

Consider Jesus Christ

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Introduction

I have spent most of my adult life either as a student or working directly with students. I have listened to many serious and honest questions about the Christian faith. During my third year in graduate school the questions below became live issues for me. Others have written volumes on each question. Our space permits only a brief outline. Maybe it will help you decide if and where you need to do further study.

Why even be concerned about such complex issues?

Reality is a most persistent thing. It keeps cropping up and frustrating plans that are not consistent with it. Assumptions that do not take reality into account are time bombs destined to explode when the time comes that reality must be faced. When people build their lives on wrong assumptions about reality, sooner or later serious "stress fractures" appear. Some lives break up as the increasing pressures of later life crumble the inadequate foundations.

Reality does not bend to our emotional fervor or to our "beliefs."

Suppose someone gave you orange juice mixed with poisonous strychnine--but assured you it was healthy orange juice. If you drank it, no matter how much you believed the drink was healthy, you would soon be dead.

Reality takes a toll! For many, the ticking time bomb of unreal assumptions about life reaches zero-hour in "mid-life crisis":

- marriages founded on the wrong assumptions about how marriage ought to be lived now come apart;
- careers based on wrong assumptions about what brings real fulfillment in life become like vampires-
- sucking life from people but giving little in return.
- children raised on wrong assumptions about child rearing now begin to create tremendous stress in family life.

Had the life been built on the right assumptions about the existence and importance of God, the correct basis for morals, the right set of priorities--perhaps the foundations could hold the pressure.

Why be concerned about all the issues we are going to talk about? Because the best time to ask the deep questions about life is when the foundations are being poured--so that they can be made strong enough to handle the stresses to come.

Does it help get a grip on the real world?

A question to ask yourself is, "Does commitment to Christ help people to live well in the real world/" In other words, is Jesus Christ relevant in today's world?

Look closely at the lives of those who take Christianity's teachings seriously and apply them-and at those who do not.

Those who take the teachings seriously are not going to be perfect; they will have problems. But over time, are they becoming better or worse family members, workers, or citizens? Are they able to function well in the real world based on their beliefs. Or, do they insist their religion or philosophy be in one compartment of their lives while logic, work and the real world exist in separate compartments? Relevance is a key issue.

What is ultimate reality?

What is really behind the universe we observe? Some popular ideas include

- The God of the Bible-a person, the creator and sustainer of the universe.
- An unknown creator no longer involved with the universe (Deism).
- No god-only matter, plus time, plus chance (Naturalism, Nihilism, Existentialism, Postmodernism).
- An impersonal god-not a person, but an "it" beyond all consciousness or personality (Hinduism, Christian Science).
- The individual self-each human self creates its own realities (New Age).

Each viewpoint has a dramatic impact on how one goes about answering the giant questions of life: the purpose of life, the meaning of human persons, the meaning of history, the basis for morals, what has value in life and so forth.

Is there evidence that God exists?

Some of the major evidences are:

1. THE UNIVERSE – Mountains are caused by collisions of tectonic plates, gigantic pieces of the earth's crust floating on its molten rock core. Supernova are caused by the explosion of stars. Stars themselves may have been caused by the contraction of material thrown out by the "big bang."

Anytime we see phenomena occur we assume they are caused by something: huge bones found in a quarry must be there because a gigantic animal (dinosaur) died there in ages gone by.

When one considers the largest phenomenon of all, the universe, the question naturally comes up: What caused it?

Is the present universe only one stage in an infinite series of exploding and contracting universes? If so, what caused the "infinite series"?

The proposed cause of the universe would have to be sufficient to account for the vast size, enormous amounts of power, and the fantastic complexity of everything (see below).

To the question above, most people have answered, "A god of sufficient power and ability."

When pressed with the question, "Then what caused God?" they answer, "Nothing. He always was. He had no cause or beginning."

One popular scientist quips that rather than assuming a god who had no beginning, he assumes a universe with no beginning--it just always was!

