

What Can You Say About Jesus to Your Non-Christian Friends? - Part 3

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Introduction

If you are a Christian, would you like to know how to answer the tough questions your friends are asking about God? Do you know what to say if someone asks you to show them who Jesus really is? Do you know what Jesus claimed about Himself? Do you know where and how Jesus says He can change a person's life? The Scripture instructs all Christians to be ready always to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15).

I want to show you how to answer the questions: Why is it we believe the four Gospels and other New Testament books were written early; that is, during the lifetime of the Apostles, not 200 years after Christ lived? How did archaeology show that the New Testament books present accurate historical reports of what Jesus said and did, rather than myths and legends?

Christianity is based in history

Let's do a quick review of where we are. We're talking about, how to talk to your friends about Christianity. How do you introduce them to Jesus Christ? And we said previously, Christianity is based in history on a real person that actually lived. If you look in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, you can find 20,000 words listed about Jesus and they never hint that He didn't exist. Why? Because anybody that does a history of the first hundred years, 100 A.D., anybody that writes a history has to include Jesus Christ in there because there were people that gave us historical information about Him that every historian recognizes.

The Gospels are based upon eyewitness accounts

We have seen that there were at least eight eyewitnesses, or people who claimed that they had contact with the eyewitnesses, who wrote the books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter and Jude. These men claimed to have contact with eyewitnesses or to be eyewitnesses themselves.

The Gospels were written and circulated within the lifetime of eyewitnesses

But then we looked at what the universities are teaching today which is, really we think that it's like going to the party where you whisper a sentence into the ear of one person and it goes all the way down the line and comes out distorted over here. And they're saying Jesus did His stuff over here and by the time it was written down, we know that because 200 years or so went by, the fact is, it couldn't have been historically accurate.

Now, that's what we're dealing with. And we saw, first of all, that goes against the very claims that we find in the books of the New Testament. They **claimed** that it wasn't 200 years later but they were right on the spot; they saw it, they were there. What they saw, what they heard, that's what they are proclaiming, declaring, writing to you. As Paul says, "I assure you before God, I am not writing to you a lie." All right? So they claimed it.

Can we find solid evidence for the accuracy of the Bible?

But what else can we now marshal to back up the claim that we have accurate information about Jesus? And where we're going is, first of all, do we have accurate information about Jesus? If we can conclude that we do, then we want to see, in those documents, what Jesus claimed about Himself. Did He ever say that He was God?

Now again, I'm not taking the Bible as a book that dropped out of Heaven that's inspired and inerrant. I believe that it is, but I'm not taking it that way this morning. If you're a non-Christian, I'm simply saying, Can I look at these books, these authors, and do they give me accurate information? The guy that writes the road maps for this country doesn't claim to be inspired by God but we think he gives us information that's accurate.

So all I want to find out is, Do we have evidence that shows these books are accurate in what they depict about Jesus? Then we'll find out what they said about Jesus and what Jesus said about Himself and then we'll draw some conclusions.

Dating the book of Acts

Now, I want to give you the time when the books of the New Testament were written. I want to give you an argument that maybe you've never heard before. I want to start with the Book of Acts and I want to date that, and then I want to work back to the Gospels. I think you'll find this interesting. I want to give you four reasons why the Book of Acts must have been written at least before or no later than 62 A.D. Four reasons. Okay? Are you ready?

1. The fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) is not mentioned in Acts.

Reason number one is that the fall of Jerusalem is not mentioned in the Book of Acts. I think that you know that Christianity spread out from Jerusalem and it was a primary city where the Apostles were. And Acts records the first happenings of the Church at Jerusalem and then how it started to spread. Well, when

did Jerusalem get destroyed? 70 A.D. How did it happen? The Roman soldiers came. The Emperor Nero dispatched Vespasian to this area. Then Nero committed suicide in 68 A.D. When Nero committed suicide, Vespasian became the emperor and then he gave to his son Titus the responsibility of conquering Jerusalem. Titus took four legions of Roman soldiers, went up and laid siege to Jerusalem, and in 70 A.D. he conquered the city, he burned it, and he slaughtered the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Now that's a pretty important act. And if the Book of Acts talks a lot about what happened at Jerusalem, why didn't Luke put the destruction of Jerusalem in there? Why? Because it hadn't happened yet.

