on several stars, and the point where those lines of bearing crossed marked their position. Today, the Global Positioning receiver in your car or phone takes bearings on three or four GPS satellites to establish where you are within a matter of several yards. The more bearings, the greater the accuracy.

Think of an individual Bible manuscript as a fixed position from which we might take a line of bearing on the original New Testament text. Today we have more than 5,600 Greek manuscripts of all or part of the New Testament, and about 18,000 early manuscripts in other languages. The earliest of these manuscripts were written less than thirty years after the original had been penned.

Besides the New Testament, we have the largest number of manuscript fragments of Homer's *Iliad*, which was a very important book to the ancient Greeks. Fewer than 650 manuscripts of the *Iliad* survive, and these were written more than a thousand years after Homer.

Similarly, much of what we know about Imperial Rome comes from the writings of Tacitus, whose major works were written early in the second century. But our only copies of Tacitus were written more than 700 years after the originals.

Now compare seven hundred copies of Homer, written a thousand years after the original, and our copies of Tacitus, written more than 700 years after the original, with more than 23,000 manuscripts of the New Testament from all over the Mediterranean world, *many written within a generation or two of the original*. God didn't want us to worship the New Testament originals, but God does want us to be sure we know what they said—and with 23,000 lines of bearing, we know what they said.

Not only do we know what the New Testament writers actually wrote, but we also know that what they wrote was accurate—true to what actually happened. Again, examples could be multiplied, and books on the subject are many, but Australian archaeologist Clifford Wilson summed up the matter pretty well when he wrote, “Those who know the facts now recognize that the New Testament must be accepted as a remarkably accurate source book.”³

So it is that our quest to decide between “insane,” “lying,” and “telling the truth” begins with the trustworthiness of the New Testament you have in your hand. Given the trustworthiness of the New Testament, what does it tell us about Jesus?

Looking at the New Testament's description of Jesus, professor Gary Collins commented on the possibility that Jesus was insane: “If I claimed to be the President of the United States, that would be crazy. You'd look at me and see none of the trappings of the office of President. I wouldn't look like the President. People wouldn't accept my authority as President. No Secret Service agents would be guarding me. But if the real President claimed to be President, that wouldn't be crazy, because he *is* President and there would be plenty of confirming evidence of that.”⁴

The New Testament tells us that Jesus claimed to be, not a civil ruler, but very God of very God, incarnate in human flesh. Jesus performed many signs and wonders that demonstrated

³ Clifford Wilson, cited in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 107.

⁴ Gary Collins, in Strobel, p. 148.

the truth of His claim; and the final, climactic proof came when “*he was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 1:4).⁵

Another piece of confirming evidence of Jesus’ truthfulness as well as His divinity comes from professor D. A. Carson, who wrote that “Historically . . . people considered most holy have also been the most conscious of their own failures and sins. They are people who are aware of their shortcomings and lusts and resentments, and they’re fighting them honestly by the grace of God. In fact, they’re fighting them so well that others take notice and say, ‘There is a holy man or woman.’ But along comes Jesus, who can say with a straight face, ‘*Which of you can convict me of sin?*’ (John 8:46).” And nobody did.⁶⁷

There’s a great deal more that could be said, and there are many resources that can help, but let’s move on to our second question: **If God has not appeared in Jesus, then how do we explain the Church?**

Consider for a moment the images of Jesus that you saw in *The Passion of the Christ*. Would a bloody, lacerated, abused corpse like that inspire anybody? Would such a bloody corpse have any power to change the world? Can you imagine a bloody corpse inspiring a worldwide continuing movement of persons who hope to someday have a body like that? Seriously?

And yet, within five weeks of Jesus’ crucifixion, over 5,000 Jewish men (not counting women and children) had professed their faith in this bloody corpse—and many of them were religious leaders in the community. Within just one generation, Christian faith had spread to most of the known world; and within 300 years it had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. What sense could it possibly make that these thousands of early followers of Jesus got together every week to celebrate the fact that Jesus had “been publicly slaughtered in a grotesque and humiliating way?”⁸

For those who really want to know, I submit to you that there’s only one way to explain such a phenomenon, and this explanation was written down by someone who had a great deal at stake in Jesus’ being dead and staying dead. This person was Saul of Tarsus, the famed persecutor and killer of Christians, who later wrote that “*I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me—that Christ **died** for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was **buried**, and he was **raised** from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said. He was **seen** by Peter and then by the twelve apostles. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died by now. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, I saw him, too” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8a).*

My friends, an empty grave does not a resurrection make, and it was not a bloody corpse that launched the Christian Movement. The Christian Movement began with a living Jesus who had triumphed over death! ***The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the absolutely central fulcrum of the Gospel.*** If Jesus of Nazareth did not rise from death, if Jesus is not alive and present, here, at this moment, in this place, then the Bible in your hand is no more than a cruel hoax. And how will you decide? You will know for sure only when you meet Him yourself.