On the surface his position sounds logical enough. But the implications of "no god" for philosophy, the humanities, and the arts are devastating, as we will see later.

One evidence for the existence of God surrounds us: the universe itself.

2. DESIGN – The universe is "patterned," not chaotic in its arrangement. When we look at the universe and the world around us we do not find a kind of cosmic garbage dump with shreds and bits of things tossed randomly in chaos.

Rather, at a subatomic level, matter is quite patterned. On a stellar scale, matter is structured and behaves according to patterns in the solar furnaces. On a larger scale, stars are patterned into galaxies, galaxies into clusters, and clusters into super clusters.

At the organic level the detail and complexity of patterning is mind boggling. Not only does life exist in a variety of forms adapted to their environments, but the biochemical complexity of even the simplest forms of life is astounding.

The universe is patterned, not chaotic.

And the patterns are extremely complex. Patterns imply a pattern-maker, a designer. Indeed, the Bible says that one can look at creation and see implicitly the mind and power of God (Romans 1:18-20).

3. OUGHT – The Bible also says that God has written His law on the hearts of mankind, that mankind itself has a consciousness that some things are right or wrong in an ultimate sense.

And, it is true. The specifics of right and wrong vary from society to society. But the sense of "right" and "wrong" is universal.

4. LOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ATHEISM – If there is no god, it becomes logically difficult to avoid the conclusions of nihilism that there is no ultimate meaning to the things we hold dear:

- a. No ultimate purpose to life-- Purpose implies intent, design. Design implies a designer. If there is no designer, there is no purpose. I might choose a theme for my life or an accomplishment to pursue during my years on earth, but there would be no ultimate purpose to life.
- b. No purpose to history--Like mankind, history simply "is." The story of man is only a story--with no purpose. Mankind might choose a direction to move or nations adopt goals, but when "entropy death" finally takes over the universe there will have been no purpose to the age of mankind.
- c. No ultimate wrong or right--Without a god who has given us standards to live by, there is no ultimate standard of "right" or "wrong," only societal or personal standards. And that means that even horrible crimes, though perhaps personally distasteful or societally incorrect, are not ultimately wrong.

Thus, the death of six million Jews by Nazi orders might not be acceptable to other societies, but it could be acceptable to the Nazi's. And the holocaust would not be ultimately wrong, for no god exists to decide which society is correct.

- d. Empty ideals--If there is no god, mankind is only a higher form of animal with the illusion of being "persons," something more than mere living flesh. "Personhood" tends to shrink to zero.

From a strictly logical basis, other great ideals shrink toward zero.

Suppose I am only a more complex form of animal, perceiving my environment through sensory stimuli and responding to those stimuli.

"Love" tends to reduce to a response I have when impacted by a certain set of visual and auditory stimuli (the presence of my wife). To say, "I love you to my wife is a statement about my response to a stimulus. It is not really different in kind from saying, "I itch," or "I am hungry." Both of these statements are also statements about a response to a stimuli. Yet most humans feel very deeply that "love" is different in kind from "itch."

"Freedom," and "justice" tend to become merely names one gives to different sets of pleasant stimuli--not ideals worth dying for.

Few people can live consistently with such a grim view of life and tend to abandon strict logic at some point in their life-styles. They will affirm there is no god, but then go on to illogically pretend that their kids are persons and love is immensely significant.

If the God of the Bible is assumed, life, history, morals, persons, and ideals turn out to have a great deal of meaning. One can proceed logically from the starting point and construct a life that fits with reality.

5. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS – which we will discuss below.

Serious question-or smokescreen?

Some people use theoretical questions as a smokescreen to cover up real issues preventing their commitment to Christ.

A friend once answered questions for a student until late at night. "Well, you have answered all my questions!" said the student.

"Great!" said my friend. "Are you ready to commit your life to Christ?"

"No!" came the reply. "If I did that, I'd have to stop sleeping with my girlfriend."

Theoretical questions had masked the real issue that blocked the student's commitment to Christ.

