

Why Believe?

The Case for Christianity

Dr. Neil Shenvi

Burlington Christian Academy

April 5, 2017



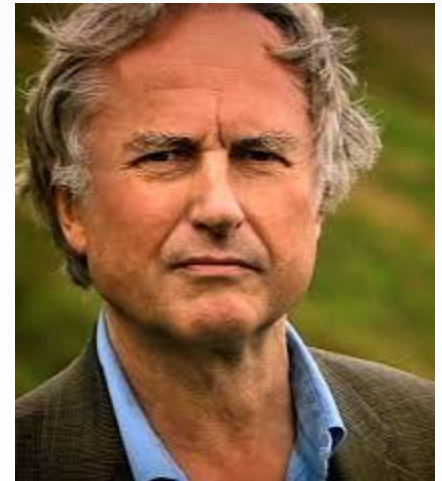
Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
 - Manuscript evidence
 - Documentary evidence
 - Geographical evidence
 - Contextual evidence
 - Archaeological evidence
 - Onomastic evidence
- The Resurrection
- The gospel

Atheists for Jesus

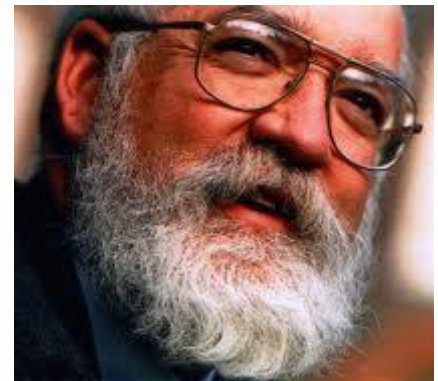
“Jesus, if he existed (or whoever wrote his script if he didn’t) was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time. His ‘turn the other cheek’ anticipated Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years.”

– Dr. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.283



“I think that, actually, Jesus makes a fine hero. I've always thought that Gandhi was about right there. He says, I like your Jesus, it's your Christians that I have trouble with. In fact, we had some discussion of forming a group called Atheists for Jesus.”

- Dr. Daniel Dennett, interview with *The Beast*, March 2009



The Trilemma

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really **foolish thing** that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a **lunatic** - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be **the Devil** of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the **Son of God**, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*



The hard sayings of Jesus

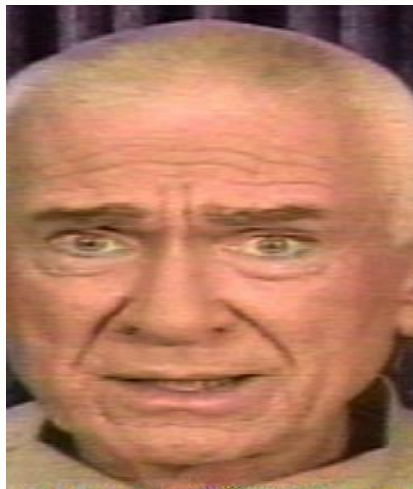
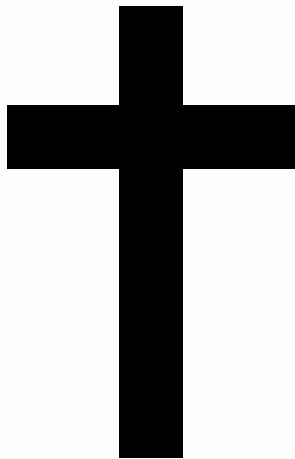
Jesus said:

- Leave everything and follow me (Matt. 19:21, Mark 10:21, Luke 18:22)
- You must love me more than your mother or father, brother or sister, wife and children, even your own life (Matt. 10:37, Luke 9:23-24, Luke 14:26, John 12:25)
- I am the only way to God (Matt. 11:27, Luke 10:22, John 14:6)
- I have the authority to forgive sin (Mk. 2:1-12, Luke 7:36-40)
- I will suffer for sins and be raised from the dead (Matt. 16:21, Matt. 28:28, Mark. 10:34, Luke 22:20, John 2:19)
- I will return at the end of history to judge all humanity (Matt. 25:31-46, Luke 21:25-28, John 5:22)

Another option?

The biblical Jesus is either:

- God
- an evil, megalomaniacal cult leader
- ... or a legend?



Skepticism about the gospels

- “no television preacher has ever read the Bible... At best, we’ve all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times” – Kurt Eichenwald, *Newsweek*, Dec. 23, 2014
- “You are probably familiar with the old birthday party game, 'telephone'... Imagine playing 'telephone' not in a solitary living room with ten kids on a sunny afternoon in July, but over the expanse of the Roman Empire (some 2,500 miles across!), with thousands of participants, from different backgrounds, with different concerns, and in different contexts, some of whom have to translate the stories into different languages over the course of decades. What would happen to the stories?” – Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, 1999, p. 51-52
- [T]hese are composite documents, the final products of long and creative traditions in which old material was reworked and new material interpolated. As they now stand, they are witness first of all to the faith of their individual writers and their late first-century, largely Gentile communities. Only at a distance do they relate to the people and the period they purport to describe” - Paula Fredriksen. *From Jesus to Christ*, 1988, p. 4

Why Christianity?

