
“If Christ is the Answer, What are the Questions?”

A Christian Critique of Our Evangelical Sub-Culture and a Gospel Engagement with Our Ever-Changing Pluralistic-Culture (amidst its Ethnic & Religious Diversity and Increasingly Hostile Environment)

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This article includes, but is not limited to, topics that were preached in a sermon series during September & October of 2018, by Marcus Johnson, Pastor of Lake Region Bible Church, Round Lake, IL. Part I includes the Preface, Introduction & Sections A & B; Part II (Sections C, D & E) to be completed at a later date.

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Some Resources concerning the topics listed below are available now on our Apologetics website (see next page)

Part II (Sections C thru E below) will be made available at a later date (these are tentative topics subject to change)

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Abbreviation Note: throughout this article "OT" = Old Testament & "NT" = New Testament

The OT refers to the books in the Bible written before Jesus Christ came to earth & the NT refers to those written afterwards

Preface

Many people today find themselves either lamenting the loss of the way things used to be, or afraid that the way things used to be is where we're headed back to, or hoping for something all together different, and not sure what that is or how to get there. Like other adults, I've grown up within the two different worlds of the 20th & 21st Centuries (their similarities notwithstanding), & have journeyed through the ongoing blessing & challenge of living in our ever-changing pluralistic culture, amidst its ethnic & religious diversity, and increasingly hostile environment. Over the last thirty years of my spiritual pilgrimage, I've watched some within the evangelical subculture that I'm a part of (& grateful for) embrace materialistic or tribalistic idolatry, cultural or political compromise, and fear-based or entertainment-driven philosophies of ministry. Others by God's grace (amidst their own flaws & shortcomings) are passionately pursuing a theologically-rich, cross-cultural & missiologically-driven view of the gospel and the Christ-centered life it demands (while many of us probably fall somewhere in between these radically different approaches). I've also watched young people grow up and leave the Christian faith they were raised in, while others are faithfully serving Christ & His church, sometimes more wholeheartedly than their parents (amidst the rise of atheism, agnosticism & religious diversity overall, & a radical shift in the way our mainstream culture views the church & the gospel we are or are not preaching).

Having reflected deeply on these issues over the last thirty years, amidst the love & wisdom others have poured into me, and in light of our current cultural context, I decided to write this article as a reflective critique of our evangelical subculture, and as a way to engage our ever-changing pluralistic culture with the life-transforming revelation & power of the gospel. **If you do not know much about Jesus Christ, the Christian faith or the Bible**, you can reference the resources on the top of our Apologetics webpage at LakeRegionBibleChurch.org (see the short video titled "The Gospel of the Kingdom"). Note: apologetics is a defense & promotion of the Christian faith, which is one of the themes of this article. Numerous resources are referenced throughout this article, with alphanumeric footnotes corresponding to the sections in the table of contents above (A1*; A2, B1*, B2, etc.). **An asterisk (*) by the footnote means that source is available on our Apologetics webpage.** There are also many books available on apologetics that are not overly technical, such as *Who is Jesus?* by Michael Green, *Man Myth Messiah* by Rice Brooks, or *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel.

I write from an evangelical viewpoint (see next paragraph), and as one who was raised in a loving Anglo family in a small, Illinois farm town, and within the Lutheran tradition of the Christian faith. God used my upbringing along with an interdenominational youth group to draw me into a saving-faith relationship with Jesus Christ as I was turning 16. My beloved wife Gwen & I met at Wheaton College, were married in 1992, and have lived in small towns, suburbs and in the inner-city of Chicago. During this time we've cherished the ethnic, economic & religious diversity we've experienced through the friends we've made & the places we've lived, while treasuring our three children God has given us along the way. In the early years of our marriage, while Gwen worked in foster care, I served with Emmaus Ministries, which reaches out to men in prostitution and helps them find a way out of that life. In connection with that ministry, I spent over 400 nights of my life hanging out in the gay bars of Chicago during the 1990's, engaging the gay community in conversations about their lives and the life-transforming joy & hope offered in Christ (at a time when many of them were ostracized by the culture & the church). I've been active in some form of youth & young adult ministry since 1986, and have served as a pastor since 1996 in two small, loving churches here in Illinois. This included formerly serving as the director of The Hope Chest, which provided food & clothes to some sixty families a week, and I currently serve as the director for an after-school outreach program to middle school & high school students called The Bridge.

My overall goal in writing is three-fold; 1) to encourage & exhort Christians in our faith, in godly living, and in effective witness; 2) to engage non-Christians in an ongoing conversation which enables us to learn from & better understand one another; and 3) to share the gospel message while building a bridge that helps non-Christians journey from unbelief, or a skeptical point of view, to one in which they are more willing to hear what Scripture has to say (including what Scripture says about itself); and ultimately put their faith in Christ with intellectual integrity & conviction of heart. While we learn from & listen attentively to one another and work hard to find common ground for the starting points in our conversations, Christian apologetics should be done with a focus on & a joyful confidence in the gospel – the message thru which God reveals Himself & transforms those who believe. Hopefully the topics discussed here will encourage you to consider or reconsider the claims of Christ, and will strengthen the faith & convictions of those who believe.

For Christ & His kingdom,
Marcus Johnson

Introduction

“If Christ is the Answer, What are the Questions?”

The title of this article is borrowed from a book written by the late Tom Skinner, an African American & former leader in the Harlem gangs of New York City. He risked his life to leave the gangs after becoming a Christian, and then served the Lord as an evangelist & author, and some of his insights are referenced in this article (see *Black and Free* for more about his life). In this introduction, “we” is used interchangeably to refer to people in general & specifically to Christians (the reader can decide for him-or-herself what does or doesn’t apply). These introductory paragraphs list several questions that introduce topics addressed later on. Some of these questions might not make sense until the article is read, but are designed to spark your interest as a reader, and are written with Skinner’s charge in mind: if Christ is the answer, what are the questions?

Regarding Our Ever-Changing Pluralistic Culture

Have we noticed over the last few decades that Superman, who used to be fighting for truth, justice & the American way, has been fighting to stay alive & relevant in our modern culture, which is skeptical about truth & disillusioned with the injustices of the American way? Is part of the resistance some people have in believing the gospel rise out of their perception that it is being preached by a Christianity largely defined by a 20th Century American culture & worldview that they are rejecting, more than the biblical teachings Christians claim to believe? On the other hand, has our contemporary culture’s overly critical & hostile view towards objective-universal truth & traditional values instilled within us a pre-conceived bias against the evidence we have for God’s self-disclosed & life-transforming revelation found in the person of Jesus Christ? Have we recognized the problematic irony in how & why various subcultures in our nation (often in opposition with one another), view our mainstream culture as the enemy, partially because so many of us believe it’s “the other group” that is in power & who should be feared? Amidst the challenges that come with a diverse & rapidly changing culture, have we cherished how these realities, when rightly understood & embraced, sharpen us as we embrace a more globally-informed, cross-cultural & socially marginalized lens thru which we view truth? Do we recognize that this kind of a gospel worldview enables us to see more clearly Christ’s call for us to be a prophetic minority of sojourners, whose ultimate citizenship is not of this world, rather than a moral majority obsessed with an idolatrous version of the American dream? Regardless of what time period & geographical location we live in, or what subcultures & worldviews we’ve embraced, Christian or otherwise, should it not concern us if “self, self-expression & self-fulfillment” continue to reign on the throne of our hearts & minds, over & against “God, His kingdom and His glory & grace?”

Regarding the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

In a day & age when the importance of a person’s “identity” regarding gender & race is often & rightly emphasized, is it possible our modern culture has ironically failed to take to heart the staggering implications of what it would be like for people in the 1st Century Greco-Roman world to “embrace the cross” as the central symbol of their newfound “identity” in Christ (while living under the gruesome shadows of the horrifying shame of crucifixion)? Consequently, has this “domesticated” view of the cross contributed to the tendency of Christians to do the following: 1) lord ourselves over the culture in self-righteous anger & fear, regarding the direction we are heading; or 2) compromise with that culture in order to remain on the “world’s version” of the right side of history? Is it possible that “alternative theories” which deny or explain away a historical resurrection of Christ sound more convincing to us when viewed thru this same “domesticated” view of the cross, which is far removed from the culturally-dominating, scandalous-stigma of crucifixion, under which Christianity exploded onto the scene? Might one of the things Muslims have to teach us be related to the “offense” of the cross, when pondering the fact that they readily affirm the virgin birth of Christ but emphatically deny that He was crucified? Can “natural explanations” of this resurrection “story” adequately explain, if Christ did not rise bodily from the dead, how the NT Church ended up preaching & obeying a worldview-altering interpretation of the kingdom of God, the Messiah and “resurrection from the dead” (in radical contrast to the way in which these same believers & their ancestors had understood these theologically-foundational & culturally-dominating concepts for centuries)? Is it possible that a worldview overly influenced by philosophical naturalism & post-enlightenment thought is keeping us from objectively considering the evidence for miraculous events, not the least of which is the resurrection of Christ?

