

Chapter #10

The Credibility of the Resurrection Witnesses and the Congruity of Accounts

In our last chapter we determined that the only way to prove a religion is true is to find a synthetic statement (a verifiable truth claim) on which the entire religion rests, and to prove it true or false based on empirical evidence. Most religious statements fall into the analytical philosophers' category of "nonsense," because they cannot be proved or disproved. Even much of what we claim as Christians regarding our subjective experience of salvation is unprovable. But Christianity does not rest on an experience. It is entirely dependent on a set of historical events: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact of Jesus' life and death are indisputable. We offered evidence in Chapter 3 to prove the historical reality of Jesus Christ. That has never been doubted until recent years. But without the resurrection, Christianity by its own admission is worthless and groundless. The resurrection is the crowning proof that Jesus was who He claimed to be and that all His teachings were true. Everything hinges on the literal, physical resurrection of Christ. And the resurrection is a synthetic claim; that is, it can be verified or falsified by an examination of evidence. Therefore, if we can prove the resurrection to be true, it follows by the logic of the philosophers that Christianity is indeed true.

Since we have already proven the Bible to be a historically accurate and reliable document, we can enter it into evidence. In Scripture we have the express testimony of four men concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These are the only written documents we have of the resurrection story. Mark and Luke were not disciples. Although Mark may have seen the resurrected Lord, we are reasonably sure Luke did not. Mark obtained most of his information from the apostle Peter. Luke was a traveling companion of Paul and may have received information from him. Luke, though, was a historian, and records in Luke 1:1-4 that he carefully researched these events in order to provide an orderly account. The testimonies of the four gospels are based on the testimony of many witnesses:

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."*

Acts 13:31 *"...and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people."*

The question might be asked, "Why do we only have four accounts of the resurrection? Shouldn't there be hundreds of accounts?" Since the testimony of just two witnesses was required for proof in a court of law, the inclusion of four accounts of the resurrection and a handful of appearances was considered ample proof for the assertions of the early church. These were written at a time when verification would have been relatively easy. Enough witnesses were still alive to verify the written accounts. British scholar James Dunn stated,

"Paul was converted within two or three years of Jesus' death, perhaps as little as eighteen months after the first reports of Jesus being seen alive after his death. And almost certainly he received this basic outline of the gospel very soon after his conversion, as part of his initial instruction. In other words, the testimony of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 goes back to within two or three years of the events described."

How do you reconcile the inconsistencies in the accounts of the resurrection?

The accounts of the resurrection are found in Matthew 28:1-20, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-49 and John 20:1-21:25. A cursory reading of the narratives does show some inconsistency. For instance, they disagree on how many women visited the tomb, whether it was angels or men who spoke to them and how many, whether it was dark or dawn, etc. The chart at the end of this chapter shows the accounts side by side to highlight the discrepancies. Do these inconsistencies prove the accounts to be false? Quite the opposite. They actually serve to substantiate their genuineness.

1. The differences prove they are independent accounts.

Because the accounts differ in certain areas, we can logically conclude that each account is independent of the others. The writers didn't all depend on the testimony of the same witness or witnesses.

2. The differences prove they are genuine; there was no attempt to harmonize.

Had the resurrection been a hoax, the perpetrators would have made certain their details corresponded exactly. After all, they wouldn't want anyone to dismiss their claims because of inconsistencies. It is the general consensus of scholars that Matthew and Luke both had the gospel of Mark at their disposal when they wrote their gospels, and yet they didn't attempt to harmonize their accounts with Mark's. Why not? Apparently, they didn't find the discrepancies irreconcilable. The testimony they recorded was genuine, not doctored up to be more convincing.

“Furthermore, it would have been impossible for forgers to put together so consistent a narrative as that which we find in the gospels. The gospels do not try to suppress apparent discrepancies, which indicates their originality. There is no attempt at harmonization between the gospels, such as we might expect of forgers.”²

3. The differences prove the writers were credible witnesses.

We often mistakenly believe that the more similar accounts of a specific event are, the more accurate. But that is not always the case in a court of law. Nineteenth century Harvard law professor Simon Greenleaf noted that the...

“...discrepancies between the narratives of the several evangelists, when carefully examined, will not be found sufficient to invalidate their testimony.... If these different accounts of the same transactions were in strict verbal conformity with each other, the argument against their credibility would be much stronger. All that is asked for these witnesses is, that their testimony may be regarded as we regard the testimony of men in the ordinary affairs of life.... If the evidence of the evangelists is to be rejected because of a few [minor] discrepancies among them, we shall be obliged to discard that of many of the contemporaneous histories on which we are accustomed to rely.”³

In a 1992 issue of the *Milwaukee Journal*, there was an interesting article about a judge's disagreement with a jury's verdict. In the article, journalist Michael R. Zahn noted one aspect of the case:

“Landry said the four women gave very similar accounts on the witness stand, even testifying identically on a minor point: that the front windows of the car were rolled down all the way and the rear windows were rolled down only slightly.