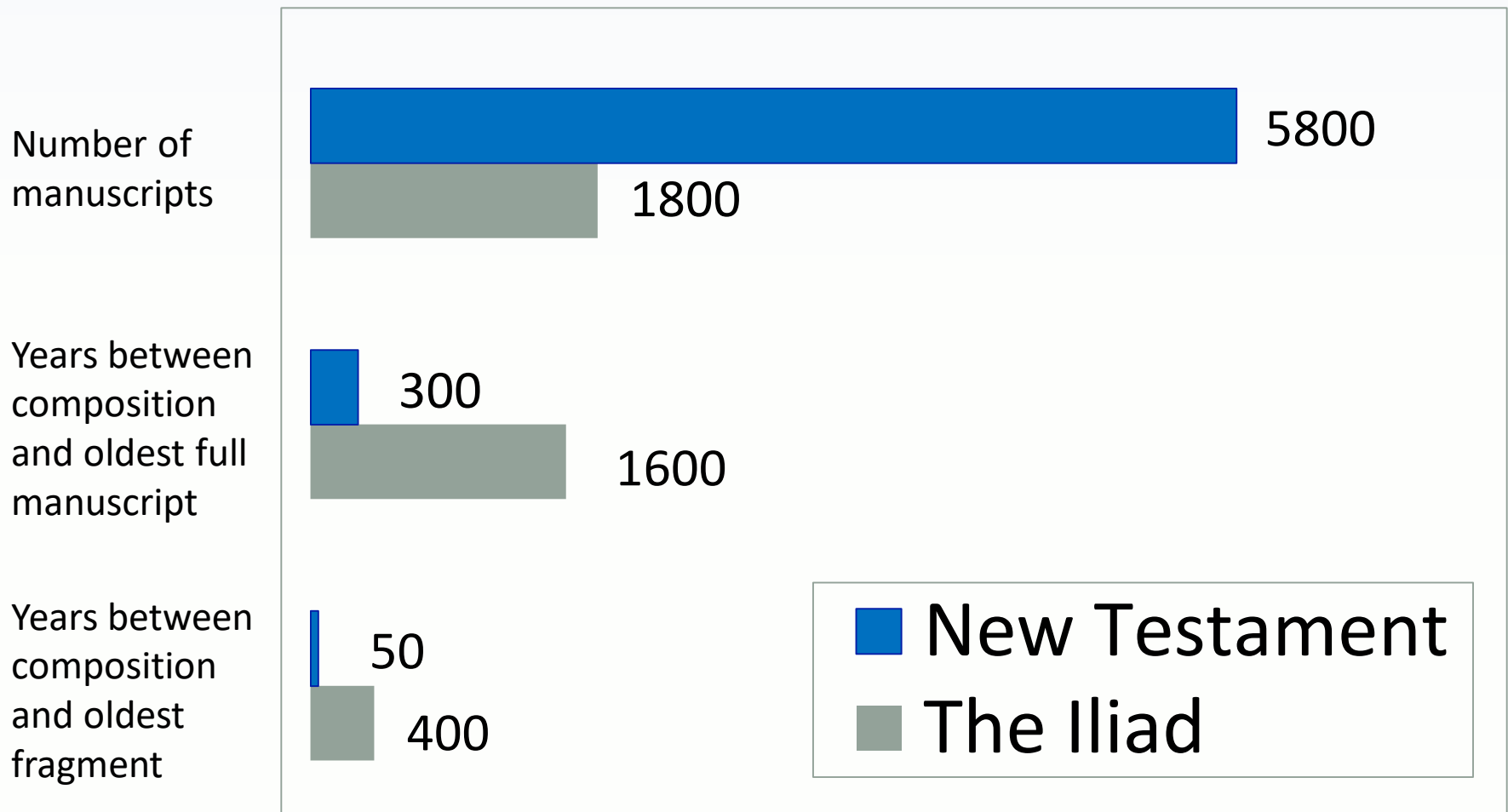
- The Trilemma

- Manuscript evidence
- Documentary evidence
- Geographical evidence
- Contextual evidence
- Archaeological evidence
- Onomastic evidence

- The Resurrection

- The gospel

Manuscript evidence



C. Jones, *Christian Research Journal*. **35**, 3, (2012).

Du   et al. *Recapturing a Homeric Legacy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2009

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
 - Manuscript evidence
 - Documentary evidence
 - Geographical evidence
 - Contextual evidence
 - Archaeological evidence
 - Onomastic evidence
- The Resurrection
- The gospel