Regarding the Authorship & Accuracy of the Scriptures

Have we considered the evidence for the reliability of the four books of the gospel, which were dependent upon the “oral history” of eyewitness accounts shared within a “controlled-oral tradition” and guided by a religious “culture of textuality” that relied upon & embraced the authority of written documents (cf. scholars Craig Blomberg, Richard Bauckman, Craig Evans, Kenneth Bailey & Michael Kruger)? In light of these realities, whether we believe them or not, could not the four authors of the gospel have given us a reliable & orderly account of the life & message of Christ, so that we might have certainty concerning the things we have been taught (Luke 1:1-4)? Are we aware that numerous scholars have thoroughly investigated & marveled at the massive undertaking involved in Luke’s writings, where he painstakingly & accurately references “32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 Mediterranean islands, not randomly, but in the course of a saga lasting some 30 years and extending from Jerusalem and rippling out eventually all the way to Rome...[along with] some 95 different persons, 62 of which are not mentioned elsewhere in the NT and 27 of which are non-believers” (NT Scholar Robert Yarbrough)? Should not this amount of historical detail cause us to consider the credibility of what Luke had to say about the resurrected-reigning Christ and the good news of great joy He offers to you & me? For those who would answer “yes” to the questions above, does the amount of time we spend feeding on God’s word reflect what we believe about it?

Regarding the Interpretation of the Scriptures

Have we considered that *the greatest love story ever told might be about a king who never married, and was authored by some forty people over the course of a 1500 year period (*adapted from Peter Nenadov, Pastor, Akron, OH)? If so, might that unfolding true love story be the lens thru which we seek to faithfully interpret the Scriptures amidst the apparent “contradictions” between the Old & New Testaments, without compromising our intellectual integrity in the process? Have we believed God’s story, the Spirit-empowered gospel of the kingdom, revealed in historical events and grounded in His loving, steadfast covenantal-faithfulness to Israel, which climaxes in Christ’s love for His bride the church? Is it possible we are persisting in our skepticism & unbelief because we’ve examined & scrutinized the Scriptures but have failed to let the Scriptures scrutinize & examine us? In light of what biblical doctrines we do or do not tend to embrace, have we thought deeply about what things we find relevant or what actually offends us, and then asked the question – why? To put that another way, when is the last time we heard someone in our culture dismiss or reject the Bible because of Jesus’ parable about the prodigal son, whose loving father not only forgave his rebellious son, but threw a party for him when his son returned? Is it possible that many of us in the West overlook the staggering implications of the father’s love for the prodigal because we do not live in an honor-shame culture? Might it be that the culturally-preconceived biases in our hearts & modern day worldviews have something to do with what gospel truths we cherish & the ones we find offensive (Christians included)? Likewise, when we fail to grasp or accept difficult or offensive Scriptural passages as divinely inspired, is it ever because our understanding of the gospel is too small?

Regarding the Life-Transforming Revelation & Power of the Gospel

Have we rejoiced in the loving heart of our Heavenly Father, who runs to meet His penitent prodigal daughters & sons and welcomes them with joyful celebration into His eternal kingdom? Or might we be more like the self-righteous older brother who refuses to join his family in that celebration, with his heart & eyes remained fixed on himself, and all that he has done for God amidst how little God has done for him? Are those of us in the church feasting upon & proclaiming the captivating glory of God’s gospel, which includes but far surpasses the “steps to peace with God” our lost world so desperately needs? Likewise, while journeying thru the storms of life, are we taking to heart the intended-ambiguity of those words from the David Crowder song, “I am holding on to you?” Is it the Christian who is singing to Jesus - “I am holding on to you,” or is it Jesus the “I am” who speaks those faith-building words to Christians, “I am holding on to you, I am holding on to you, in the middle of the storm, I am holding on, I am...”? Could not our lack of faith be keeping us from experiencing the life-transforming joy, healing, peace & hope offered to us all, by God’s matchless grace thru faith in His beloved Son? Consequently, has unbelief left any of us comfortably-preoccupied & dangerously-unprepared for the day when King Jesus returns to usher in the fullness of His already inaugurated & advancing kingdom and to judge the living & the dead, unto His Father’s eternal glory? In conclusion, is it not worth considering at a penetratingly-deeper level that the ultimate answers to the most important questions we should be asking might be found in the person of Jesus Christ?

Our Ever-Changing Pluralistic Culture

How does Our Culture Influence Us, What Questions are We Asking, & Why? (Section A)

Cultural Influences & Life Experiences: Regarding Our Presuppositions, Values & Worldviews

For those who care about topics like truth, justice, epistemology, culture, history, transcendence, spirituality or religion, it is important to continually reevaluate & sharpen the presuppositions, values & worldviews that form the convictions we hold and the questions we are or are not asking (see the insights shared by apologist Ravi Zacharias [A1*]). The more I've learned, the more I've recognized my own ignorance & blind spots along the way, and the more I've appreciated & benefited from the life experience & wisdom of those within & outside of my own perspective. We live in an ethnically & religiously diverse pluralistic culture which has radically changed over the last several decades. Amidst the many blessings that have come with these changes, we've also unfortunately experienced a dramatic increase in the hostility between various groups within our culture, and in the rise of violence overall. Our geographical, historical & cultural contexts, and our personal journeys, heavily influence the way we view ourselves, our history & various issues or events; how we think & what we believe about truth & spirituality; and not just the questions we ask, but the assumptions behind the questions themselves (for a list of some influential social, historical & religious factors & events over the last century that have significantly impacted our life experiences & worldviews, see A2). Our different subcultures & personal perspectives each have various strengths & weaknesses, some of which we will examine below. Three examples are listed here, regarding how we are partially molded by the time periods & cultures we live in and the life experiences we share, followed by a few suggestions in how to move forward in light of the inherent blessings & challenges all of this presents for us today.

First, regarding our view of truth, self & reality, there are ongoing radical changes in the presuppositions, values & worldviews of our mainstream, pluralistic culture, and how we think overall. Two of the many key factors in these changes are postmodernism (and the post-postmodern world it has produced), and the changing nature of the secularization of our culture, and how these two interrelated realities impact us individually & the different age groups, subcultures & religious groups in our culture. Postmodernism is a multi-faceted, diverse, highly debated & evolving phenomenon, which is both the fruit of, and a rejection of, the Enlightenment and the different expressions of modernism & postmodernism that followed. Here I'm addressing postmodernism & post-postmodernism together as they are interrelated & overlapping realities, and will only briefly touch on a few aspects of this phenomenon, as examples of how our worldview has changed & affected our view of truth, self & reality. These are complicated movements & perspectives within themselves that are understood in various ways. For more on postmodernism, post-modernity, post-postmodernism, see the articles by faculty from The University of Alabama (A3*) & Georgetown University (A4*); also "The Resurrection & the Postmodern Dilemma" by N.T. Wright (A5*); "The Postmodernism that Refuses to Die" by D.A. Carson (A6*); & "Late Modern or Post-Modern" by Tim Keller (A7*).