So, number one, the fall of Jerusalem tells me it's got to be at least before 70 A.D. that this book was written. Otherwise, the fall of Jerusalem would have been recorded.

2. Nero's persecutions (A.D. 64 and A. D. 68) are not mentioned in Acts.

Number two: Nero's persecution is not mentioned in the Book of Acts. Now, there were two persecutions that Nero did. One was in 64; another one in 68. And there are some words in the Book of Acts concerning some of the local persecutions but nothing about the emperor's edict across the whole Roman Empire that Christians should be hunted down and killed and some of the stories that were told later on. None of that is mentioned in the Book of Acts. So why isn't it mentioned? Because the Book of Acts was written before that. So we're now before 64 A.D.

3. The death of the Apostle Paul (A. D. 64?) is not mentioned in Acts.

The third reason would be this: the Apostle Paul is still living when the Book of Acts comes to an end. The Apostle Paul is one of the central characters in the Book of Acts. It's almost his biography, if you want. And when you are spending so much time on a person and talking about what he did, what he taught, what he said and so on, when you come to the point of his death, that's kind of key in a biography. It ends it. The fact is, they didn't put anything about Paul's death. Why? When did Paul die? Well, most people think that he died in the first Neronian persecution of 64 A.D. And because Luke does not record Paul's death—Paul is still living. He's confined to jail at that time—then again, we have a third reason why Acts had to be written before 64 A.D.

4. The Apostles Peter (d. A. D. 65?) and James (d. A. D. 62?) are still living.

The fourth reason: there are two other central figures that could have been mentioned. The Apostle Peter and James are still living. We know that Peter died at approximately 65 A.D.; and James is said to have died at 62 A.D. But when Acts is done, they're still alive. And remember, other deaths were recorded. For example, Luke records the fact of Stephen and James, the brother of John—both of these people died and it's recorded. Well, Peter and Paul and some of the others, they were more important than those figures. Again, why weren't these people and their deaths mentioned? Because Acts was written before 62 A.D.

Now, all I wanted to do is to get that into your head. That 62 A.D. is approximately where the Book of Acts ought to be placed. Okay? So let's start there.

The book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke (A. D. 58?)

Now what do we know about Acts? Acts is book two of what? Of Luke. The Gospel of Luke came first. How do we know that? Well, Luke says so. He says in Acts 1, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach." That's what the Gospel of Luke is about. But if it's the former book, that means that it came first. So now we have 62 A.D. when Acts was written and if the Gospel of Luke was written before that, we have to have that before 62 A.D. Where would we place that? Well, how about putting that at about 58 A.D., just a few years before Acts was written.

Matthew predates Luke (A. D. 50-55?)

But then, if you've got Acts here at 62, and you've got Luke at 58, all the scholars say that Matthew came before Luke. And so you have people like William F. Albright and Dr. John A. T. Robinson saying that we've got to put Matthew over here at about 50 to 55 A.D. in front of the Gospel of Luke. Okay? Are you following me so far?

Mark predates Matthew (A. D. 40-45?)

Now, going on back, they say, and almost all the scholars, probably 95% of them would say that Mark had to come beforehand because there are sections of Mark that show up in both Matthew and in Luke, that they use some of the material from Mark and so therefore it had to come even before Matthew. Well, if Matthew is at 50 to 55, some have put Mark at 45. And both William F. Albright and John A. T. Robinson put Mark as early as 40 A.D.

Why are these dates significant?