Non-Christian documentary evidence

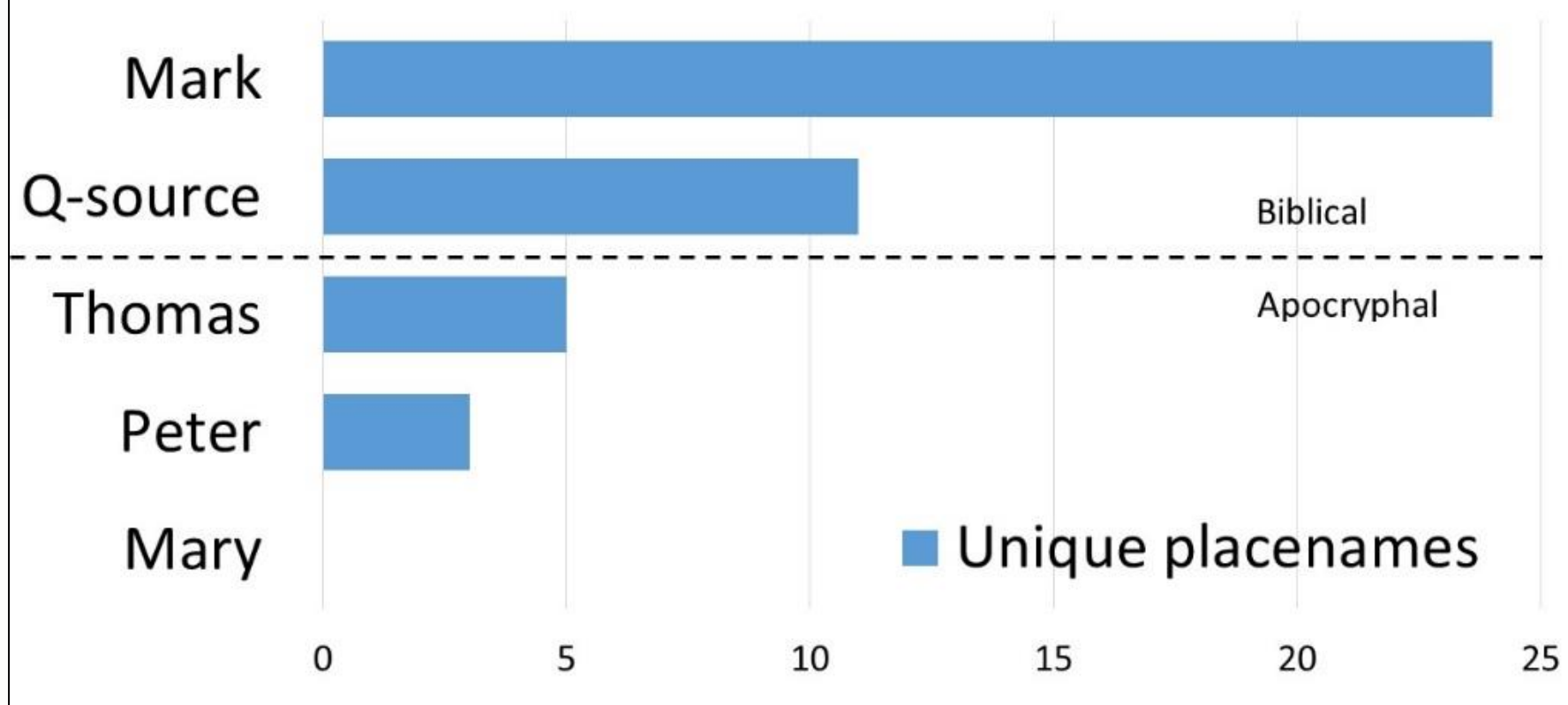
- “he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others” – Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 20, Ch. 9, 1
- “About this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.” - Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 18, Chapter 3, 3 (Meier’s reconstruction)
- “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome” - Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44
- “On the Eve of Passover they hung Yeshu the Notzarine And the herald went out before him for 40 days [saying]: “Yeshu the Notzarine will go out to be stoned for sorcery and misleading and enticing Israel [to idolatry]....so they hung him on the Eve of Passover.” - *Babylonian Sanhedrin* 43a

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
 - Manuscript evidence
 - Documentary evidence
 - Geographical evidence
 - Contextual evidence
 - Archaeological evidence
 - Onomastic evidence
- The Resurrection
- The gospel

Placenames in the gospels

Use of geographical placenames



Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
 - Manuscript evidence
 - Documentary evidence
 - Geographical evidence
 - Contextual evidence
 - Archaeological evidence
 - Onomastic evidence
- The Resurrection
- The gospel

The gospels' Palestinian context

- Aramaisms in the gospels:
eli eli lema sabachthani,
Talitha koum, *Ephphatha*,
Corban, *Abba*
- Judaism in the gospels:
Sadducees, Pharisees,
ceremonial laws, festivals, Old Testament
quotations
- Absence of circumcision controversy



Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
 - Manuscript evidence
 - Documentary evidence
 - Geographical evidence
 - Contextual evidence
 - Archaeological evidence
 - Onomastic evidence
- The Resurrection
- The gospel

Archaeological evidence



Jerusalem



Ephesus



Athens



Corinth



Paphos



Thessalonica

Archaeological evidence



The pool of Bethesda: John 5:1-15

Archaeological evidence



The pool of Siloam: John 9:1-7

Archaeological evidence



The synagogue at Capernaum: Mark 1, Luke 7, John 6

Archaeological evidence



Ossuary of the high priest Caiaphas: Matt. 26:57-67

Archaeological evidence



1st century house in Nazareth – Matt. 2:23

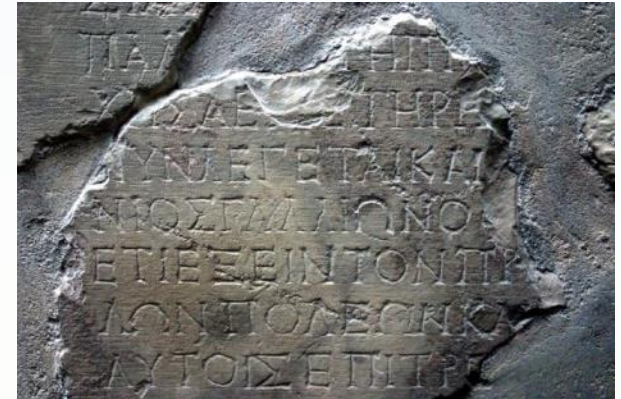
Archaeological evidence



Prefect Pontius Pilate –
Mark 15, etc...