Some in our older generation, and some people of all ages & within various religious or political subcultures, have a blended worldview that embraces both traditional & religious views somewhat contrary to modernism, while also embracing modernist's perspectives & values, like belief in objective-universal truth and an emphasis on rational thought. **While believing in objective truth is a foundational aspect of Christian belief, the traditional evangelical church has to some degree embraced a "modernist" version of how objective truth has been emphasized, more so than a biblical view of truth (myself included).** This is evident in our overemphasis on a rational presentation of the gospel while underemphasizing other key biblical themes such as the life & supremacy of Christ. For example, when sharing the gospel, we have often relied on "The Four Spiritual Laws" or the "Steps to Peace with God" approach (which are very effective in some contexts), while too often neglecting to emphasize other approaches as the outline or overall focus of our presentation (e.g. focusing on the story of Christ's life & His lordship as our outline, like Matthew, Mark, Luke & John do). This approach is also problematic in other ways, for example: a) when we are not taking the time to provide a background to the storyline of the Bible and the life of Christ overall, and then expect unbelievers to believe in Jesus when they have very little biblical knowledge upon which to base that belief (unlike our mainstream culture in years gone by which had a basic working-knowledge of the OT & the person of Christ); or b) when we emphasize theological truth or confront specific sins but do not adequately

emphasize how experiencing Christ & following God's plan in the Spirits' power gives us the identify & fulfillment we are hungry for (whether we realize it or not).

This overemphasis on a rational approach of emphasizing the objective truth of the gospel & Christian theology has hindered our ability to reach the postmodern culture, and those coming from an atheistic or agnostic point of view, amidst the changing secularization of our culture overall (in which tolerance & authenticity are exalted while all belief systems are questioned & challenged). Unlike the prevailing mindset that dominated much of our older generation, **our postmodern culture is often predisposed to be skeptical of or question the following:** our ability to know truth, ourselves, our own reality and anything transcendent or divine; it embraces authenticity over authority; and it tends to reject or be suspicious of any *hierarchal guiding principles, foundations, or meta-narratives often embraced by the older generation, and/or more traditional or religious minded people in general (*objective-universal truths or morals, patriotism, exclusive religious convictions, etc.). So, for example, within the modernist worldview in which he was conceived, Superman was fighting for truth, justice and the American way. **In the postmodern world, Superman is fighting to stay alive & relevant amidst a culture that is skeptical about truth & disillusioned with the injustices of the American way** (for articles about Superman, Wonder Woman & Black Panther, viewed in light of our modern culture, see A8*).

Consequently, our gospel witness is therefore hindered when we fail to understand our modern culture and acknowledge the ways it rightly recognizes & rejects the compromise within our church subcultures & the gospel we are or are not preaching. Our gospel witness is also hindered when some within the church overreact to these criticisms by embracing our modern culture's worldviews & idols over against responding prophetically to what is wrong in the traditional church while appreciating & preserving what is right within her. Following WWII, with the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, feminism, environmentalism, an idolatrous version of capitalism, and a neo-conservative foreign policy that led to things like the 2nd Iraqi War, many within the up & coming generations have become increasingly disillusioned with the American way and with humanity's overall failure in living up to the modernist ideal of human progress. These younger postmodern generations have also been simultaneously appalled by the hypocrisy & corruption inherent within the personal lives & agendas of modernist-minded, religious & patriotic people, some of who used their positions of power & privilege to exploit others for personal gain (including those within the church). **Consequently, many in our modern culture are skeptical about believing the gospel**, when it is preached by a Christian subculture that to them seems molded more by the 20th Century, modernist-minded, traditional American culture they are rejecting than the biblical teachings Christians claim to believe.

At the same time, **in an ironic sense of being true to itself**, the fruit or logical out-workings of postmodern thought leads some people to question their own postmodern presuppositions, and they are often frustrated with the void that postmodernism has left within our hearts & minds, whether they realize why they are feeling frustrated & empty or not (hence our post-postmodern world). While some are saying we cannot really know ourselves, our reality or truth objectively, others are saying we cannot be sure that we cannot know such things in some objective or meaningful sense. **In other words, to say that we cannot know something objectively must also be questioned.** At times it seems as if the most credible view in some people's minds then is the one that is forever saying everything must be questioned. Therefore, some who hold to this perspective (& who in their own minds never embrace any one point of view over & against all the others) see themselves as the ones who are viewing our reality most objectively, even though their "one point of view" is to some degree inherently exclusive in how it views what we can know about ourselves or truth and is exalted in their own minds above other viewpoints (qualities usually rejected by postmodernism). Others who embrace this perspective that questions everything seem to be doing so more out of a desire to think deeply about our presuppositions, values & worldviews, in a passionate pursuit of understanding our own reality & knowing truth (to whatever degree that is possible and/or even relevant & worth pursuing). In other words, their questioning of everything is so that they can know themselves and more accurately view the reality in which we all live, in contrast to the goal of forever questioning everything just for questioning's sake. The definitions listed below contrasting "skeptical postmodernists" and "affirmative postmodernist" sheds some light on the points being made here (University of Alabama article; A3*).

- Skeptical Postmodernists – They are extremely critical of the modern subject. They consider the subject to be a “linguistic convention” (Rosenau 1992:43). They also reject any understanding of time because for them the modern understanding of time is oppressive in that it controls and measures individuals. They reject Theory because theories are abundant, and no theory is considered more correct than any other. They feel that “theory conceals, distorts, and obfuscates, it is alienated, disparate, dissonant, it means to exclude, order, and control rival powers” (Rosenau 1992: 81).
- Affirmative Postmodernists – Affirmatives also reject Theory by denying claims of truth. They do not, however, feel that Theory needs to be abolished but merely transformed. Affirmatives are less rigid than Skeptics. They support movements organized around peace, environment, and feminism (Rosenau 1993: 42).

Likewise, there are some in the older generation, and/or others who have not embraced postmodern ideals overall (regardless of age), **who rightly see the inherent biases & shortcomings of many postmodern-minded people.** Our postmodern culture often embraces a “world-owes me” or “victim” mentality, and a counter-productive, predisposed-bias against our ability to know truth, that is overly critical of, or hostile against, the modernist view of objective-universal truth, as well as traditional values & religious beliefs, some of which have greatly benefited society (e.g. acknowledgment of a creator, basic family values & sexual ethics, respect for authority, sacrificial service for one’s country, or protecting the most vulnerable & oppressed people group in our nation since 1973 – the unborn child). For more about these cultural changes, see *The Vanishing American Adult* by Ben Sasse; *Serving God & Country: U.S Military Chaplains in World War II* by Lyle W. Dorsett; “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences” from John’s Hopkins University (A9*); “Empowering Parents of Gender Discordant and Same-Sex Attracted Children” from the American College of Pediatricians (A10*); & “The FAQs: Pornography as a Public Health Crisis” by Joe Carter (A11*). Some in the emerging church-like movements from the previous two decades and others who are embracing a similar path have compromised with these modern cultural values in an attempt to stay relevant and reach the culture, and because they are at times deceived by & attracted to the idols of our modern culture. They rightly emphasize things like social justice, loving people in the LGBTQ community, the importance of experience & narrative in preaching & teaching, and the priority of correctly reading & reaching the modern culture. However, many of these modern anti-traditional evangelical approaches have over-reacted against the failures of the more traditional evangelical church by compromising doctrine & morality in order to fit in with the culture, while also downplaying or reinterpreting the gospel message, and/or confusing it with other important topics like social justice or the two great commandments (loving God & our neighbors). For an excellent summary & critique of these topics, see *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* by D.A. Carson (A12*).

This modern version of evangelical compromise has also hindered our gospel witness, and it will not produce lasting fruit, it lacks God's truth & power overall, and it will ultimately fail to reach the culture. **While its sins manifest in different forms & sometimes opposite extremes, the more modern anti-traditional version of evangelical compromise is ironically very similar to the traditional evangelical one** – although it’s rebelling against the traditional church’s compromise on the one hand, it is ironically embracing a modern day cultural compromise on the other (both the traditional & more contemporary versions of evangelical subculture have both been overly influenced by the culture, and that idolatrous compromise manifests differently, based on whatever idols, fears & deceptions reign most influential in our hearts and within the mainstream culture at any given point in time). Along these lines, it is also worth noting that in some ways postmodernism ironically stands in contrasts to both modernism & traditional-religious beliefs, which are at odds with one another (but both embrace objective-universal truth that postmodernism tends to reject). In other ways, modernism & postmodernism are united in their “self-driven” foundations & stand opposed in many ways to a gospel worldview, and this mindset often permeates the church. Within each of these movements, and within the various church subcultures of each time period, “self, self-expression & self-fulfillment” over & against “God, His kingdom and His glory & grace” have reigned on the throne of the hearts & minds of those embracing these worldviews, regardless of which movement happens to be dominating the culture at any given point in time.