⁵ See also John 20:30-31, 21:25.

⁶ D. A. Carson, in Strobel, p. 158.

⁷ The Dalai Lama, considered one of the holiest leaders of Buddhism, doesn’t even believe there is a God at all.

⁸ J.P. Moreland, in Strobel, p. 253.

And that brings us to our third question: **If you will not receive God through Jesus, then by what manner of revelation would you receive Him?** What proof would be sufficient? What written record could be more amazing than the Bible? What revelation could possibly be more powerful than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth?

Is not your refusal to believe simply that, a refusal and a rejection rather than an argument for insufficient evidence? It has long seemed to me that, when all is said and done, persons who reject Jesus as God's Messiah have one of just two reasons for such rejection.

One reason why people reject Jesus is that they insist on continuing to try to impress God with their own works of righteousness rather than submitting to the Bible's many affirmations that it is impossible to achieve righteousness on one's own. This first "reason" is a problem of human pride.

The second reason why people reject Jesus is that they do not want it to be the case that they are in fact accountable to God for every thought and every action of their lives. As Lee Strobel put it, "I had a strong motivation to ignore [the proofs of Christianity's truth]: a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to abandon if I were ever to change my views and become a follower of Jesus."⁹ So this second "reason" has to do with human pride, too.¹⁰

Professor William Lane Craig once debated a spokesman for American Atheists, Inc. before a crowd of 8,000 people, and that debate was broadcast over more than 100 radio stations. "In the end, it was no contest. Among those who had entered the auditorium that evening as avowed atheists, agnostics, or skeptics, and overwhelming 82% walked out concluding that the case for Christianity had been the most compelling. Forty-seven people entered as nonbelievers and exited as Christians. . . . nobody became an atheist."¹¹

Lee Strobel was a reporter covering that event, and he noted that "I was ambushed by the amount and quality of the evidence that Jesus is the unique Son of God."¹² Some years later, Strobel, who began adulthood as an angry atheist, chose to become a follower of Jesus. After he was born again, Strobel's life changed so radically that his five-year-old daughter went to her mother to say, "**I don't know what's happened to Daddy, but whatever it is, I want it to happen to me, too.**"¹³

Louis Lapidés was a young Jewish man who was trying to decide about Jesus for himself. When he read Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah in chapter 53, he found those words so breathtakingly descriptive of Jesus that he concluded that Isaiah 53 was a fraud. Lapidés concluded that Christians had somehow rewritten the Old Testament and twisted Isaiah's words, 700 years after the fact, to make it sound as if Isaiah had been foreshadowing Jesus. But we've already seen that we know what the text said, and that really is what it said. Isaiah's words really were a prophecy that has now been fulfilled in Jesus.

Louis finally went out into the desert to grapple with God: "God," he said, "I've got to come to the end of this struggle. I have to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. I need to know that you, as the God of Israel, want me to believe this."

⁹ Strobel, p. 13.

¹⁰ After the service, Dr. Tracey Manning noted that there is at least one other reason: seeing the sorry lives we Christians sometimes live.

¹¹ Strobel, p. 206.

¹² Strobel, p. 264.

¹³ Strobel, p. 269.

As Louis told his story to Lee Strobel, who was at that time the Legal Editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, Louis hesitated, unsure how to put into words what happened next. “The best I can put together out of that experience is that God objectively spoke to my heart. He convinced me, experientially, that he exists. And at that point, out in the desert, in my heart I said, ‘God, I accept Jesus into my life. I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do with Him, but I want Him. I’ve pretty much made a mess of my life; I need you to change me.’”

“And God began to do that in a process that continues to this day. My friends knew my life had changed, and they couldn’t understand it. They’d say, ‘Something happened to you in the desert. You don’t want to do drugs anymore. There’s something different about you.’”

“And I would say, ‘I can’t explain what happened. *All I know is that there’s Someone in my life*, and it’s Someone who’s holy, who’s righteous, who’s a source of positive thoughts about life—and I just feel whole.’”¹⁴

Well, there are our three “CHRISTmas Questions” for this first Sunday of Advent. It seems to me that we are wise not to ignore them, because **Christianity is either true, or it’s false. There is no middle ground. Christianity cannot be moderately true, and Christianity cannot be moderately important.**

Paul minced no words about it: “*If Christ was not raised [from the dead, proving his claim to be God], then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless. . . . But the fact is that Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who will be raised to life again*” (1 Corinthians 15:14, 20).

And all of this brings us to our final and most important question: **What will you do with Jesus?**

¹⁴ Louis Lapidés, in Strobel, pp. 180-181. My friend, Messianic Rabbi Joe Bell, who grew up as an orthodox Jew in New York City, found Jesus the Messiah through Isaiah 53 in a very similar way.