Sergius Paulus –
Acts 13:6-13



Gallio , proconsul of Achaia –
Acts 18:11-12



Erastus, city treasurer of Corinth – Rom. 16:23

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
 - Manuscript evidence
 - Documentary evidence
 - Geographical evidence
 - Contextual evidence
 - Archaeological evidence
 - Onomastic evidence
- The Resurrection
- The gospel

Onomastic evidence



Onomastic evidence

Gospels and Acts			Ossuaries	
Rank	Name	%	Name	%
#1	Simon	10.3	Simon	13.3
#2	Joseph	7.7	Joseph	10.2
#3	Judas	6.4	Judas	10.0
#4	John	6.4	Lazarus	6.6
#5	James	6.4	John	5.7
#6	Jesus	3.8	Jesus	5.0
#7	Ananias	3.8	Ananias	4.1
#8	Herod	3.8	Matthew	3.8

Rank	Name	%	Name	%
#1	Mary	35	Mary	23.5
#2	Salome	6	Salome	23.0

The Trilemma

The biblical Jesus is either:

- God
- or an evil, megalomaniacal cult leader
- ~~...or a legend?~~

“Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, **but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher.** He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” – C.S. Lewis

His Impact



His Teaching

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. – Matt. 5:3-10

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

– Luke 6:27-31

Trilemma: summary

“...So what you’re left with is: either Christ was who He said He was the Messiah or a complete nutcase. I mean, we’re talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson...The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me, that’s farfetched.” – Bono

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
 - The possibility of miracles
 - Burial and empty tomb
 - Belief of the disciples
 - The conversion of Paul
 - The improbability of other explanations
- The gospel

Statements from non-Christians

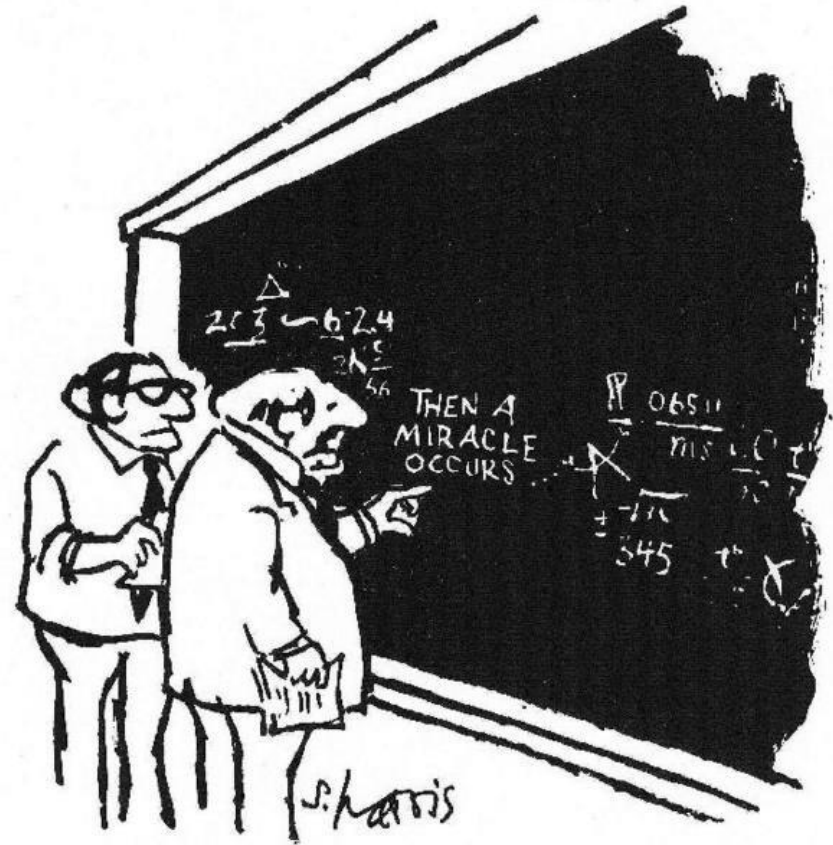
- "Both sides [atheists and Christians] are correct within their worldview... Unless atheists can demonstrate that theism is irrational or that the historical evidence for a material resurrection is lacking, they are unlikely to convince many theists to reject the resurrection. Similarly, Christian apologists need to recognize that, until atheists are shown that theism is plausible, atheists will continue to regard the resurrection as a highly implausible event... I think it is rational to both accept and reject the resurrection." - atheist and founder of infidels.org Jeff Lowder in his online essay "The Historicity of Jesus' Resurrection"
- "The evidence for the Resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It's outstandingly different in quality and quantity..." - deist Antony Flew, in "Did the Resurrection Happen?: A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew" Habermas, Flew, Baggett (2009)
- "I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as a historical event." – Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapidé in "Jewish monotheism and Christian Trinitarian doctrine: a dialogue." Lapidé and Moltmann, 1981

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
 - The possibility of miracles
 - Burial and empty tomb
 - Belief of the disciples
 - The conversion of Paul
 - The improbability of other explanations
- The gospel

It is problematic to assert that miracles are impossible

- 'God **cannot** perform miracles because natural laws cannot be violated'
- 'God **does not** intervene in nature'
- 'God **would not** intervene nature'