Along with the rise of postmodernism, **the changing nature of the secularization of our culture** also greatly affects our view of truth, as well as the values we embrace and our view of God, morality & transcendence (addressed in

the 2nd & 3rd points below). Like with modernism & postmodernism, these various forms of secularization each present different challenges, while also providing benefits to us, if we are able to faithfully recognize, learn from & respond to the insights gleaned from our ever-changing culture. A research team from Faith Church in Indianapolis did an extensive study on the secularization of our culture, and wrote some excellent articles based on their research (A13* & A14*). Their work included the study of James K. A. Smith's *How (Not) to be Secular* (HNTBS), which is a commentary on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. This research team's articles address our current secular context and how we arrived at this point. Listed below are some excerpts from "A Secular Age" (A13*), which summarizes different expressions of secularization within our history & culture, along with some insights offered about *authenticity within these different expressions (*a foundational value within our current secular culture, and in postmodernism itself). Note: a modern example of what "secular₃" and "the age of authenticity" (referenced below) looks like is seen in the atheistic perspective that is shared in the "Conversational Engagement" paragraphs starting on page 14 (underlining below is mine).

Definition of "Secular" Our understanding of the word "secular" is key. **Secular** doesn't just mean "non-religious." "Secular" has three meanings: 1. Secular₁ - in classical or medieval accounts, the "secular" amounted to something like "the temporal" -- the earthy realm of politics or mundane vocations. This is the classic "sacred/secular" divide. 2. Secular₂ - in modernity, particularly post-Enlightenment, "secular" begins to refer to a nonsectarian, neutral, or *a* religious space or standpoint ... This is the viewpoint that calls for a secular public square, secular school system, etc. It tends to be unreflective about the epistemic questions that attend its own beliefs. 3. Secular₃ - This is the definition of "secular" to be read in the title of "A Secular Age" and "How (Not) to be Secular." A society is secular₃ insofar as "religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable (and contested)" (HNTBS pgs 21-22). We can live in a secular₃ age even if religious participation is visible and fervent. The conditions of belief have changed; belief in God is no longer axiomatic [self-evident, unquestionable]. All beliefs are contestable. This is not just a change in "worldview," but a change in the default assumptions about what is believable.

The Age of Authenticity How was religion thought of in different ages? Taylor introduces a web of religious forms at three different stages: 1. Ancien Règime - there is an inextricable link between religious identity and political identity ... This type of religion is susceptible to the elites, who sway whole masses. Thus the Protestant Reformation is able to claim whole countries by converting the king. 2. Age of Mobilization - If anything is going to fill the void left by the ancien régime, we have to do it. We need new rituals, practices, institutions, etc. No ancien régime to take for granted, no enchanted cosmos in which God resides. God is present in his design, in order. "He will be similarly present in our polity, *if we construct it aright, if we conform our constitution to the order God decrees in the heavens*" (HNTBS pg. 85). The divine is present to the extent that we build a society which plainly follows God's design. 3. Age of Authenticity - this is the social imaginary of expressive individualism, "the understanding that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside" (HNTBS pg. 85). *Authenticity* is the key word; "...and tolerance is the last remaining virtue." "The only sin which is not tolerated is intolerance" (HNTBS pg. 85).

Second, regarding the values we embrace (or are imposed upon us), we are heavily influenced by the cultural contexts in which we are born, as well as the subcultures we choose to identify with (religious, political, philosophical, or in music, sports, the arts, etc.). One example of this is seen in an insightful article written by a Canadian Christian author named Tim Challies, entitled "Shame, Fear, Guilt" (A15*).

I've heard it said that there are three kinds of culture in the world, each defined by its predominant worldview. There are cultures of shame, cultures of fear, and cultures of guilt, and each of them has their own way of pressuring people to behave or to conform to society ... In a *shame culture* your standing before other people depends on your level of shame or honor. It's like there is an imaginary scale that has shame on one side and honor on the other and the things you do, the things you say, and the ways you behave can tip the scale in one direction or the other ... In a *fear culture* your standing depends on your level of fear or power. These cultures are usually tribal and animistic and they pressure you with the fear of consequences meted out by supernatural spirits. The way to overcome fear is to gain power—power over those spirits and, through them, power over other people ... In a *guilt culture* your standing depends on your level of guilt or innocence. These cultures are obsessed with justice, with keeping people in-check with standards of right and wrong. So from their earliest days children are taught to follow the rules and are told they will be innocent if they obey those rules or guilty if they disobey them. Adults are kept in-check with endless lists of laws and, when offended, are quick to bring charges against other people in the hope that they will be found guilty. Every person experiences the desire to avoid guilt and protect innocence ... And, in fact, most cultures draw components from all three. One will be predominant but there will be

elements of the others. You will probably recognize that here in the West we are predominantly a guilt culture with some elements of shame (think of social media shaming as a means to conformity) and fear (think of the surprising rise of karma and “paying it forward” as controlling forces). You will probably recognize as well that the way a culture acknowledges right or wrong standing before people is the way they will acknowledge right or wrong standing before God.

Along with the cultures we are born into, we are also influenced by the subcultures we choose to identify with (which may or may not be what we were raised in). **An example of this is seen in how & why different subgroups view our mainstream culture as evil.** Some view our mainstream culture as the enemy because of our culture’s liberal values and anti Judeo-Christian agendas. Other subgroups view it as a threatening or evil force because of its oppressive rule over, & prejudice against, various minority groups within & throughout American history (regarding our ethnicity, gender, religion, special needs, etc.). Any of these subgroups can be found viewing our mainstream culture (or anything else) too much thru our own life experiences, fears, and agendas, rather than thru the biblical revelation that comes with a gospel worldview shaped by a globally informed, cross-cultural & interdenominational Christian perspective. Consequently, & ironically, some within either of these subgroups view those in the other group as the ones in power, who are to be feared, and whose agendas we should be taking a stand against. At the same time, some (but unfortunately not enough) of us recognize that each of these foundational perspectives have insights & strengths, biases & blind spots, related to our values & worldviews, and the problems we face, in light of the multiple & complicated factors involved. In a recent article from *The Atlantic*, entitled “The Threat of Tribalism” (A16*), Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld shed some penetrating light on these issues.

The causes of America’s resurgent tribalism are many. They include seismic demographic change, which has led to predictions that whites will lose their majority status within a few decades; declining social mobility and a growing class divide; and media that reward expressions of outrage. All of this has contributed to a climate in which every group in America—minorities *and* whites; conservatives *and* liberals; the working class *and* elites—feels under attack, pitted against the others not just for jobs and spoils, but for the right to define the nation’s identity. In these conditions, democracy devolves into a zero-sum competition, one in which parties succeed by stoking voters’ fears and appealing to their ugliest us-versus-them instincts ... America is not an ethnic nation. Its citizens don’t have to choose between a national identity and multiculturalism. Americans can have both. But the key is constitutional patriotism. We have to remain united by and through the Constitution, regardless of our ideological disagreements. There are lessons here for both the left and the right. The right needs to recognize that making good on the Constitution’s promises requires much more than flag-waving. If millions of people believe that, because of their skin color or religion, they are not treated equally, how can they be expected to see the Constitution’s resounding principles as anything but hollow? For its part, the left needs to rethink its scorched-earth approach to American history and ideals. Exposing injustice, past and present, is important, but there’s a world of difference between saying that America has repeatedly failed to live up to its constitutional principles and saying that those principles are lies or smoke screens for oppression. Washington and Jefferson were slave owners. They were also political visionaries who helped give birth to what would become the most inclusive form of governance in world history.

Third, regarding our view of God, morality, and transcendence, Gavin Ortlund has written an enlightening article worth quoting here (A17*), which addresses some of the issues related to the secularization of our culture mentioned above. Additional reflections & insights related to these topics will also be addressed under the next key point regarding conversational engagement. There we will look at some insights gleaned from an atheist who de-converted out of Christianity (underlining is mine).