Are your questions sincere questions-or smokescreens? You can tell by answering this: if the questions I have were reasonably answered, would I become a Christian? If the answer is

- "Yes," your question(s) is a key question. Dig to get answers.
- "No," another question is the key question for you. What is it?

What kind of evidence?

The kind of evidence offered to prove an idea or hypothesis depends on the area of study involved.

- In mathematics, identity is important: an equation is proved when both sides of the equation are reduced to the same identical quantity.
- The physical sciences look for reproducibility: Experiments are designed to produce a certain set of data if the hypothesis is correct. When the same confirming data are reproduced by different people running the experiment, the hypothesis gains credibility.
- History looks for artifacts from the time, such as letters, journals, and objects, the reports of eyewitnesses and the reports of historians near the time.
- In the court system, like history, artifacts and eyewitnesses, and so forth are important.

What kind of evidence is used to prove the existence of God?

Mathematical manipulation and reproducible experiments do not apply. Instead, proving the existence of God involves evidence much like that of history or law. One looks at "artifacts" (like the universe and human existence) and "eyewitness" accounts (like the Gospel accounts of the New Testament) and the testimonies of people involved. Then one has to decide which hypothesis better explains the evidence: that a god exists-or that no god exists.

How do you decide what is true?

People tend to use three ways to evaluate whether or not something is true. Some rely on one way more than others.

- **THE INTELLECTUAL:** Is there good evidence for this? It is logical? Does it fit together systematically?
- **THE PRAGMATIC:** Does it work? What trustworthy persons have tried this and found that it works?
- **THE EMOTIONAL:** How do I feel about this? Do I feel good when I consider this, when I am involved with it-or do I feel bad?

Through these three channels people add up "evidence" and decide to accept or reject a claim to truth. Which channel is more important to you? You might place the three in order of priority for you. Why do you choose this order?

Do all religions worship the same God?

Actual study of the world religions shows:

1. GOD-CONCEPTS ARE QUITE DIFFERENT.

The personal God of the Bible and the nonpersonal "it" god of Hinduism are enormously different. Buddhist thought affirms that it makes no difference whether god exists or not. Muslims are adamant that Jesus could not be the Son of God--a concept key to the Christian faith.

2. ONLY HINDUISM SAYS "ALL ROADS LEAD TO GOD."

Islam, Christianity, and Judaism each affirm their God is unique. Of course, all cannot be equally right. But each religion should be allowed to speak for itself and not be unintelligently painted over with a Hindu concept of god.

Your god, my god-no big deal!

"You believe what you want to believe, and I'll believe what I want to believe. And, we'll both do fine."

This fairly popular idea is based on the assumptions that

- (1) religious beliefs have little to do with our ability to handle the stresses and decisions of life successfully, and/ or
- (2) the god(s) who is (are) really there is(are) not significantly concerned with our opinions or are unable to significantly impact our life if they are angered by our opinion.

If the God of the Bible is real, both assumptions are false.

What kind of god is really there?

The universe indicates the Creator has

1. **POWER**-enormous amounts for creation.
2. **MIND**-Great enough to design all.
3. **PERSONHOOD**-God would not be less than his creation, mankind.
4. **MORALITY**-at least as great as man's.

The Bible affirms that the above are true, and that god can be known most fully by looking at Jesus Christ (see Colossians 1:15).

Can the Bible be trusted?

The Bible is actually a small library of books written by various people from several cultures over a span of more than a thousand years. The library has two divisions:

- the Old Testament (OT), 39 books written mainly in Hebrew between about 1400 B.C. and 400 B.C.
- the New Testament (NT), 27 books written in Greek from the middle to the later part of the 1st century A.D. Translations into English from Greek and Hebrew texts are usually done by teams of well-known linguistic scholars working together. Their academic reputations are at stake in the quality of work they produce.

How did the ancient texts come into being?

The books of the Bible were written by real human beings in different periods of history and in different cultures. The purposes of the various books differ: some are historical, others are more legal, others for worship, others are letters written to help churches solve problems.