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

We should retain an open-minded attitude towards miracles

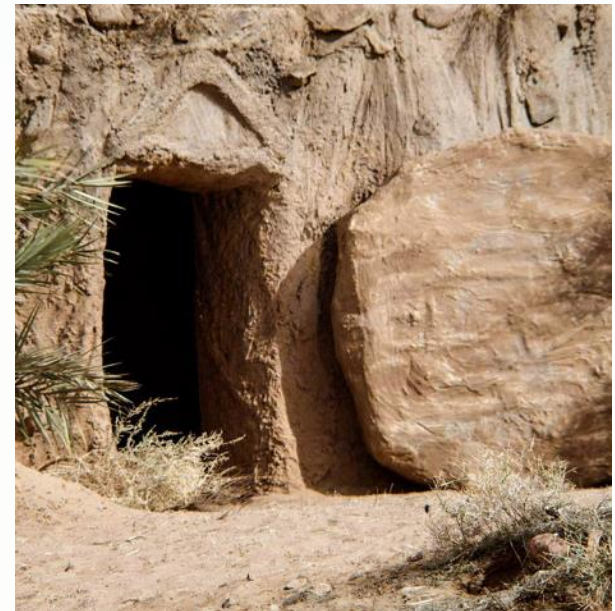
- Agnosticism towards God requires agnosticism towards miracles
- Belief in some miracles does not require belief in all miracles
- We should expect miracles mainly at the 'great ganglia of history' (C.S. Lewis)

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
 - The possibility of miracles
 - Burial and empty tomb
 - Belief of the disciples
 - The conversion of Paul
 - The improbability of other explanations
- The gospel

Burial and the empty tomb

- Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be an invention
- Burial is mentioned in 1 Cor. 15
- The discovery of the tomb by women is unlikely to be an invention
- The inclusion of Mary Magdalene is unlikely to be an invention
- The earliest Jewish polemic against the Resurrection presupposes an empty tomb
- The empty tomb is implied by 1 Cor. 15
- The apostles' preaching in Jerusalem would have been difficult if the tomb were not empty

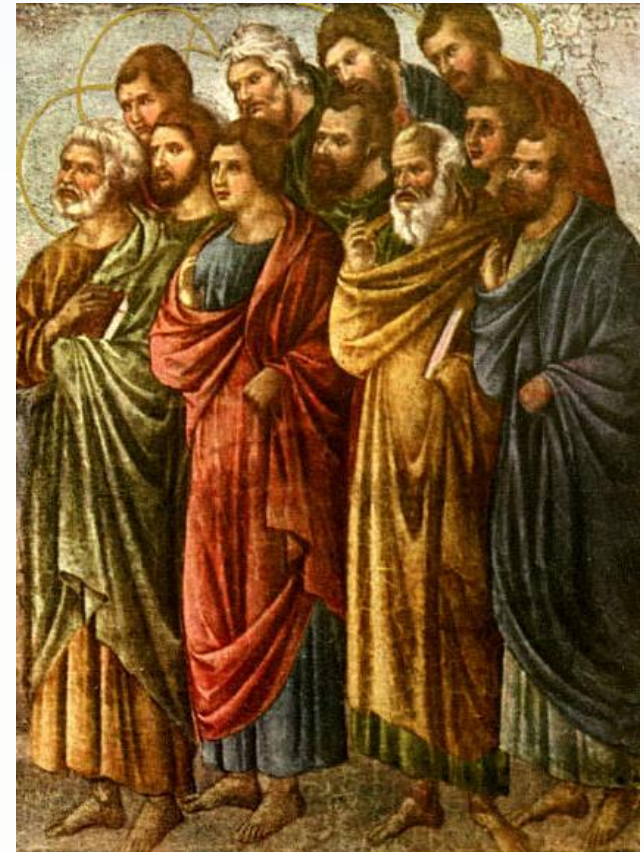


Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
 - The possibility of miracles
 - Burial and empty tomb
 - Belief of the disciples
 - The conversion of Paul
 - The improbability of other explanations
- The gospel

Claims of post-mortem appearances

- Jesus appears to multiple people in many settings over many weeks
- The disciples reported touching Jesus and eating with him
- In 1 Cor. 15, Paul reports that Jesus appeared to 500 witnesses at one time, many of whom were still alive at the time of writing



Sincerity of the apostles

- The apostles maintained their belief in Jesus' Resurrection in the face of intense suffering and persecution
- We know that at least 4 and possibly as many as 10 of the apostles were killed for their beliefs
- “It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.” – G. Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*

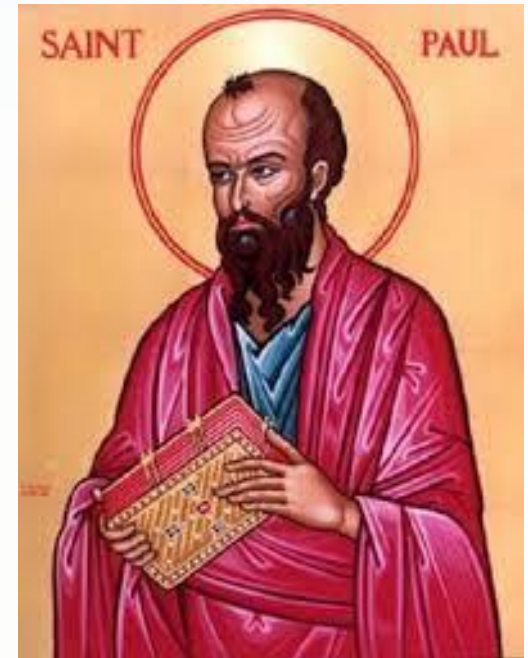


Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
 - The possibility of miracles
 - Burial and empty tomb
 - Belief of the disciples
 - The conversion of Paul
 - The improbability of other explanations
- The gospel

The conversion of Paul

- Saul of Tarsus, who later became known as Paul, was an intense persecutor of the church
- While traveling to Damascus he suddenly converted to Christianity
- In his letter to the Galatians claims that his conversion was due to encountering Jesus
- The same narrative recorded by Luke in the book of Acts



Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
 - The possibility of miracles
 - Burial and empty tomb
 - Belief of the disciples
 - The conversion of Paul
 - The improbability of other explanations
- The gospel

Improbability of other explanations

- **The swoon hypothesis** – Jesus did not die on the cross; he merely fainted.
- **The reburial hypothesis** – Jesus was removed from the tomb on Friday by Joseph of Arimathea.
- **The stolen body hypothesis** – Jesus' disciples or his family stole his body
- **The twin hypothesis** – Jesus had an identical twin who was mistaken for Jesus after his death

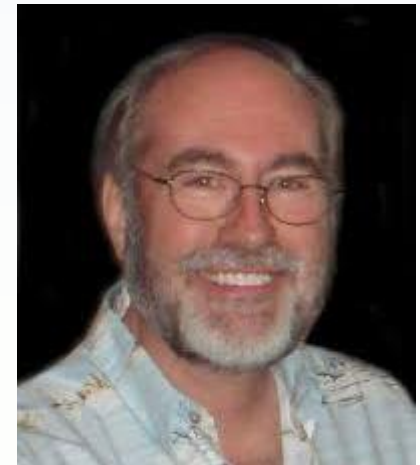
Dr. Bart Ehrman on the Resurrection

- “Miracles are not impossible. I won't say they're impossible...I'm just going to say that miracles are so highly improbable,... **their probability is [so] infinitesimally remote, that we call them miracles.**”
- “Let me illustrate by giving you an alternative scenario of what happened to explain the empty tomb...[Outlines stolen body hypothesis]...**This is a highly unlikely scenario... but it's more likely than a miracle, which is so unlikely, that you have to appeal to supernatural intervention to make it work.**”
- “Suppose Jesus had a twin brother -- nothing implausible! People have twins. [Outlines twin hypothesis]... **That's an alternative explanation. It's highly unlikely. I don't buy it for a second, but it's more likely than the idea that God raised Jesus from the dead because it doesn't appeal to the supernatural,** which historians have no access to.” – from debate with Dr. William Lane Craig



Dr. Greg Cavin on the Resurrection

- “I’ve given two [alternative explanations]: the extraterrestrial theory and the twin theory; there are others as well”
- “[My challenge to Dr. Craig is to] show us that a resurrection is more probable than a mass hallucination. Do not get me wrong: a mass hallucination is extremely improbable, yet a resurrection from the dead is even more so.”
- “Of course, it’s absurd before we look at the evidence to think that Jesus could have had an unknown twin. That’s highly unlikely. Of course, it’s even more unlikely that God would raise Jesus from the dead.”
- “I argued that even a slight decrease in the entropy of the dead body of Jesus would be something –given the laws of thermodynamics- not that God could not do, but that God would not do... God will not cause the entropy of the universe as a whole to decrease, according to the 2nd law of thermodynamics” – from debate with Dr. William Lane Craig



Resurrection summary

Three non-miraculous facts:

- Empty tomb
- Belief of the disciples
- Conversion of Paul

The best explanation: Resurrection

“God ... commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this **he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.**” – the apostle Paul, Acts 17:30-31



Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
- The gospel
 - The doctrine of sin
 - The doctrine of salvation

The doctrine of sin

Jesus' view of sin:

"do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.
Rather fear him who **can destroy both soul and body in hell.**"
- Matt. 10:28

"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.**" – Mark. 7:20-23

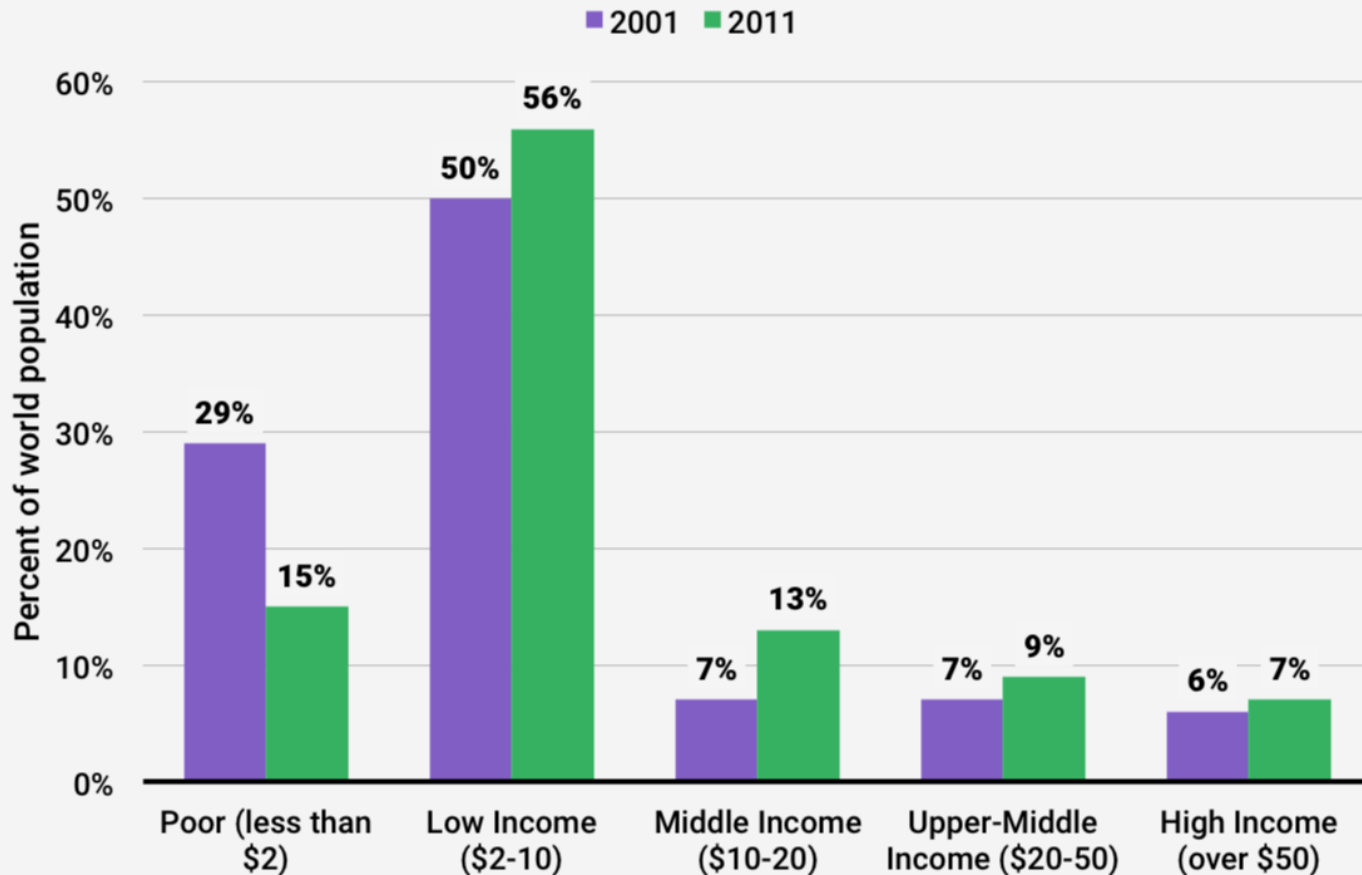
"those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? **No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.**"-Luke 13:2-5