1. God is in the dock. I’m currently writing my doctoral dissertation on Anselm (1033–1109). I’m always amazed by how exercised he was by the problem of divine mercy. Throughout his writings he labored over the question: how can a just and righteous God pass over sins and spare the undeserving? Today we have the opposite problem. Divine mercy is assumed, and divine justice must be explained. How could a good and loving God ever judge people? (This is one of the top seven objections to Christianity Tim Keller tackles in *The Reason for God*.) What’s so striking to me isn’t that Anselm and American culture have different answers, but that they’re asking different questions. For an 11th-century monk, it simply never occurred to him that God, rather than man, would be the one needing to be justified. C. S. Lewis captured this distinction well: “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock.” Perhaps the greatest example of this role reversal is the rise of atheism, a relatively rare phenomenon before the modern West. There are some scattered examples in pre-modern times of various kinds of materialism or agnosticism, but they’re strikingly sparse. For every one Lucretius or Democritus, you can find entire centuries and nations that know nothing but priests, monks, imams, lamas, shamans, sages, and sorcerers.

2. Morality is about self-expression. In most cultures throughout history it was assumed that external reality is fixed—and that the basic point of life is to conform ourselves to it in some way. Buddha and Plato agree on this point; they only differ on what the conforming process looks like. Our culture, by contrast, tends to exalt human desire and aspiration such that the point of life is for external reality to be conformed to it ... In the late-modern West we've reduced truth to a personal construct and lost confidence in reason's ability to access external reality ... Basically, for many in our culture, you should be able to do anything you want so long as you don't inhibit someone else's self-expression. Plato could have at least understood Buddha's four noble truths. Buddha would have comprehended Plato's advocacy for reason and justice. Both would be only perplexed and exasperated with the modern mantra "be true to yourself."

3. Life is starved of transcendence. In most ancient cultures, life and meaning were relatively stable. You didn't have people like Albert Camus contemplating whether the absurdity of human existence necessitated suicide among the ancient Mongols, Mayans, or Vikings. As Brother Lippo Lippi put it in Robert Browning's poem, "This world's no blot for us, nor blank; it means intensely, and means good: to find its meaning is my meat and drink." Many today lack this sense of objective meaning; we are starved of transcendence, community, stability; we're aching to find something big to live for; we feel listless, adrift, barren. Think of Nietzsche's anguish in proclaiming the death of God in the late 19th century—in a milder, semiconscious way, this is how many feel today ... I believe much of the sexual confusion and brokenness in our culture is the result of this deeper, existential void. We use things like sex and money to address basic questions of identity and fulfillment. As Keller recently observed, "In ancient cultures people had sex and made money to build a community; today, they do so to build an identity." Or as Trevin Wax puts it, "One reason our culture is so sex-saturated is that we are so transcendence-starved."

Some suggestions for moving forward – These examples listed above regarding our view of truth, our values and our overall view of God, morality & transcendence, highlight the following: our worldviews & religious beliefs, passions & fears, interactions with one another, and our overall understanding of truth, justice & the American way, are heavily influenced in positive & negative ways by our personal life experiences, our subcultures, and our mainstream culture overall (which has undergone major worldview shifts & radical changes over the last century). As stated earlier, many people today in & outside of the church find themselves either lamenting the loss of the way things used to be, or afraid that the way things used to be is where we're headed back to, or hoping for something all together different, and not sure what that is or how to get there. For those who care about issues related to truth, culture, spirituality, morality & justice, it is important to continually ask ourselves how our individual & collective life experiences affect us, and the questions we are or are not asking.

For those of us living here in the States, we are both blessed by & also challenged by the variety of cultures we have and how our mainstream cultural values, life experiences & worldviews keep rapidly changing. **From a Christian point of view, diversity of culture and a constant change in the culture, when rightly understood & embraced, is a blessing because it sharpens us as the church in multiple ways:** 1) in our pursuit of the truth thru a more globally informed, cross-cultural & socially marginalized lens (which recognizes this world as we know it is not our final home); 2) in our call to embrace a Christ-centered life of holiness & unity with each other (as we're confronted with & repent of any idolatrous forms of materialism, tribalism, immorality, sexism, etc.); and 3) in our gospel witness to the world as a prophetic minority, not a moral majority, as God uses these cultural changes to open our eyes & hearts where we've been ignorant of, or resisting, the call to be sojourners in the Spirit's power (regardless of whether other believers continue clinging to an idolatrous worldview & mission or not). These themes listed above rise out of several Scriptural passages, not the least of which are found in the book of 1 Peter, which is written to socially marginalized believers who faced additional hostility due to their allegiance to Christ. Peter emphasizes that they are both "a royal priesthood" but also "sojourners and exiles" (2:9, 11), and then gives them the following charge: ¹⁴ "But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" (3:14-17). Notice the reason non-Christians will ask them "for a reason for the hope" that is in them: they were honoring Christ as Lord & suffering well. **Unfortunately, too often today among those of us who are Christians, our complaining about the sinful world we live in is louder than our gospel witness to this fallen world.** For additional biblical reflection, I highly recommend consulting the commentary *1 Peter* by Karen Jobes (ECNT © 2005).

The challenge we face, however, among other things, is that amidst a diversity of cultures, and rapidly changing mainstream cultural values, both the church & our nation can grow increasingly divided, angry, and/or hopeless, and because some of these cultural changes include an increase in idolatry, immorality or injustices against others. These challenges are also intensified when we lose our privileged position along with our cultural & governmental influence & power, and when such loss includes an increased hostility & government sanctioned discrimination against us (regarding the laws of the land & the cultural shaming that takes place against those who refuse to bow to whatever modern day idols currently reign over our culture). This is something various minority groups have suffered & persevered under to a far greater degree throughout American history than what Christians here in the U.S. have generally faced up to this point (the isolated yet increasing number of examples of overt discrimination against Christians notwithstanding). Also, **some Christians see the impact of this loss of privilege or power thru a different lens than much of pop-culture, political evangelicalism**, because they come from various minority groups (that did not have a privileged position in the first place), and/or they've been thinking missiologically & embracing a sojourner's worldview already (as a prophetic minority not a moral majority). Those who view our cultural changes thru this type of a lens recognize the mixed blessing that comes with the hegemony the church in the West has experienced, in varying degrees, dating all the way back to Constantine's rise to power (e.g. blessings such as the ability to influence laws that promote justice & free exercise of religion, amidst the disastrous consequences of a church subculture corrupted by its idolatrous pursuit of political, economic, cultural and/or military power, etc.).

Consequently, because we have sinful motives & unbiblical elements within our theology & worldviews, and in light of our changing circumstances, **Christians (along with others) can find ourselves prone to do the following:** a) demonize those we disagree with, rather than engage them in meaningful discussions; b) withdraw in fear, rather than reach out with the life-transforming hope we have in Christ; or c) compromise our biblical convictions in order to win the world's approval, rather than speak the truth in love to an increasingly hostile yet ever-searching culture. Unfortunately those of us in Christ are often slow to see these truths & faithfully embrace them, and examples of this are addressed throughout this article. For those who are excited, interested, confused, concerned, scared and/or angry about our current culture, and/or who like to think thru the presuppositions we operate with, **you might find the following resources helpful** (along with the other ones already mentioned above concerning postmodernism, secularization, etc.): "The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About Antifa" by Joe Carter (A18*); "Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy" by Stephen McGlinchey (A19*); "The Gospel of the Kingdom & the 2016 Presidential Election" (based on a sermon I preached in October 2016 (A20*); & excerpts from Tom Skinner's book on his chapter addressing the church as a community rather than an institution (A21).

Conversational Engagement: Learning from & Responding to Those We Disagree With

Along with recognizing how our worldview & beliefs are affected by our life experiences & contexts, our ongoing journey of seeking to know truth and share it with others should also include learning from & responding to those who have a different life experience & perspective than ourselves, including those we disagree with. Such humility guides us in overcoming our own prejudices & blind spots, and empowers us to more faithfully follow in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul, who wrote the following to the church in Corinth: "¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law ... ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Here I will give two examples of conversational engagement, one from an African American Muslim who grew up in poverty & ended up incarcerated before becoming famous, and another one from an atheist who de-converted out of Christianity.

