



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

A Case for God: In Person, In History

Introduction

1. One of the most helpful paragraphs I have read with regard to formulating a popular level focused approach to apologetics, is near the end of a book on worldviews I was reading as background for a course I was preparing to teach.

Furthermore, consider all the other things we can settle once we know that Jesus is God and that his words are God's words. We then have an authoritative answer to all our most important questions: Is there a personal God who loves us? What is our duty in life? How do we become children of God? Why did Jesus die? Is there life after death?¹

2. We will think more about that with regard to making a case for Jesus below. First, however, we will look at it from another angle, the approach the New Testament Christians took to showing "that Jesus is God and that his words are God's words."

Body

- I. A Case from History.
 - A. In the opening verses to 1 John, the apostle reviewed how he and others (see 4:6) had taught the believers.
 1. He emphasized the *content* of their teaching: "the life that was made manifest . . . Jesus the Son of God" (vv. 1-4)
 2. He said they included *testimony* (proof, or a defense) along with *proclamation* (v. 2).
 - a) "We have *seen* it . . ."
 - b) " . . . and *testify* to it."
 - c) " . . . and *proclaim* to you the eternal life."
 3. In short, he grounded the faith in the claim that the events happened in *history*.
 - B. That aligns with what Paul said about the message in his defense before King Agrippa, summed up in Acts 26:26 -- "For the king [Agrippa] knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner."²
 - C. The same emphasis on the historical reality of the Christian faith needs to characterize modern believers and our proclamation.
 1. N. T. Wright summarizes what many have heard about Jesus.
 - a) "And the people whom ordinary Christians meet, to whom they must address the gospel, have been told over and over and over by the media, on the basis of some

recent book or other, that the Jesus of the Gospels is historically incredible and that Christianity is therefore based on a mistake.”³

- b) In summary, we live in a world where:
 - (1) People are against Jesus, or at least against the traditional teaching about him.
 - (2) They may believe he was a good teacher, a sage, or guru, etc., but do not accept that he was “God in the flesh.”
 - (3) Some who espouse this trendy view of Jesus are professing Christians.
- 2. The parallel is not exact, but the situation is not significantly different from what John said he faced.
 - a) He said his opponents were “antichrists,” that is, people who were against Christ and did not believe what had been taught about him from the beginning (1 Jn. 2:18, 22-23; 2 Jn. 7).
 - b) John’s opponents had rejected the original teaching, that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh (1 Jn. 4:2-3).⁴
 - c) Some among them had been members of the Christian community (1 Jn. 2:19, 26).
- D. Especially at a time when study of history is being de-emphasized, and the idea that we can in any sense ever know “what really happened” is met with skepticism, we cannot emphasize its importance enough.
 - 1. Just as John kept stressing what happened against those who claimed that only the “spiritual” mattered, we must keep teaching what has been traditionally taught.
 - 2. We must commit to two important principles as we do, well stated in the following.
 - a) First, “It cannot be stated too strongly that Christianity is an historical religion, and that it is so intimately tied to history that if the historical credibility of its sources were to be proven false, it would at once collapse as a possible claimant for our loyalty.”⁵
 - b) Second, we must not engage in special pleading: “... I have to confess my conviction that as a Christian I have no business operating with double standards. Because my faith is tied to history I have to use the best historical tools available for studying history. The rules of the game do not allow me to relax the standards when it comes to matters of faith.”⁶

II. Making a Case for Jesus.

- A. The writings that report his life and work are credible reports.⁷
 - 1. Some have argued, and popularized, that the Gospels are not to be trusted.
 - a) Some allege that there are historical inaccuracies in them.
 - b) Others say that the four writings contradict one another.⁸
 - c) Others attribute the above to the gap in time between the events in Jesus’ life and the publication (and surviving manuscript copies) of the Gospels.⁹
 - (1) The critics exaggerated the time gap.
 - (2) They did not account for the middle east being an oral culture.¹⁰
 - d) “The interval between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence . . . [is] in fact negligible, . . . Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”¹¹
- B. Jesus claimed to be divine.
 - 1. People have claimed all sorts of things, but making a claim does not make it true. We are not arguing in a circle, using the claim to deity as proof of being deity.