In some places the authors say they are recording things God has said directly to them. In other places

authors were led by God to do extended research to write an accurate report of what God has done (for example, Luke 1:1-4).

The biblical perspective on the writings is that, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21, NIV). For example, several times in the Book of Hebrews the writer quotes David, a writer of the Book of Psalms, and yet ascribes the quote to God.

Don't they contain inaccurate legends?

Based on the assumptions that most of the content of the Bible was written generations after the fact, some have theorized that the miracle stories of the Bible are legends growing over long times. Some have also felt that hand-copying through the centuries must have seriously distorted the original texts.

Some modern discoveries have lent great evidence for the accuracy of the Bible:

- A parchment fragment of the Gospel of John dated by carbon 14 to A.D. 115-125 indicated the NT was written comparatively soon after Christ's death.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls are preserved texts from about 200 B.C. They confirmed the effectiveness of copyists in preserving the original texts of the OT as they made new copies through the centuries.
- About five thousand portions and texts of the New Testament have been brought to light by archeology. Some date back as far as A.D. 175-200. Possession of so many copies and portions allows an extremely fine-tuned reconstruction of the original text of the New Testament.

Archaeology has repeatedly confirmed the accuracy of OT and NT statements about ancient locations, customs, and governmental officials. Ask a Christian friend or your director of Baptist student ministries to recommend a book on archaeology and the Bible.

What about the Bible and science?

Science covers a wide range of studies that attempt to quantify and measure details of reality and construct theories about how reality operates.

The Bible presents a view of the world in its entirety as created by God: the inanimate world, the plants and animals, and mankind. It also occasionally mentions supernatural events: healings; miracles, including the resurrection of Jesus Christ; and phenomenal events of nature, such as floods and earthquakes.

Over the years, discussions have gone on about evolution and creation, the biblical worldview and the scientific worldview, and the possibility of the miraculous. We will take a look at the issue of the miraculous. You may want to try to locate a copy of Bernard Ramm's *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954)(op.) for greater detail on other issues. The library on your campus may have a copy of this book.

Some people have objected to the miraculous in the Bible, saying that it goes against what science has taught us about the nature of things.

Actually, that objection is based on an assumption: that there is no god, or if there is, the god does not do the miraculous.

Now, if there is no god, then of course the miraculous would be highly unlikely or impossible. However, if the God of the Bible is real, the miraculous is possible--perhaps even probable!

For this reason, the resurrection of Christ is the key supernatural event of the Bible to investigate. If Jesus Christ was actually raised from the dead (not just resuscitated), then the God of the Bible is real and other supernatural events become possible. If Jesus did not come alive from the grave, then the other miracles of the NT are suspect and the religion of the NT is an empty pursuit (see I Corinthians 15:19-20). So we will take a look at the evidence for the reality of Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

Is Jesus really God? Did Jesus really exist?

Even antagonistic scholars today do not doubt the existence of a 1st-century Jew named Jesus, crucified by Pontius Pilate, declared resurrected by His followers, and worshiped as God by a rapidly growing 1st-century movement.

The references to His existence include not only Christian authors in the 1st century, but ancient and pagan sources mentioning Him. These sources include Josephus, a widely respected Jewish historian of the 1st century.

Is the New Testament merely myth?

Academic skepticism until the mid-1900s assumed the NT was written many generations after the death of Jesus and contained legends that gradually grew up over the long period of time.

In this century a fragment of the Gospel of John, dated about A.D. 115-125 indicated that most of the New Testament was written within about 60 years of Jesus' death. There was no long time for legends to grow.

Were the New Testament writers liars?

Consider the facts about the NT writers:

1. AVAILABLE CROSS-CHECKS--Many eyewitnesses to Jesus' life were still alive while the NT was being written. Paul implies the Corinthians could check with those witnesses (see I Corinthians 15:6) about his accuracy.
2. PERSECUTION NOT PROFIT--The apostles received physical pain for their efforts, not wealth (see Paul's recounting of his ministry in 2 Corinthians 1-5).