First, back in the 1990's, I learned about the life of an African American named Malcolm Little, whose background & religious experience was radically different than mine. While reading his book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (as told to Alex Haley), **I was greatly humbled & inspired by Malcolm's suffering, wisdom, boldness & perseverance**. He was born in 1925, grew up under the oppression of poverty & racism, headed down a destructive

path that led to his incarceration, was radically changed thru his conversion to Islam (first to The Nation of Islam and then to a traditional Islamic faith), and became a well-known & powerful voice for justice, before being tragically assassinated in 1965. His intense personal life experiences & penetrating insights challenged me to think deeper about what the gospel is, and what hope Christ offers to those who've suffered under poverty & racism, and to those embracing a religious faith much different than my own. For a Christian perspective from those who were contemporaries of Malcolm X and experienced similar challenges in life, see *Black & Free* by Tom Skinner, or *Why We Can't Wait* by Martin Luther King Jr. (which includes his "Letter from Birmingham Jail"); or for a more contemporary Christian perspective, see *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry* by Fernando Arzola Jr., or "Evangelical History in Black & White" by Douglas A. Sweeney (a history of evangelicals & racial-ethnic sins; [A22*]).

Hopefully some of the thoughts I share throughout this article reflect how my heart has been softened & opened up over the years to learn from others, and how my perspective is being sharpened by those, like Malcolm X, whose life experience & perspective is very different than mine. As stated in the preface, I'm very thankful for my childhood & the upbringing the Lord has blessed with me. At the same time, I recognize that my worldview, theology & passions in life are heavily influenced & limited by my cultural context & life experiences. During my early twenties, through the cross-cultural teaching I received at Wheaton College & the cross-cultural opportunities experienced thru Wheaton's inner-city connections, the Lord graciously began to open my eyes to the devastating problems of racism & the gospel call to racial reconciliation (see Romans 15:5ff; Ephesians 2:11ff; Revelation 7:9ff). Listed below are some selected excerpts from Malcolm X's book which shed some light on the passionate & convicting cry for justice his life & his voice offered to those who were or were not willing to listen.

Regarding Poverty & Racism: "Mr. [Elijah] Muhammed instructed us, 'Go after the black man in the mud.' Often, he said, those converted made the best Muslims ... I knew the great lack of most of the big-named 'Negro leaders' was their lack of any true rapport with the ghetto Negroes" (302, 357). "Any intelligent, honest, objective person cannot fail to realize that this white man's slave trade, and his subsequent devilish actions are directly *responsible* for not only the *presence* of this black man in America, but also for the *condition* in which we find this black man here" (306). "Why was it that when Negroes did start revolting across America, virtually all of white America was caught up in surprise and shock? I would hate to be the general of an army as badly informed as the American white man has been about the Negro in this country" (314-15). "Is white America really sorry for her crimes against black people? Does white America have the capacity to repent—and to atone? Does the capacity to repent, to atone, exist in a majority, in one-half, in even one-third of American white society ... most American white people seem not to have it in them to make any serious atonement – to do justice to the black man (426) "Indeed, how can white society atone for enslaving, for raping, for unmaning, for otherwise brutalizing millions of human beings, for centuries? What atonement would the God of Justice demand for the robbery of the black people's labor, their lives, their true identities, their culture, their history – and even their human dignity (426)."

Regarding America, Christianity & Islam: "Audiences seemed surprised when I spoke about Jesus ... I would explain that it was our belief that Christianity did not perform what Christ taught. I never failed to cite that even Billy Graham, challenged in Africa, had himself made the distinction, 'I believe in Christ, not Christianity'" (329). "Awareness came surging up in me – how deeply the religion of Islam had reached down into the mud to lift me up, to save me from being what I inevitably would have been: a dead criminal in a grave, or, if still alive, a flint-hard, bitter, thirty-seven-year-old convict in some penitentiary, or insane asylum" (330). "America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem" (391). "Are you aware that some Protestant theologians, in their writings, are using the phrase 'post-Christian era' – and they mean now? And what is the greatest single reason for this Christian church's failure? It is its failure to combat racism. It is the old 'You sow, you reap' story. The Christian church sowed racism – blasphemously; now it reaps racism" (425).

For those not well-versed in the personal life experiences of those who've grown up under the oppression of poverty or racism, and for those seeking a more faithful & effective cross-cultural gospel witness in a religiously diverse society, I encourage you to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* if you haven't already. In reflecting on his book, I wrote the following summary in a paper entitled "Racism, Racial Reconciliation & Theology" (for an internship at Wheaton Graduate School): "Malcolm X's devotion to Islam, his intelligence, his daring pursuit of truth and ability to articulate it, his stand against racism, and his giving his life for his beliefs, stand as an awesome challenge to modern day, historic, and orthodox Christianity. Some of his great insights into humanity, American history, Islam, Christianity, and racism must be tackled if we are to have a relevant and effective theology and

evangelism.” Thankfully, by God’s grace there are numerous Christians seeking to grow in a holistic faithfulness to the gospel in regards to issues such as these. We are also blessed & challenged by many high profile voices within Christianity, who are speaking out about various issues of justice in keeping with the faithful proclamation of the full gospel, such as John Perkins, Joni Eareckson Tada, Samuel Rodriguez, Thabiti Anyabwile, Russell Moore, & Jackie Hill Perry, to name a few. Before moving on to a second example of conversational engagement, I’ll share some humbling & inspiring words from the late evangelist Billy Graham, who Malcolm X himself quoted (see above), and who has preached the gospel to more people in person than anyone in human history. Billy wrote a convicting article entitled “Racism and The Evangelical Church” which was published in *Christianity Today* (October 4th, 1993). In light of the fact that he was not being pressured to respond to any specific controversy at the time, and since he was well known for having taken a stand against segregation back in the 1950’s (long before it was popular or politically correct to do so within our mainstream culture), his words listed below are all the more convicting. May all of us who are seeking to be faithful to the gospel take Billy Graham’s humble confession & prophetic insights to heart.

Racial and ethnic hostility is the foremost social problem facing our world today ... Racism – in the world and in the church – is one of the greatest barriers to world evangelization. Racial and ethnic hatred is a sin, and we need to label it as such ... Christ came to bring reconciliation – reconciliation between us and God, and reconciliation between each other ... Tragically, too often in the past evangelical Christians have turned a blind eye to racism or have been willing to stand aside while others take the lead in racial reconciliation, saying it was not our responsibility. (I admit I share in that blame) ... Our consciences should be stirred to repentance by how far we have fallen short of what God asks us to be as his agents of reconciliation. Racism is not only a social problem, therefore; because racism is a sin, it is also a moral and spiritual issue ... No other force exists beside the church that can bring people together week after week and deal with their deepest hurts and suspicions. Of all people, Christians should be the most active in reaching out to those of other races instead of accepting the status quo of division and animosity.

Second, Arael Avinu is a former Christian turned atheist & the founder of FullyDeconverted.com (A23*), which promotes atheism, the pursuit of truth and welcomes discussions from people of all faiths & worldviews, including Christians. He shares many insightful thoughts & asks some perceptively-foundational questions in his numerous online videos, and Christians would do well to “hear” what he and others like him are saying. While interviewing a Christian apologist named Michael Jones of InspiringPhilosophy.org (A24*), Arael engages him in an interesting & informative conversation, and spends a great deal of time listening to what Jones says (an approach that is too often not taken by Christians or our culture in general). In some of his responses, Arael offers an intriguing critique of Christianity, which sheds light on his own deconversion out of Christianity and his ongoing rejection of it. His perspective also gives us one example of the “secular₃” worldview and “the age of authenticity” that goes with it (p. 9). **Although I think his assessment is incomplete (explained below), what Arael says is very perceptive & should be taken to heart.** Like in all areas of life, it is prudent to listen to the critique of what others from outside our own camps have to say, because an outside perspective, & one that is not seeking to blindly defend itself, helps us see more clearly (obviously some outside perspectives can include a bias against that which it is evaluating, which should also be taken into account). Here is my paraphrased-summary of Arael’s perspective (using a lot of his own words) which he shares in his video interview with Jones (A23*).