“It disturbed the jury that all their stories were the same,” Landry said. “Each woman used the phraseology ‘the back windows were open a crack.’ That struck me, too, as very unusual and very suspect, and I think that contributed to the jury's skepticism.”

“Normally, when questioned on such trivia, witnesses would contradict each other or be uncertain, Landry said.”⁴ [Emphasis added.]

Discrepancies in minor details are more a mark of authenticity than they are of falsity. To disbelieve the gospel accounts of the resurrection on the grounds of inconsistency is to do a great injustice to the original witnesses.

4. The similarities are more striking than the differences.

What is most striking in the resurrection accounts is the large amount of information on which they agree. Women went to the tomb on the first day of the week. They found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. Messengers told them Jesus had risen from the dead. After that, the disciples saw the risen Lord. Every writer agrees on the basic facts; they are incontrovertible. The testimony is that Jesus was dead, then He was not. Period.

Could the resurrection accounts be legend?

In chapter 5 we proved that the writing of the New Testament is completely incompatible with myth and legend. Notice the difference between the gospel accounts and what is written concerning the resurrection in the spurious Gospel of Peter (from the mid-second century):

Now in the night in which the Lord's day dawned, when the soldiers, two by two in every watch, were keeping guard, there rang out a loud voice in heaven, and they saw the heavens opened and two men come down from there in a great brightness and draw nigh to the sepulchre. That stone which had been laid against the entrance to the sepulchre started of itself to roll and gave way to the side, and the sepulchre was opened, and both the young men entered in. When now those soldiers saw this, they awakened the centurion and the elders for they also were there to assist at the watch. And whilst they were relating what they had seen, they saw three men come out of the sepulchre, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross followed them, and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the hand overpassing the heaven and they heard a voice out of the heavens saying, -Thou has preached to them that sleep. And from the cross there was heard the answer, -Yea. Those men took counsel with one another to go and report this to Pilate.⁵

Unlike this legend, none of the four gospel writers claim to have seen the resurrection itself, only the evidence of the resurrection (an empty tomb and the risen Lord). Even Matthew's account, in which he tells of an earthquake, an angel rolling the stone away, and the guards becoming like dead men, doesn't offer any testimony about the actual resurrection. The angel didn't roll away the stone to let Jesus out, but to show that He had already risen. Legend attempts to give an explanation of the miraculous and to fill in the missing details. The gospel writers, on the other hand, only included what was truly observed - the evidence that the resurrection had already taken place.

How do we know the witnesses were credible?

Aside from the fact that the four accounts of the resurrection agree on the major details, how can we be sure their testimony should even be considered? The answer to that question is found in our own courts of law. How is any eyewitness testimony evaluated? Simon Greenleaf's *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence* is still considered the "greatest single authority on evidence in the entire literature of legal procedure."⁶ In that renowned book, Greenleaf offers five tests for eyewitness credibility:⁷

- (1) **Honesty.** Can the witnesses be shown to have integrity and to be honest?
- (2) **Ability.** Were the witnesses able to tell the truth based on their opportunity to observe the facts?
- (3) **Consistency.** Are the various testimonies concerning the same event consistent?
- (4) **Reality.** Is the testimony concerning a real-life experience (something able to be verified)?
- (5) **History.** Does the testimony match facts and events from the same time period that are already known? ⁷

All testimony must pass these five tests before being subjected to cross-examination. These are the tests that are used every day in a court of law. They are not 100% accurate. It is possible that a witness could appear to pass all five tests and still be lying, but the probability of the testimony being true increases to a high enough

degree that it is given the benefit of the doubt. Remember, in proving synthetic statements we use inductive reasoning \hat{o} reasoning based on the accumulation of evidence. The evidence raises the degree of probability, but it can never prove with 100% certainty. The fate of thousands of people are based on this method of determining credibility every day. We trust it because it is reliable 95% of the time. The Bible doesn't ask for special treatment in accepting its truth claims, but neither should it be judged more strictly. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John willingly submit their testimony to the five tests for eyewitness credibility outlined by Greenleaf.

HONESTY

Everything about the disciples' testimony points to honesty and integrity. First, we know that Jesus had commanded His disciples to be honest, a teaching they propagated to the first century Christians. In Matthew chapters 5-7 Jesus warned against hypocrisy and having to take oaths to prove their truthfulness. He and His followers preached righteousness, purity, holiness, keeping a clear conscience and living faultless lives.

