

A discussion with a sceptic – On the resurrection

Introduction

The central point of the Christian faith is the resurrection. Without the claim of the New Testament writers that a man named Jesus rose from the dead, men like Peter, James and John would have remained fishermen, Paul would have remained a Pharisee and Jerusalem would have carried on in the non-dramatic rule of the Romans. But that's not what happened is it. If I ask you if you believed that what we read about on the New Testament is true I'm pretty certain you would say. But what if a sceptic asked you the question. What if they said just because you have faith that it happened, that does not make it true. Ask anyone that subscribes to any religion if they have faith in their teaching and they would probably give you a similar assertion as to why they believe. Faith. But just because I might believe that the sky is Purple doesn't make it true.

So what would you do if an atheist, agnostic, pantheist or any other person questions you on what you believe. 1 Peter 3:15 says: "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." The truth of the matter is that if you engage in a conversation and are not able to adequately defend the position of the Christian faith, you put yourself in a position where you may begin to doubt your faith. Don't we know that the devil loves making us doubt. It's literally from the first page of his play book. So what if you are in that position right now. What are you going to do?

Given the above I would like this morning to model a conversation with a sceptic. So let's say I've engaged in a conversation with a sceptic...

Christian: How could you not believe in God? Creation itself shouts of being designed. For me it's about knowing that Jesus died on the cross for my sins and three days later rose from the dead.

Sceptic: So I'm not sure about God, I mean there is so many different religions these days. How can you know that it is true? Doesn't your bible say that 'if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is worthless, and so is your faith?

Christian: Well I agree. If Jesus did not rise from the dead then being a Christian is futile.

Sceptic: So how can you be so sure that the resurrection actually happen?

Christian: Simple, there is good evidence for the resurrection. In fact, most scholars of the New Testament (from the super conservative to the most liberal) agree on the following as historical fact:

- Jesus died by Roman crucifixion;
- He was buried in a private tomb;
- Soon afterwards the disciples were discouraged, bereaved, and despondent, having lost hope;
- Jesus' tomb was found empty very soon after his interment;
- The disciples had experiences that they believed were actual appearances of the risen Jesus;
- Due to these experiences, the disciples' lives were thoroughly transformed. They were even willing to die for their belief;
- The proclamation of the Resurrection took place very early, from the beginning of church history;
- The disciples' public testimony and preaching of the resurrection took place in the City of Jerusalem, where the Jews Jesus had been crucified and buried shortly before;

- The gospel message centred on the preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus;
- Sunday was the primary day for gathering and worshipping;
- James, the brother of Jesus and a sceptic before this time, was converted when he believed he also saw the risen Jesus; and
- Just short time later, Saul of Tarsus (Paul) became a Christian believer, due to an experience that he also believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.

Sceptic: What if they went to the wrong grave?

Christian: That could have been easily refuted. The Roman soldiers could have gone to the 'real' grave, taken Jesus's body and paraded it across Jerusalem and put a quick end to the claim that the disciples were making.

Sceptic: That's all good and well, but how do we know that the disciples were not having a hallucination of Jesus. They had just been through a traumatic experience if we are to believe that there is any truth to their story.

Christian: The problem with that theory is simple. It's not possible for so many people to have the same hallucination. Hallucinations are similar to dreams in that they are only experienced by a single person and not multiple people. And even if it were possible for say a handful of people to have the same dream or hallucination you are forgetting that it is recorded that Jesus appeared and ate with His disciples on numerous occasions. Furthermore, he appeared to more than 500 people at one time. It is simply impossible that so many people had the same

Sceptic: What if it just looked like he died on the cross but was still alive when they put Him into the tomb?

Christian: It is accepted that all present (friends, enemies/ Romans) believed that Jesus was dead. Moreover we know that the Roman's were essentially pro's at executing people. This is confirmed by the fact that the Roman soldiers pieced Jesus' side to check if he was dead. This technic has been confirmed. What Roman soldiers would do is use the spear to piece the heart of the victim.

In the Journal of the American Medical Association, three medical doctors, including a pathologist from the Mayo Clinic concluded: *'Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear, thrust between his right rib, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart thereby ensured his death. Accordingly, interpretations that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge'*.

Beyond this we also know that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus embalmed the body of Jesus. I'm sure they would have known if they were busy embalming a man that was not yet dead.

Sceptic: What if the disciples stole the Body?

Christian: What did the disciples have to gain by stealing the body and making up a story about the resurrection of Jesus? They were all Jews. They had not need for a new religion. In fact something significant (like the actual resurrection) would have had to happen for them to consider leaving Judaism. Furthermore, if they stole the body surely one of them would have admitted such when they were threatened with death. But that's not what happened. All the disciples, with the exception of John, were executed for proclaiming that Christ has risen from the dead. It makes no sense for the disciples to willingly die if all they were doing was defending a lie. But if it were true, well

defending truth is worth dying for. So it is highly unlikely that the disciples would have stolen the body of Jesus.