2. But, it is reasonable to expect a being who was God to know he was; the absence of such a claim from someone who demanded absolute loyalty and accepted worshipful devotion would be telling (Mark 8:34; Matt. 21:15-16).¹²
3. John 10:22-33 is a good case study.
 - a) Challenged by some Jews to declare whether he was their Messiah (v. 24), Jesus replied that the works he had done pointed to his identity (vv. 24-26) and then offered to guarantee eternal security as surely as the Father did (vv. 28-29).
 - b) He then declared, "I and the Father are one" (v. 30).
 - c) Those hearing him understood what he meant; they tried to stone him for blasphemy, "because you, being a man, make yourself God (vv. 31-33).
- C. Jesus' works display the character of God.
 1. John's use of *sign* suggests that his supernatural deeds were designed to show more than just power and wonder (John 2:11, 18, 23; 3:2; 4:48, 54; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 20:30).
 - a) Walking on water and calming raging storms showed power over the elements at their most fierce.
 - b) When he healed the blind, the lepers, and the lame, and fed the crowds, Jesus showed God's concern and care for all.
 - c) He also had power over the forces of death.
 2. The signs were designed to bring about and nurture belief (John 20:30-31).
- D. Jesus was raised from the dead.
 1. Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4).
 2. Witnesses reported an empty tomb and having seen multiple appearances of the risen Jesus (e.g., Luke 24:1-35).
 3. In conquering death, he defeated sin and paved the way for many more to be raised (1 Cor. 15:23; Heb. 2:14-15; Rom. 4:25).
 4. If he was not raised, faith is futile and forgiveness non-existent (1 Cor. 15:17).

Conclusion

1. What do you think about the case for Jesus? Do you need to examine it more, or are you convinced? If you are convinced, have you acted on your conviction?
2. Jesus asked his original disciples what people thought about him, and then asked what all must answer: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29, NIV)

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Notes

¹ Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 154.

² Paul referred to events that were known or could be checked throughout his defense. This includes a reference to Agrippa's familiarity "with all the customs and controversies of the Jews" (v. 3), his own background (vv. 4-5), and his efforts under the oversight of the Jewish Council to eradicate the Christian movement (vv. 9-12).

³ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 18. In sentences that follow the above Wright indicts the faulty approach to history taken by many people of faith. "It simply will not do to declare this question out-of-bounds, to say that the church's teaching will do for us, thank you very much, so we do not need to ask historical questions. You cannot say that to a serious and enquiring person who engages you in conversation on a train or to someone who wanders into a church one Sunday and asks what it is all about.

⁴ It is interesting to see how often John affirmed that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh and/or was the Son of God. A list of references in 1 John where he used "Jesus," "Christ," and/or "Son" includes 1:3, 7; 2:1, 22-23; 3:8, 23; 4:2-3, 9-10, 14-15; 5:1, 5-6, 9-10, 12-13, 20.

⁵ Charles C. Anderson, *The Historical Jesus: A Continuing Quest* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 55.

⁶ Colin Brown, *History and Faith: A Personal Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1987), 14-15. Wright made the point this way: "If Christianity is not rooted in things that actually happened in first-century Palestine, we might as well be Buddhists, Marxists or almost anything else. And if Jesus never existed, or if he was quite different from what the Gospels and the church's worship affirms him to have been, then we are indeed living in cloud-cuckoo land" (*Challenge of Jesus*, 18).

⁷ See these popular-level studies: Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?* Rev. Ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2003); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981).

⁸ For a useful introduction to this question, see Rubel Shelly, *Prepare to Answer: A Defense of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: 20th Century Christian, 1990), 151-170.

⁹ See the claims of the Jesus Seminar in Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, et. al., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, paperback edition (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1997), 25-28. For a response, see Michael J. Wilkins & J. P. Moreland, eds., *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

¹⁰ Robert Stein has pointed out: "We must not forget that the ability to remember traditions and pass them on faithfully is not limited by our present-day inability to do this or conceive of this. The introduction of cheap writing materials into the world has had a negative impact in that it has paralyzed our abilities to memorize and to use the mind, rather than notebooks and files as a data-bank. ("The 'Criteria' for Authenticity," in R. T. France and David Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, reprint edition [Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1983] 1:227.)

¹¹ Sir Frederic Kenyon, *The Bible and Archeology* (1940), 288-289, in Bruce, 15.

¹² Larry W. Hurtado has written extensively on the church's adoration of Jesus as divine. See his *How on Earth Did Jesus Become God? Historical Questions About Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005); and *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).