3. HIGH ETHICS--The NT writers present a very high standard of ethics for followers of Jesus to live by. Would con artists create so high an ethical code knowing they would live with it for years to come?
4. NO RECANTERS--Though martyred, the apostles did not recant. Would self-interested liars consistently die for what they knew to be an empty lie? It hardly seems possible that the NT writers were liars. They were reporting facts as they researched or witnessed them.

Access to the facts

The Gospel authors had access to the facts about Christ. Matthew and John were eyewitnesses. Mark was a longterm companion of Peter, one of Jesus disciples and eyewitness to the events of Christ's ministry and resurrection, Luke was a long term companion of the Apostle and church planter Paul. In composing his Gospel, he did extensive research among the living witnesses of the times (see Luke 1:1-4).

Liar, lunatic, or Lord?

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus claimed to be divine (see Matthew 26:63-65; John 8:48-59).

In His claim, Jesus is either:

- a LIAR: deceiving people;
- a LUNATIC: deluded, Himself deceived;
- or, LORD: truly God.

Would a liar or a lunatic have given the world new heights in ethical standards? It seems improbable.

But, the greatest confirmation of Jesus' deity lies in His resurrection

The Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus

Jesus was arrested, kept up all night in mock trials, beaten till His back was a bloody mass, and then crucified by the Romans (Matthew 26--28). After His death a soldier rammed a spear up through Jesus' rib cage to make sure He was dead.

His body was put into a tomb cut into rock about an eighth of a mile from Jerusalem. A huge rock disk that rolled into a trough in front of the cave sealed it from intruders.

The hopes of Jesus disciples were dashed. Their leader was dead and they feared further persecution. To make sure no one stole the body and proclaimed Him "risen," the Romans placed a troop of armed soldiers to guard the tomb.

On the third day something happened and the tomb was empty.

Soon the demoralized disciples were boldly enduring persecution to proclaim Jesus had risen from the dead.

Even skeptics admit that the tomb of Jesus became empty. Some attempted explanations:

THE WRONG TOMB, an empty one, was found by visitors who mistakenly concluded that Jesus had risen. However, if this were true, public officials could have easily produced the dead body of Jesus from the correct tomb. They did not--because the body was not there!

THE BODY WAS STOLEN by the disciples while the guards slept. This theory ignores the importance of several facts:

1. The guards were soldiers, not volunteers, and faced serious consequences for such a dereliction of duty.
2. The disciples
 - a. The disciples underwent a dramatic change. Demoralized fishermen were quickly changed into bold men willing to sacrifice their very lives for the principles they promoted. A jolting event is needed to make such a transformation--not a quiet conspiracy to lie about the resurrection of Jesus.
 - b. Their character and integrity was challenged. Again, it doesn't seem psychologically probable that a group of liars would live their whole lives under constant threat of persecution, continue to embody the highest ethics, and never recant, even at martyrdom.

MASS HALLUCINATION made the emotionally overwrought disciples think they saw Jesus. But over a 40 day period Jesus appeared, interacted with, and taught several individuals and groups--including a crowd of five hundred. It is simply incredible to believe that whole groups of people would: (1) have the same detailed hallucination and (2) hear the same detailed teachings.

JESUS ONLY SWOONED, passed out on the cross, and recovered in the refreshing cool of the tomb. He pushed away the rock, frightened off the soldiers, walked back to town, and persuaded the disciples He was the resurrected Lord of heaven and earth. There are several unanswerable points against this theory.

1. Roman concern for political stability demanded certainty of Jesus' death.
2. The spear stab was deep, penetrating the sac around Jesus' heart, accounting for the outpouring of "water and blood."
3. The great strength needed by a severely wounded man to roll, from inside the tomb (with no handhold), a stone disk so large that three women outside the tomb feared they couldn't move it (Mark 16:3).
4. Shock. People who work with trauma victims know their greatest enemy is shock. If not kept warm, they die.