First, all ideas & religious faiths basically spread thru the same natural means, so Christianity spreads & grows in the same way other religions & movements do. Second, amidst our rigorous study of the evidence, that evidence can turn out to be false, and we can be found viewing such evidence thru a lens that has systematic errors on our take of reality (e.g. the “evidence” we have for the Bible’s credibility is flawed along with the worldview thru which we are viewing that evidence). Consequently, Christians (& others) end up wrongly exalting our beliefs over other people or over other areas of thought. Third, those who embrace a belief or worldview based on wherever the evidence stacks up seem unable to step out of their perception of reality. They fail to realize that they are operating within a social construct where arbitrary values have been placed on them unknowingly, influencing them in ways they don’t recognize. For Christians that means we have been overly influenced by both church doctrine as well as our Christian sub-culture, and are more subjective & limited in our view of truth than an atheist or agnostic who is not holding to or limited by any one view of thought. Fourth, 2000 years after Christianity began, we have not noticed a decrease in human behavior as it relates to the things we call either evil or sin.

In some ways I agree with Arael's assessment & am challenged by it, including his critique of the Christian subculture overall (as evidenced in some of the other videos he's made as well). However, I believe he is overlooking some significant aspects of the Christian worldview & experience which affects our ability to know truth. Hopefully what is written throughout this article will shed some light on the following perspectives which I hold. For a more detailed & enlightening response, see the articles referenced above on discipleship & our secular age (A13* & A14*). **Here's a brief response.** First, Christianity (both the true church & false forms of it) does spread in part through natural causes & unfortunately thru sinful means. But God continues to sovereignly work through the ugliness & messiness of church (& world) history, while the gospel goes forth in part thru the godly-sacrificial witness of millions of believers down thru the centuries & around the world.

Second, Christians do view the evidence we look at thru a distorted lens & perception of reality, and sometimes that "evidence" is rightly found wanting amidst other evidence that stands up to modern scrutiny. But for those who continue to think deeper about the gospel & obey it with each passing year, we slowly have our eyes opened more & more by God's grace to His wisdom & truth. **We also begin to see how the theology & worldview of the gospel itself not only stands above our human wisdom, but also penetratingly critiques our subjective perspectives & preconceived biases** (which, unlike the gospel, are overly influenced & limited by the culture & time period we live in). This revelation & wisdom we receive from the gospel especially relates to knowing & obeying Christ, and to an understanding of the grand meta-narrative of where we've come from, why we are here, how to be redeemed & live as God's people in a fallen world, where we are headed (or more specifically "who" & "what" we are waiting for), and how all of this relates to the unfolding plan & eternal glory of God. In his chapter on knowing God's will, **Tom Skinner offers some insights worth sharing here:** "you may not see clearly all the way down the road, but you take the step toward what you can see ... take one step at a time on the basis of what you know from Scripture, your circumstances, and other truth God has given" (A21; p. 17). See also the extended quotes by N.T. Wright in "The Resurrection & the Post-modern Delemma" (A5*) & from D.A. Carson in "The Postmodernism that Refuses to Die" (A6*).

Third, the church is often slow to recognize how subjective & biased our viewpoints are, how impure are motives are, and how external factors influence us. Arael and others like him have much to teach us along these lines. However, there are some within the church who are repenting of & staying on guard against our idolatry, syncretism, sexism, racism, materialism, immorality and so forth, and rightly confronting those of us who are not. Growing in Christ thru a biblical understanding of the gospel actually confronts us on these very matters and guides us in "seeing" more objectively (see the insightful article by Michael T. Cooper entitled "COLONIALISM, NEO-COLONIALISM AND FORGOTTEN MISSIOLOGICAL LESSONS" [A25*]). There's an increasing divide taking place within the contemporary evangelical church (here I'm limiting my assessment to the church subculture I'm a part of, while acknowledging my gratitude for believers who do not identify as evangelical, and some of these critiques would apply across the board). In spite of the unfortunate pop-culture Christianity of our day, there are many within the church seeking to mature in these areas. Thru God's revelation in Christ, by His sanctifying-grace, and with the inherent & increasingly cross-cultural nature of Christian theology here in the States, as well as our growing interdependence on one another as a global community around the world, we are slowly over time developing a less subjective, but still limited, perception of our own reality & understanding of truth (while this theological & spiritual maturity varies greatly from church to church, & believer to believer).

Because the gospel is divine revelation which is both universally true and cross-culturally relevant, the more we understand & obey the gospel within a *globally-informed & cross-culturally defined fellowship the more objective our worldview actually becomes. To put that another way, the more our theology & perception of reality line up with a gospel worldview, the more objective we become in our ability to know truth & the better equipped we are to obey it. **For additional reflection**, see the extended quote by D.A. Carson on the emerging church (A12*) & Tom Skinner's rebuke of the institutional church & his appreciation for the church as a community (A21) referenced above; the extended quote from R. Scott Smith, who went through a painful time of doubt after becoming a Christian (in his chapter entitled "Non-Foundational Epistemologies and the Truth of Scripture" [A26]); and the

numerous books & articles recommended regarding global & cross-cultural Christian perspectives such as *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* or Leslie Newbigin's classical work *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (A27).

Christians should also readily acknowledge that there are "values" placed on us from the outside, some of which are flawed and which influence us in ways we are unaware. However, some of these external-influencing "values" come from divine revelation. As we mature in Christ, we begin to see how these "values" of God's revelation & sanctifying grace are transforming us, even as we become more aware of how overly influenced we are by our surroundings, our subjective perceptions of reality, the flaws within our Christian subcultures, and the impure motives of our hearts. **Part of living under God's grace is recognizing that He uses us in spite of ourselves to proclaim truth and reach out to a lost world.** We are sheep who need the Good Shepherd to lead & protect us amidst our ignorance & stubbornness (John 10:11ff; Gal 6:1; 1Pe 2:25). The Bible is full of examples of flawed believers who God used amidst their blind spots & sinful flaws: God bestowed favor on Noah, declaring him a righteous man despite his drunken tendencies, and chose Sarah (who laughed in unbelief) & Abraham (who lied out of fear) thru whom He would bring the Israelite people & their Messiah into this world, while commending them all for their faith (Genesis 6:8-9; 9:20ff, 12:1ff; 18:9-15, 20:1ff; Hebrews 11:7ff); Jesus commissioned Peter in spite of His denial of Christ & used Peter to write part of Scripture in spite of his compromise with the Judaizers (John 21:15ff & Galatians 2:11); God used John Mark in ministry & to write the book of Mark, in spite of having once abandoned his missionary calling (Acts 15:36ff & 2 Timothy 4:11); Paul entreated Euodia & Syntyche to overcome their dispute with each other while exhorting the local church to support these women in ministry (Philippians 4:2-3).

Fourth, it is true that in many ways evil in this world has not diminished overall, while the sinful, self-centered nature of humans remains the same, and a compromising church at times shares part of the blame. I would clarify, however, that good & evil have both increased throughout the world, and that there are certain things that are currently better overall in many countries, in part due to the influence of Christianity (see the keynote address "What Can Christianity Offer Our Society in the 21st Century?" by Tim Keller in which he addresses how our Western worldview & society have been positively impacted by Christianity; given at the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast in Westminster Hall, London, England, June 2018 [A28*]). At the same time, Scripture actually teaches that this very thing will happen. Evil in this world will continue and in some ways get worse until Jesus appears again, even as God's kingdom goes forth now influencing cultures & governments, and as He raises up a godly remnant out of every tribe & language, prepared as the bride ready for His Son when He returns (Matthew 13:24-30; 24:12-14; 2 Timothy 4:1ff; Revelation 7:9ff). Meanwhile, we should all take Christ's exhortation of warning & hope to heart: "¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:12-14).

Some Pastoral Convictions: Regarding Biblical Faith, a Gospel-centered Worldview & Christian Apologetics
First, while acknowledging the influence our life experiences & contexts have on our worldviews & beliefs, and the need to learn from those outside of our own subcultures & perspectives, to rightly & effectively pursue a knowledge of the truth, **I write with a pastoral conviction that we have compelling intellectual & scholarly reasons why we can trust the credibility of the Old & New Testament Scriptures and the gospel message these Scriptures proclaim** (which are some of the key issues in the apologetic defense & promotion of the Christian faith in our modern culture). This includes research done regarding the oral history, memory capabilities & use of written documents within 1st Century Judaism & Christianity (see the online resources available on our Apologetics webpage under "The Authorship & Accuracy of the Holy Scriptures" section). It is my belief that the internal evidence of these Scriptures, along with the external evidence of cultural & historical research & reflections, weigh heavily in favor of viewing (but not proving) Christ's resurrection as a historical event upon which Christianity stands or falls (see Section B). Belief in Christ and the Bible as the Word of God is ultimately a step of faith, but not a blind step of faith based on unreliable or contradictory sources.