Now, what's the significance of all this? Well, if you look at Harold Hoehner's book, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, which documents archaeologically that Jesus died at 33 A.D.:

- At 33 A.D. Jesus died.
- In 40 A.D., Mark is on the newsstands.
- By 50 A.D., Matthew;
- By 58 A.D., Luke,
- And then 62 A.D., the Book of Acts.

What does that tell us? Well, all of the Gospels, if you were living in Jesus' day, would have already been on the newsstands while you're still here. And, just as you can remember the assassination of President Kennedy, the people, both pro and con, could remember seeing Jesus. He was a controversial figure. That's why F. F. Bruce at Manchester said it just can't be legend; it can't be myth; they couldn't have padded the case, because there were too many interested people that were eyewitnesses that could have corrected them if they were wrong. That tells me we have accurate information.

Archaeological evidence

Now, another area that tells me we have accurate information is archaeology. Now, we've been talking a lot about Luke. He's got Acts. You've got the Gospel of Luke. There was a fellow by the name of Sir William Ramsay from the School at Tubingen in Germany. Ramsay was one of the higher critics. He really didn't believe that these guys were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life. But he was one of the world's greatest archaeologists, and he went to the Holy Land to try to prove his thesis. When he got down to the Holy Land, he would start to shovel and unearth the mud and the clay and so on and he would find rocks with inscriptions. And as he read them, he found out that his assumptions were wrong—that Luke was right.

Now let me give you an idea of what I'm talking about. In terms of language, take Frank Peretti as an example. Now, if Frank writes for another 30 years, the words that he'll be using in his book will probably reflect our culture and be a little different than what they are right now. For example, do you remember during the 60s we used words like "Cool" and "Groovy" and "Sit in," things like that. Now, we don't use those words anymore, so if you read a book today and the characters are using the words "cool" and "groovy," we would date it right around 1960 to 1970, right in that area.

Then we've got these words like "awesome" that's started coming up. Okay? What I'm saying is that you use certain kinds of words all along the line. For example, do you think that a hundred years from now, when the historians are writing about America, that they will call President Clinton "Slick Willy"? See? We have a little term here for the President that probably will not make any sense to the guys a hundred years from now.

So, Ramsay goes into the Holy Land and he's uncovering the rocks and so on, and just like we've got Slick Willy and other things for other Presidents along the way, they had it about kings and rulers of their own day. Sometimes the emperors laid it on themselves. They gave themselves special names apart from their real name, and only the people that lived in that slice of history knew about it. Well, Ramsay thinks that Luke is one of these guys that's a mythical figure that just used the name of Luke and really didn't even know the events. Wasn't an eyewitness on the scene. He was 200 years later. But he goes and he starts unearthing the rocks and he finds out that Luke in his book in naming the emperors, the rulers, the cities, geographical areas, he knows all the secret names that are on the rocks that were right from that period. And all of a sudden it starts to dawn on Ramsay that he couldn't have known that unless he was actually there and living in that period of time. He was more accurate than any of the people that were in Germany just writing about their thoughts. He had been right on the scene. And Ramsay changed his mind completely about Luke and said that he was one of the greatest historians of that time.

Now listen to this. Luke mentioned 32 different countries in the Gospel of Luke and in Acts; 54 different cities; 9 different islands; and several rulers. And when

they checked him out archaeologically, **all** the special names, **all** of the cute names of the time period, Luke never made one mistake. He was accurate in every one of those areas.

Now, if he is accurate in everything that you can check, then in the areas that you cannot check, you've got to give him the benefit of the doubt because he's already established his credibility. He is an accurate historical writer. And then he says, "I checked out everything carefully. I investigated everything carefully." If you can document from archaeology that is the case, then in everything else that he tells you, you've got to give him the benefit of the doubt. You have to. So archaeology tells me that we have accurate information.

Throw out the classics!

Again, I'm not saying these books are inspired and inerrant. I just want to have accurate information. And I want to make a statement now and I want to back it up, and that is that if you're an intellectual—I would say this on any university campus—if you're an intellectual and you know the classics, the Greek classics, you know ancient history, the fact is, if you will not accept the documents that we have in the New Testament from Matthew through Revelation, if you're going to throw this out, then you're going to have to throw out Aristotle, Plato, Thucydides, Homer. You'd have to throw out the classics.