Matthew 5:37 *"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."*

Matthew 5:20 *"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

2 Corinthians 6:4, 6-7 *"Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses... in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left..."*

1 Timothy 4:12 *"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity"*

1 Timothy 6:11 *"But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness..."*

1 Peter 3:16 *"...keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander"*

In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira were killed by God for lying to the Holy Spirit, and the entire church was filled with fear. That would have been a great deterrent to spreading any type of falsehood. When Simon the Sorcerer tried to buy the power of the Holy Spirit in Acts 8:18-21, he was rebuked harshly by Peter. The disciples couldn't be bought. Even Pliny the Younger, in his letter to the emperor, acknowledged that Christians \hat{o} bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds... never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up. \hat{o} Christians were known to be honest. They preached honesty. This evidence raises the probability that the witnesses to the resurrection were honest men.

We might expect men to be dishonest in reporting the events surrounding the resurrection if there were something to be gained. If by preaching that Christ was risen from the dead they would accumulate wealth or lives of leisure or political power or prestige, we could conceive that their motives may have been tainted. But that isn't the case with Christianity. The followers of Jesus knew they faced opposition, criticism and persecution for preaching a risen Christ. Many lost their citizenship and all their earthly possessions. Others paid with their lives. If the disciples were propagating a lie, they knew it was a lie. They would have had to purposely set out to deceive the world into believing their dead Master had risen. And for what? There was nothing to be gained and everything to lose. Even their message, that eternal life was to be gained through belief in Christ, would be hollow. William Paley wrote,

\hat{o} Would men in such circumstances pretend to have seen what they never saw; assert facts which they had not knowledge of, go about lying to teach virtue; and, though not only convinced of Christ's being an imposter, but having seen the success of his imposture in his crucifixion, yet persist in carrying on; and so persist, as to bring upon themselves, for nothing, and with full knowledge of the consequence, enmity and hatred, danger and death? \hat{o} ⁸

Such a proposition is absurd \hat{o} even more so when we evidence the changed lives of the disciples based

on their belief in their message. Matthew probably knew well what it meant to lie; he was a tax-collector, and tax-collectors were notorious for pocketing a portion of what was collected. They were noted for their dishonesty. But Matthew was changed by an encounter with Christ and became an ardent follower to the point of death. All of the disciples fled after the crucifixion and had to be convinced of the truthfulness of the resurrection. These were not gullible men. Something incredible happened to change James, the half-brother of Jesus, from a jeering skeptic to a leader in the early church. Something extraordinary turned Peter, who denied even knowing Christ during His trial, into a bold proclaimer of His resurrection. One writer described it like this:

“On the day of the crucifixion they were filled with sadness; on the first day of the week with gladness. At the crucifixion they were hopeless; on the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty and hope. When the message of the resurrection first came they were incredulous and hard to be convinced, but once they became assured they never doubted again. What could account for the astonishing change in these men in so short a time? The mere removal of the body from the grave could never have transformed their spirits, and characters. Three days are not enough for a legend to spring up which would so affect them. Time is needed for a process of legendary growth. It is a psychological fact that demands a full explanation.

“Think of the character of the witnesses, men and women who gave the world the highest ethical teaching it has ever known, and who even on the testimony of their enemies lived it out in their lives. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world.

T h a t s i m p l y w o u l d n ' t m a k e s e n s e . ”⁹

ABILITY

The second test for credibility is ability. Were the witnesses able to tell the truth based on their opportunity to observe the facts? In a court of law, this test would involve the accuracy of the witness's power of discerning (eyesight, hearing, mental capacity, etc.). We've all seen the courtroom dramas on television where the clever defense lawyer questioning the key eyewitness walks to the back of the room and asks, “How many fingers am I holding up,” to prove the witness wasn't able to see what he said he saw. That is using the test of ability. Faithfulness of memory is also judged under this test.

The writers of the Gospels pass this second test. Their narratives are filled with minute details concerning Jesus's life, death and resurrection, even recounting the position of the graveclothes left untouched in the empty tomb. We've already shown that the Gospels are filled with evidence proving they had intimate knowledge of first-century Palestine, so they had an opportunity to observe the facts in question. Simon Greenleaf added,

“The difference, in the detail of circumstances, between artful or false witnesses and those who testify the truth, is worthy of especial observation. The former are often copious and even profuse in their statements, as far as these may have been previously fabricated, and in relation to the principal matter; but beyond this, all will be reserved and meagre, from the fear of detection. The testimony of false witnesses will not be uniform in its texture, but will be unequal, unnatural, and inconsistent. On the contrary, in the testimony of true witnesses there is a visible and striking naturalness of manner, and an unaffected readiness and copiousness in the detail of circumstances, as well as in one part of the narrative as another, and evidently without the least regard either to the facility or difficulty of verification or detection.”¹⁰

Concerning the New Testament narratives, Greenleaf concludes that they “abound in examples of this kind of evidence, the value of which is hardly capable of being properly estimated.”¹¹

CONSISTENCY

We've already covered the area of consistency among the witnesses. They agree on all major points, and the areas of disagreement are proof that there was no collusion or intention to harmonize details. Their testimonies are consistent with what we would expect of genuine, eyewitness testimony.

