

Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But Easter is not just one day, but a forty-nine-day season, representing the forty days during which Jesus appeared to his disciples many times after he rose from the dead and the additional nine days between Jesus's ascension into heaven and the day of Pentecost, when he poured out the Holy Spirit. This Easter season gives us an excellent opportunity to consider both the uniqueness of the Christian religion, which we will consider today and next weekend, and the meaning of Jesus's resurrection from the dead, which we will consider the next three weekends after that.

At some point every Christian has to wrestle with some difficult questions: "Out of all the religions on earth, how do I know my religion is the correct one? Am I a Christian just because my parents were Christian, or because most of the people in my community or area are Christian? Is it just another expression of my culture, or is there something more to it?" I once knew a lady who ultimately lived to be 111 years old before she went to be with Jesus. Her wrestling with these questions was pretty simple. She said, "My dad told me the Bible was true and I believed him. He wouldn't lie to me." But I think she was the exception, not the rule.

When people ask me these questions, I usually point to two unique traits of Christianity—that it is the only religion with a firm historical foundation, and that it is a religion with a completely unique message. Let's focus on that first trait today. Listen to Luke 1:1–4:

**LUKE 1:1–4. (EHV)**

Many have undertaken to compile an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, an account like those handed down to us by those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word from the beginning. For this reason, it seemed good to me also, since I followed everything closely from the beginning, to write an orderly account to you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you were taught.

Christianity is the only religion with a firm historical foundation. First, we have all the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus, like Genesis 3:15, 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 22, Psalm 118, Isaiah 53, and so many more, made hundreds and thousands of years before Jesus was even born, and not only in circulation in Hebrew but also translated into Greek well before Jesus was born.

Then we have the testimony about Jesus in the New Testament. For comparison, no one doubts that Caesar's *Gallic War* was written by Julius Caesar between 58 and 50 BC. But we only possess nine or ten good manuscripts of his work, and the earliest dates to about 900 years after it was first written. No one doubts that Herodotus and Thucydides wrote their respective histories, yet we only possess seven or eight reliable manuscripts of both, and the earliest of them date to more than 1,300 years after their composition. The earliest manuscript evidence for Buddha dates to somewhere between 600 and 800 years after he died (and didn't rise from the dead, I might add). I could go on. Many ancient works of high value, even some written after the time of Jesus, like the *Histories* of Tacitus, we don't even possess in complete form anymore. Parts of them, or the entire works, are just gone.

But there are over 5,000 reliable Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in whole or in part. Two of the best of the entire New Testament date to about 350, only about 320 years after the time of Jesus. We have a papyrus that contains all of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts

and another one that contains all of Paul's letters and letter to the Hebrews that both date to the early 200s, only about 200 years after the time of Jesus.

And that's just a sampling of the manuscript evidence. It doesn't include the evidence of the so-called Apostolic Fathers, who wrote between 90 and 160 AD, so just 60–130 years after the time of Jesus, and they extensively quote from and allude to the books of the New Testament, showing that those books were already in circulation then.

Then you have the actual content of the New Testament, which contains books written by close companions and disciples of Jesus, like Matthew and John, and by others who knew the apostles and other companions of Jesus personally, like Mark and Luke. (Compare that to the earliest biography of Muhammad, the founder of Islam, which dates to about 120 years after Muhammad died [and didn't rise from the dead], and isn't even preserved in its original form.) Then there is Jesus's apostle Paul, who stands in a class by himself. Some have said that his conversion to Christianity at a time when he was zealous in persecuting Christians and enjoyed prominence and popularity among the Jewish leaders is enough to prove the claims of Christianity all by itself. Not to mention the fact that Paul was eventually willing to die for the Christian faith. And did. If you think that people are in the religion they are in because that's just the way they were raised, try telling that to Paul.

These New Testament writers go out of their way to establish their claims as historical fact, and you can scrutinize their claims as closely as you like in the light of other secular historians of the time and archeological evidence. Luke in particular is a historian like few others. He mentions by name three Roman emperors (Luke 2:1; 3:1; Acts 11:28; 18:2), six Roman governors (Luke 2:2; 3:1; Acts 13:7; 18:12; 23:24; 24:27), a number of people from the Herod family from several generations (Luke 1:5; 3:1; Acts 25:13) and others connected with them (Luke 3:19; Acts 25:13; see also Luke 8:3; Acts 13:1), priests (Luke 3:2; Acts 23:2), and a rabbi (Acts 5:34)—all of whose existence can be verified by other, non-biblical sources. Luke also goes out of his way to get the titles of various rulers and administrators exactly right (e.g. Luke 3:1; Acts 13:7; 16:20, 35; 18:12), titles that have been verified by other writings and archeological inscriptions, and he did so at a time when he couldn't do a Google search or consult an encyclopedia for those titles. (Compare these claims to the Qur'an of Islam, for example, which claims that the Old and New Testaments *are* previous revelations of God and encourages Muslims to read them, but also directly contradicts what the Bible says in many places. Or compare it to the Book of Mormon, which claims that Jesus also made a visit to the Americas after his resurrection, for which there is not one shred of evidence outside of the Book of Mormon.)

Not only that, but all the authors of the New Testament make consistent and unanimous claims about Jesus—that he was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, that he was both true God and true man, and that he made full and complete payment for the sins of the world—and that he conclusively proved all of this by prophesying his death, including the manner of his death, and his resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; 20:17–19; 26:1–2, 31–32 and parallel passages; John 2:19, 21; 3:14; 8:28; 12:32–33; 13:33), and then fulfilling those prophecies. And after rising from the dead, he didn't just appear to one or two people secretly. He appeared to the women whose names are recorded in the four Gospels (Matt. 28:1–10; Mark 16:9; Luke 24:1–10; John 20:1–18). He appeared to all of his apostles multiple times (Acts 1:2–3; 1 Cor. 15:4–5). He

appeared to his half-brother, James, which contributed to James's conversion (1 Cor. 15:7); previously James didn't believe in Jesus (John 7:5). Paul says Jesus also appeared to more than 500 people at the same time—and he might have just been counting the men—and that most of those eyewitnesses were still living just over twenty years later, when he told the Corinthians about it (1 Cor. 15:6).

You can come up with alternative ideas—that the women mistakenly went to the wrong tomb, that the Jewish authorities themselves had the body removed, that Jesus's disciples all experienced a mass hallucination—but none of them will hold up to serious inquiry. Charles Colson was one of President Nixon's men involved in the Watergate scandal. He later became a Christian. One of the reasons, he later said, was that if he and his team weren't able to successfully cover up something as relatively insignificant as breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters, even though they were connected to the most powerful man on earth at the time, then explaining away the resurrection of Jesus as a Christian coverup was utterly ridiculous.

This unshakeable historical evidence is why, in 1838, Oxford professor Thomas Arnold, one of the most renowned historians of his time and intimately acquainted with all sorts of ancient literature, said that he knew of “no one fact in the history of mankind [which was] proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort” than Christ's death and resurrection from the dead. No other religion has the historical evidence and foundation Christianity has. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!