"Truly, truly, I say to you, **everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.** " – John 8:34



The reality of sin

GLOBAL DAILY INCOME DISTRIBUTION



The reality of sin

- “Are we culpable for all the preventable injury and death that we did nothing to prevent? We may be, up to a point. The philosopher Peter Unger has made a persuasive case that **a single dollar spent on anything but the absolute essentials of our survival is a dollar that has some starving child’s blood on it**. Perhaps we do have far more moral responsibility for the state of the world than most of us seem ready to contemplate.” – Dr. Sam Harris, “The Limits of Discourse”
- “The classical utilitarian regards an action as right if it produces more happiness for all affected by it than any alternative action and **wrong if it does not**.” Dr. Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 3
- “If it is in our power to prevent something very bad happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it...The life or death needs of others must take priority... **even a bottle of water is a luxury if there is safe drinking water available free**.” – ibid p. 199, 213, 215

The reality of sin

- 65% of men watch porn at least once a month
- 12% of websites on the Internet are pornographic
- “Of the 304 [pornographic] scenes analyzed, 88.2% contained physical aggression...while 48.7% of scenes contained verbal aggression”¹
- “people who started watching porn were more likely to split with their partners...For men, the chance of divorce went from 5% to 10%. For women, that number jumped from 6% to 18%.”²
- 23% of married men and 19% of married women admit to an extramarital affair

¹ Bridges, AJ. et al. *Violence Against Women*. 2010 Oct;16(10):1065-8

² Shultz, D. *Science*. “Divorce rates double when people start watching porn.” Aug. 26, 2016

The reality of sin

An Army of Workers Overseas Suffer the Worst of the Internet So You Don't Have To