Jesus would not have recovered from the beating, crucifixion, and spear stab while lying on a stone slab at 50-55 degrees. If not already dead, He would have died!

JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD. The only explanation of the empty tomb that fits the data is that Jesus actually died and returned to life in line with the reports in the Gospels.

The subsequent dynamic movement built by His formerly demoralized disciples had a sufficient cause: Jesus had indeed risen from the dead!

For a very detailed investigation of all the possible alternative explanations to resurrection see *Who Moved the Stone?* by Frank Morrison. Morrison recounts how he spent 10 years trying to disprove the resurrection--and then finally became a Christian.

SUMMARY: Jesus really existed. The writers of the NT had access to accurate information about Him, and tried to honestly present that information. The crucial matters of the life of Christ are His death and resurrection. Logically, the best answer for the empty tomb is that Jesus rose from the dead, proving His divinity.

Why doesn't God end suffering and evil?

According to the Bible, God is both good and powerful. He made the universe without the current evil and suffering. When mankind rebelled against God, evil and suffering entered the world. Harm, decay, illness, and death became a part of life (see Genesis 3 and Romans 8:18-24).

God will one day deal with evil finally: the new heaven and earth will have no tears. But God does not immediately remove evil because He is not ready to remove the human race. All humans sooner or later do wrong and hurt others. Were God to remove "all evil" He would remove those who do it. That includes all of us.

In the present God is:

- preventing evil from becoming all that it can be (see 2 Thessalonians 2:5-7).
- granting time for people to turn to Jesus Christ before He does remove evil from the earth.
- not aloof from suffering. Jesus, Himself, suffered and died at the hands of evil men so that we could be set free to know God. And Jesus shows the attitude of God toward evil and suffering: sickness He healed, death He reversed, and sin He forgave. God is in charge-and He does care.

What about followers of other religions and those who have never heard of Jesus Christ?

The followers of other religions and those who have never heard of Christ will be treated justly by God, for He is just.

According to Romans 2:14-16 all people are going to be judged by the extent to which they obeyed the revelation they received. Those who have:

- never heard of the true God will be judged by their obedience to what they knew about God from the creation and from His law "written on their hearts" (Romans 2:15, NIV).
- heard only the Old Testament law will be judged by obedience to it.
- heard the good news about Jesus Christ will be judged by whether or not they yielded to Jesus Christ.

Since you are investigating Jesus Christ, you are in the third category.

What about hypocrites?

An older friend of mine invited a man to church who respected her life. But he did not have the same respect for some of the people in her church.

"I don't want to go to church with all those hypocrites," he said.

With a twinkle in her eye she replied, "I'd rather spend time in church with them than spend eternity in hell with them!"

He decided she had a point!

1. **YOU MAY BE MISUNDERSTANDING WHAT A REAL CHRISTIAN IS:** Some think "Christians" are people accepted by God because they are morally superior. Thus, someone less than morally superior can't claim to be a Christian without being a "hypocrite." Actually, a Christian is someone forgiven by God even though they are not morally superior.
2. **YOU MAY BE LOOKING AT A CHRISTIAN WHO IS SPIRITUALLY IMMATURE:** Power for the change in behavior comes as a Christian studies the Bible, spends time in prayer, and yields to Christ in the details of life. Christians who neglect these channels of power continue relatively unchanged.
3. **YOU MAY BE CORRECT IN NOTING HYPOCRISY:** Some people are actually hypocrites. They pretend to be Christian, but they are not following Jesus Christ. And their behavior shows it. That is why it is important to get a clear picture of Jesus and His teaching in order to determine what real Christianity is and is not.

If you are aware of a church that has a large number of "hypocrites," look for another church to attend. Know in advance, however, that since Christians are not perfect people, you will not find a perfect church.

CONCLUSION

Years ago, after much study, I felt that the evidence for the reality of Jesus Christ was compelling. Should you agree, a further step remains for you-- decide whether to trust Jesus Christ with your life. Evidence can bring one to God, but trust enables them to know God. May you have wisdom and integrity as you look for the truth.