REALITY

The test of reality asks whether the event could take place in the realm of space and time; whether it was a real-life experience. Some might conclude that, since what the disciples saw was a miracle, it wasn't a real-life experience. Modern historians, of course, approach these testimonies with the basic predisposition that God doesn't exist; there is no supernatural world and no such thing as a miracle. But, using inductive rather than deductive reasoning, we must let the evidence speak for itself. When you take the miracles out of the New Testament, nothing makes sense. Why did so many people follow Jesus? Why did the Jewish authorities want to kill Him? Why was He such a threat? Why were the followers of Jesus after the resurrection tortured and killed? For three years Jesus claimed to be God based on the evidence of His miracles. He was seriously deranged if He really never performed a miracle. The evidence points to the reality of miracles, but one doesn't have to believe in miracles for the account of the resurrection to pass the reality test. The New Testament writers saw the resurrection as an undeniable historical fact that took place within the time-space continuum. It was not a hallucination or a "spiritual resurrection." It was a real event that could be verified or falsified by proof in the real world.

HISTORY

The final test, the test of history, examines the witness's testimony for coordination with known facts and circumstances of the period in question. Chapters 5 and 6 were filled with examples of the historical accuracy of the New Testament, so it is without question that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John pass the historical test.

Are the testimonies concerning the resurrection credible? If we subject them to the same legal tests that eyewitnesses in a court of law are subjected to they are extremely credible. Sir Edward Clarke wrote,

“As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidences for the events of the first Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling. Inference follows on evidence, and a truthful witness is always artless and disdains effect. The Gospel evidence for the resurrection is of this class, and as a lawyer I accept it unreservedly as the testimony of truthful men to the facts they were able to substantiate.”¹²

Everything points to the fact that the New Testament writers were honest and credible witnesses. But, as witnesses, they are still subject to cross-examination. In our next chapter we will scrutinize their testimony by examining alternate explanations for the resurrection and see if their testimony still stands up.

Some food for thought concerning the eyewitness testimony in the meantime:

“If Jesus did not rise from the dead... then either we must believe that a small, unlearned band of deceivers overcame the powers of the world and preached an incredible doctrine over the face of the whole earth, which in turn received this fiction as the sacred truth of God; or else, if they were not deceivers, but enthusiasts, we must believe that these extremists, carried along by the impetus of extravagant fancy, managed to spread a falsity that not only common folk, but statesmen and philosophers as well, embraced as the sober truth. Because such a scenario is simply unbelievable, the message of the apostles, which gave birth to Christianity, must be true.”¹³

End Notes

- ¹ Quoted by Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988, 1993), p. 279-280.
- ² William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1984), p. 256.
- ³ Quoted by Steven Collins, *Championing the Faith: A Layman's Guide to Proving Christianity's Claims* (Tulsa: Virgil Hensley Publishing Co., 1991), p. 35.
- ⁴ Michael R. Zahn, *Milwaukee Journal*, October 9, 1992, p. B1, 4.
- ⁵ *The Gospel of Peter*; p. 35-43, quoted by George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 95.
- ⁶ Collins, p. 108.
- ⁷ Collins, p. 108.
- ⁸ William Paley in *A View of the Evidence of Christianity*, quoted in Craig p. 263.
- ⁹ J.N.D. Anderson quoted by Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 228.
- ¹⁰ Quoted by Collins, p. 120.
- ¹¹ Collins, p. 120.
- ¹² Quoted in *Evidence*, p. 190.
- ¹³ Craig, p. 265.

A Comparison of the Resurrection Stories

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, **Mary Magdalene and the other Mary** went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: "He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him." Now I have told you.

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Post-Resurrection Appearances:

ÉThe eleven in Galilee

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, **Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome** bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, **they saw a young man dressed in a white robe** sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, "He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Post-Resurrection Appearances:*

ÉMary Magdalene
ÉTwo in the country
ÉThe eleven

*(all from an unreliable passage)

Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, **the women** took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly **two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning** stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. **It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others** with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Post-Resurrection Appearances:

ÉTwo on the road to Emmaus
ÉEleven in Jerusalem

John 20:1-13

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, **Mary Magdalene** went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and **saw two angels in white**, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

Post-Resurrection Appearances:

ÉMary Magdalene
ÉThe 10 disciples
ÉThomas and the disciples