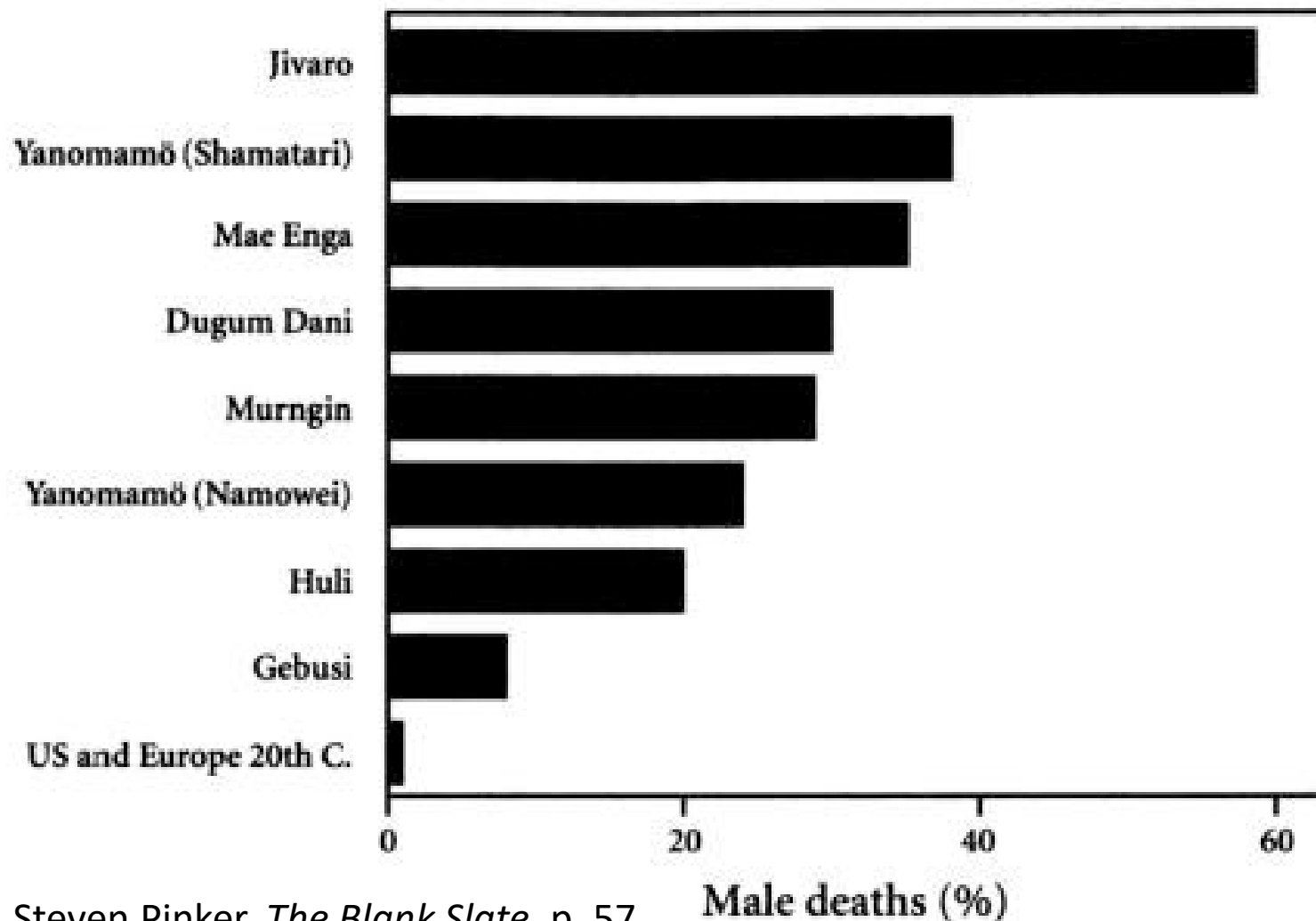
By Amanda Marcotte



- “the psychological toll of this work is immense. A lot of the job involves taking down pornography, of course, but a lot of it is taking down hateful, sadistic, and terrifying stuff. (There's also a lot of overlap.) ‘The worst was the gore: brutal street fights, animal torture, suicide bombings, decapitations, and horrific traffic accidents,’... One woman in particular is ‘especially haunted’ by a video she took down, about half an hour long, that appeared to be of a [CENSORED] Seeing that just once would be hard to get over, but having to deal with that stuff daily seems impossible to fathom.”
- “The army of content moderators is huge, ‘well over 100,000,’”

The reality of sin

Percentage of male deaths caused by warfare



The reality of sin

- Nazi Germany began killing mentally disabled individuals in 1939. In 1941, doctors and nurses at Hadamar “celebrated the cremation of their 10,000th patient with beer and wine served in the crematorium.”¹
- “Chinese men were used for bayonet practice and in decapitation contests...Not only did live burials, castration, the carving of organs, and the roasting of people become routine, but more diabolical tortures were practiced...So sickening was the spectacle that even the Nazis in the city were horrified, one proclaiming the massacre to be the work of “bestial machinery.””²
- Milgram experiment: “Sixty-five percent (65%) of the teachers were willing to progress to the maximum voltage level.”³

¹ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/nazi-persecution-of-the-mentally-and-physically-disabled>

² Chang, Iris. *The Rape of Nanking*. Quoted in Jones, C. “Human evil and suffering”

³ <https://nature.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7article/article35.htm>

The reality of sin

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that **everyone who is angry with his brother** will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” – Matt. 5:21-22

The reality of sin

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed **adultery with her in his heart.**” – Matt. 5:27-28

The reality of sin

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” – Matt. 5:43-45

The reality of sin

“The most important [commandment] is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” – Mark 12:29-31

The problem of sin

- The radical nature of sin
 - Heart vs. behavior
- The infection of sin
 - Sin as cancer
- The indelibility of sin
 - Impossibility of recompense
- The holiness of God
 - Sin as spiritual adultery

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
- God and revelation
- The gospel
 - The doctrine of sin
 - The doctrine of salvation

The doctrine of salvation

Jesus' view of salvation:

"this is my blood of the covenant, which **is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**" – Matthew 26:28

"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to **give his life as a ransom for many.**" – Mark 10:45

"I tell you, [the tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the [Pharisee]. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but **the one who humbles himself will be exalted.**" – Luke 18:14

"The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. **So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**" – John 8:35-36



Salvation and justification

- “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” – Phil. 3:8-9
- “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. – Gal. 2:16
- “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” – 1 Pet. 3:18

Salvation and sanctification

- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. **The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.**” – 2 Cor. 5:17
- “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, **‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’** Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive” – John 7:38-39
- “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be **holy and blameless before him.**” – Eph. 1:4

The remedy for sin

- The radical nature of sin
 - A radically new nature
- The infection of sin
 - Growth in grace
- The indelibility of sin
 - A new record
- The holiness of God
 - A perfect record

The doctrine of salvation

“just as hitting home runs is the monopoly of one sport, **salvation is the monopoly of one religion.** If you see sin as the human predicament and **salvation as the solution, then it makes sense to come to Christ.** But that will not settle as much as you might think, because the real question is not which religion is best at carrying us into the end zone of salvation but which of the many religious goals we should be seeking.” – Stephen Prothero, *God is not one*, p. 22

Why Christianity?

- The Trilemma
- The Resurrection
- The gospel

**Christianity is intellectually
credible.**

**Reject Jesus honestly or
trust him honestly.**