You say, "Wow. Can you back that up?" Yes, I can. I want to tell you why. First of all, let me tell you something about documents today. Let's say you know you've got Aristotle writing around 400 B.C., before Christ. Well, they didn't have printing presses back there, right? So what happened? They would write it on material that would disappear. And as this material, papyrus or whatever, would start to disintegrate, in order to preserve it, they'd have to recopy it. You didn't have a printing press, so you had to recopy it again. And then as that copy got a little bit soiled and started to disintegrate, you'd have to copy it again.

Now my question to you is, Do you know how much time transpired between the time that Aristotle wrote and the first copy that has come down to us and survived? How much time? Another way of saying it, how much time is in there that we've got nothing? Fourteen hundred years went by that we don't know what in the world transpired. Aristotle wrote about 384 B.C. and the fact is, the first copy that we have that exists now in the museums and so on is 1100 A.D. It's marked at 1100 A.D.

Now, what I love is that even though we have that big gap from the time that he wrote to the time that we have the first manuscript that exists, if you would ask any classical scholar: "Does that bother you? Do you think that because we have a big gap there and we don't know what transpired or who copied or whatever, we have nothing that goes back 1400 years to actually when Aristotle wrote, do you think that we don't have an accurate copy of what he said? Do you think that somebody messed with the manuscript? Do you think that somehow somebody down the line added stuff to it so that we don't really know accurately what he

said?” No! There’s not one classical scholar that doubts that what we have now—1400 years from the time that he wrote—is exactly what the man said.

How about Plato? Plato wrote about 427 to 347 B.C. The first manuscript that we’ve got is 900 A.D.—1200 year gap in terms of the manuscripts coming down.

Thucydides wrote his Wars sometime during the time frame of 496 to 406 B.C. The earliest copy that we’ve got in existence is 1000 A.D. That means there’s a 1400 year time span from the time that he wrote to the first manuscript that exists today.

Sophocles wrote about 496 to 406 B.C. The earliest copy is dated at 1000 A.D. There’s a 1400 year time span. And yet they all say that basically we have an accurate account of what these authors originally wrote and said.

The gap narrows!

But they’ll come to the New Testament and say, “We haven’t got accurate stuff. You Christians just believe anything, don’t you? The time span from the time that the writers wrote to the first copies that you have is **so** long that we can’t believe that you have accurate historical information.” How long is it, by the way? Let me give you a couple of ideas here.

They were down in Egypt and they found five verses from the Gospel of John. It’s called the John Ryland’s Papyrus. They are dated as being written at 117 A.D. Obviously these are copies, but if John wrote and ended his book at 80 A.D., that means that the gap from the time that he wrote and the copy that they found, that’s dated 117, is 37 years. Thirty-seven years versus 1400 years. They have no doubt that what Aristotle said over here is right. But they say, “Well, you know...I mean, look what happened in between where you don’t have the Apostle John sitting there writing. We just have a copy.” Thirty-seven years old. The ink is hardly dry.

The Bodmer Papyri, dated at 175 to 225, contain most of the Gospel of Luke and most of the Gospel of John. That would mean that these are only 110 years away from the Apostles. The Chester Beatty Papyri are dated at 250 A.D. Three Codices that contain most of the New Testament. This would put them at 180 years from the time of the Apostles. The major manuscripts that have the whole Bible, the Codex Vaticanus dated at 325 A.D. and Codex Sinaiticus at 350 A.D. These would be only 255 years away from the Apostles.

Now, I want to say it again. If you will not accept the New Testament writers as giving accurate historical information, what are you going to have to do with Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides and Sophocles? You’re going to have to throw them out. I don’t know any classical scholar who, in order to not deal with the New Testament, is willing to chuck the entire classics. They’re not **that** biased.