Sceptic: What if a substitute took Jesus' place on the cross?

Christian: This happens to be a theory that Muslims believe. According to them it only appeared as if Jesus had been crucified. So let's for starters have a look at when the Qur'an that claims this was written. The Qur'an was written more than 600 years after the crucifixion. Furthermore there is no evidence that this is true. If we have a look at the records of the time attested to by eye witnesses we learn that it was in fact Jesus who, not only was crucified but died by crucifixion. This is confirmed by the Talmud and the disciples. Also, for this theory to be true we also have to ask well who was put in the tomb that was found empty. There are too many unanswered questions left by this theory for it to be plausible.

Sceptic: What if the disciples' faith led to their belief in the resurrection?

Christian: Let's have a look at this theory. The disciples we know ran away and went into hiding after the crucifixion. I would venture to say that that group of men were not bookworms either. They could only have been questioning everything Jesus had taught them. So you are saying, in this theory, that scared skeptical men decided to come up with a belief that Jesus rose from the dead, without ever seeing him, and based belief that he rose from the dead set out to tell whomever they could that Jesus was alive, and not only that but be willing to die for that statement. I think you have it the wrong way around. The only way that the disciples would have declared the resurrection is if they actually encountered the risen Jesus. It was His resurrection that led to their faith, not the other way around. Moreover, in order for this to be true you would have to disprove the evidence for more than 500 eyewitnesses of the risen Christ.

Sceptic: Could the New Testament writers have copied Pagan resurrection myths like that of the supposed resurrections of Marduk, Adonis and Osiris?

Christian: I guess what you are trying to say that the rising of the dead of Jesus is just a story. Well did you know that CS Lewis said this, *'All I am in my private life is a literary critic and historian, that's my job... and I'm prepared to say on that basis if anyone thinks the Gospels are either legends or novels, then that person is simply showing his incompetence as a literary critic. I've read a great many novels and I know a fair amount about the legends that grew up among early people, and I know perfectly well the Gospels are not that kind of stuff'*.

So even if the myth could explain the resurrection, none of those myths can explain the martyrdom of the eye witnesses or the empty tomb or the testimony of non-Christian writers. It also can't explain the facts I listed earlier which are accepted by scholars as historical fact.

In addition no Roman or Greek myth ever spoke of the incarnation of a monotheistic God into human form by way of a virgin birth. The Egyptian myth of Osiris was one where Osiris was cut into 14 pieces and spread around Egypt. Osiris is then reassembled and brought back to life by the goddess of life Isis. However, Osiris is not really come back to life but rather becomes a member of the shadowy underworld. This is quite clearly different from Jesus.

The first real parallel to a dying God rising from the dead are found in AD150, well after Christianity has been established. Hence, this is more likely to be a copy of the story and not something that the disciples made up.

Sceptic: Well do you not have a problem over here when you claim a resurrection. We have no way of knowing that that is even possible. It would be a miracle and I'm not sure that miracles are possible?

Christian: I would agree that from a medical sense we would not be able to explain a resurrection. That would, in my mind, constitute a miracle. But as to the question of if miracles are possible, it seems to me that you have pre-supposed that miracles are not possible. And, despite the strong evidence that the only reasonable way to explain was is historically been accepted as true a resurrection.

To further my point, there is one miracle that if it were possible, would certainly make any other miracle claim plausible. That is if Genesis 1:1 is true, the creation of the universe would be a miracle and hence the resurrection of Jesus would be plausible. We know from science that the universe as we know it had a beginning. Well if it has a beginning how did it start? Well first there would have been nothing and either nothing created something from nothing, or something created something from nothing. Nothing can't create. Something intelligent that exists outside of time and space, which is immaterial and all powerful must have created the universe from nothing. That would (i) be a miracle as well as the most logical explanation for the beginning of the universe and (ii) it would most certainly point towards God.

Sceptic: Do you not need extraordinary evidence for the claims of a dead man rising from the dead?

Christian: What would extraordinary evidence mean? If you mean overwhelming evidence that Jesus did die and rise again. Well I think I have just given you exactly that. If you, after having considered this evidence still choose not to believe then I must ask, is it not a matter of you don't want to believe?

Conclusion

Ok, so now that we can know with certainty that Jesus lived, died and rose again, what are we do with this information. Well I think I'll split this into a few classes.

Firstly, if you are strong in your faith you can continue to stand firm in strengthened faith.

Secondly, if you are doubting your faith, I believe that looking at this evidence should put to rest your doubts. You can know that what the eye witnesses say they saw actually happened.

Thirdly, if you have not yet come to faith, I want you to consider the evidence, I want you to consider the love of God. The fact that God sent his Son to die in your place. He sent his Son to live a Holy life at standard that you can't meet. But in doing that God made a way that you can reach that standard only through His Son.

Fourthly, If you still do not believe after examining the evidence, then ask yourself, is my objection because of the evidence or because I simply do not want to believe.

Finally, let's make sure that we are prepared to always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."