Second, along with the credibility of the Scriptures & the gospel message, **it is also my conviction that embracing a gospel-centered worldview helps reveal the strengths & weaknesses found within the different perspectives & passions we embrace** (within modernist or postmodern perspectives, the changing nature of secularization within our culture, and amidst our various cultural, geographical & political subcultures, as discussed above). This gospel-centered worldview calls all of us to embrace the beauty & wisdom inherent within the different contexts & worldviews we come from & identify with, while also repenting of the sinful & self-exalting passions & perspectives that are perpetuated within our different subcultures & viewpoints. As addressed above, and as we will see below, a gospel-centered worldview offers us the following: a) the lens thru which we can more objectively view & understand these difficult issues; b) the foundation in which many answers for these complicated problems are revealed & sharpened; and c) a unifying mission that empowers us to work together amidst the differences we might still have in how we view the problems & opportunities that lie before us.

When humbly received, passionately pursued & faithfully obeyed, a gospel worldview includes both the revelation of God's truth as well as the courage to embrace the way of the cross, as citizens of a heavenly kingdom, who should by God's grace & power do the following: a) love God, one another, our neighbors & our enemies, while proclaiming both truth & the unfolding true story of the gospel to a lost world; b) live as servants in this world who preach the Word in season & out, while working for justice for all people, rather than lording ourselves over the culture or compromising with it; c) trust & hope in our sovereign Lord & His coming kingdom, which empowers us to repent of nationalistic and ethnic idolatry & prejudices (that those with & without cultural or governmental power are susceptible to); and d) experience the Christ-centered joy found in denying "self" while taking risks for the benefit of others, at our own earthly & temporary expense.

Third, for those who are Christians, **it is my conviction that we must keep a biblical balance in our Christian apologetics between continuing to reevaluate our perspectives & convictions while contending "for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude v3)**. Amidst our devotion to God's Word by faith, it is good (in a biblically wise manner) to read, learn from, be challenged by, and engage with people of different religions & worldviews (as mentioned in the second point above), and also from different traditions within our Christian faith & throughout church history (see the multiple sources cited in A27 & A29). Some of the Christians I'm quoting in this article come from different theological camps or subcultures within Christianity and embrace some viewpoints that I disagree with, but they offer penetrating insights that I cherish (e.g. Fleming Rutledge, N.T. Wright).

We should whole-heartedly pursue truth, being widely read while feeding deeply upon the revelation of one book (Holy Scripture), and this includes ongoing rigorous study from external sources related to the reliability of Scripture, what non-Christians have to teach us, & so forth. However, once God has revealed Himself to us & we've come to saving faith in the living Christ, while continuing to study & learn in these ways, **we must make sure that it is the Scriptures that are evaluating & scrutinizing us, and not the other way around**. Otherwise we end up self-deceived regarding God's self-disclosed revelation in Christ and shrinking back from the call to live by faith. So with all of these thoughts in mind, we will now move on to some of the foundational questions & objections raised by seekers, agnostics, atheists, and people of other religious backgrounds, regarding some core beliefs within the Christian faith, viewed in light of what it means to faithfully believe & obey these truths.

Note: the next section deals with the credibility of both the gospel message & the Bible as a whole. If you are not interested in technical discussions about these issues, but would like to learn more about the Christian faith as it relates to our daily lives, you can consult the online resources available on our Apologetics webpage (especially those listed at the top & under the sections "Our Ever-Changing Pluralistic Culture" and "The Life-transforming Revelation & Power of the Gospel" section).

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Did Jesus of Nazareth Rise from the Dead & Why does it Matter? (Section B)

The Universal Importance of the Resurrection: Regarding History, Truth, Eternity & the Christian Faith

It is predominantly accepted in the Western World that Jesus of Nazareth is not only a historical figure, but also died by crucifixion in AD 30 or 33 (B1*). This is included in the writings of the first century Jewish historian Josephus, who was not a Christian (B2), and the debate surrounding the truthfulness & relevance of Christianity in our Western culture does not usually focus on this historical fact (the life & death of Jesus Christ is something most non-Christian scholars readily affirm). Muslims deny the crucifixion of Christ, but this seems to be driven more by religious convictions than historical ones, and some of the points below address topics related to Islam. For an insightful look into the differences between Islam & Christianity, see Timothy George's book *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? or Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* by the late Nabel Qureshi.

However, the historical resurrection of Christ is highly debated, especially because it involves belief in divine intervention, and because of the universal & eternal implications involved in whether or not He actually rose from the dead (i.e. if Christ rose from the dead, perhaps we should take seriously what He said!). On the other hand, the resurrection of Christ is foundational to the Christian faith, and the entire Christian faith is dependent upon it. This is clearly stated by the Apostle Paul, who was a persecutor of Christians before his dramatic conversion experience with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9): “¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:14-18). For those who do not believe in the historical resurrection of Christ or are unsure, but sincerely care about truth, they will suggest alternative theories for what might have happened instead of a miraculous resurrection. **In so doing, they are seeking answers to questions that can explain how various interrelated realities are true without a historical resurrection**, such as: 1) how can the largest represented religion in the world exist when it's history & theology depend on the resurrection of Christ; 2) how can we account for the NT Scriptures which teach that Jesus rose from the dead; and 3) how did Christianity arise & grow so fast in the first place in the days of the Roman Empire if her crucified-Messiah did not conquer the grave?

Usually these alternative explanations include something like the following or a combination thereof: 1) there was a conspiracy theory (e.g. the disciples stole the body, made up a lie, & held it together); 2) some of the disciples had postmortem like experiences (e.g. hallucinations, etc.) in which they genuinely thought they “saw” Jesus (or His spirit) risen from the dead, and then told this to others (see B3* for a scholarly assessment by Gary Habermas regarding the weaknesses of hallucination theories); 3) stories about Jesus were collected over time, were not based on eye witness accounts, and eventually were written down several decades after the fact, which are the documents known today as the NT Scriptures; and/or 4) we simply do not know what happened, but natural explanations sound more convincing, or the historical evidence is lacking, and/or because there is a miracle involved we cannot access this option historically, and so forth. **Even if you do not think the NT Scriptures are reliable, it is still worth considering why these documents say what they did about the resurrection, instead of something else** (this is addressed in the 2nd point below concerning a gospel-centered worldview of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection). Because the resurrection of Christ obviously entails believing in a miracle, many find some form of a natural explanation more convincing (even if they have doubts about any of these alternative theories being presented), and are less likely to believe the gospel, which stands or falls on whether Christ's resurrection actually happened (1 Corinthians 15:1ff).

There is a significant amount of internal evidence within the NT Scriptures which point to the credibility of believing in the resurrection, which are worth your investigation if you've not pondered them before, and such internal evidence holds more weight after one considers the credibility of the NT Scriptures (see the resources regarding

the credibility of the Bible on our Apologetics webpage under “The Authorship & Accuracy of Holy Scripture”). Here’s a few examples (see also B4* & B5* for a detailed list): 1) all four books of the gospel cite that women were the first eyewitnesses (in a culture that didn’t value their testimony); 2) the radical transformation of the disciples and Saul of Tarsus (the Apostle Paul); 3) numerous resurrection references in Paul’s early epistles; 4) the Christians meeting on the first day of the week (rather than on the Sabbath); or 5) how different the Gospel accounts of the resurrection are compared to later Apocryphal accounts & so forth. Regarding alternative theories, the late Chuck Colson offers a compelling case which reveals the weaknesses inherent within the conspiracy theory, when viewed in light of how fast things collapsed & how President Richard Nixon’s inner circle was unable to hold together a lie during the Watergate Scandal (a summary is listed under B6). Other natural explanations are also dependent on unlikely scenarios (see B7*), but are nonetheless often cited as a more believable explanation over a supernatural event taking place.

Therefore, in light of these popular alternative views, we will focus on three interrelated thoughts which highlight the historical likelihood of the resurrection, and challenge the conclusion that alternative theories are more intellectually sound or reasonable than what is recorded in the NT Scriptures (including natural explanations and/or agnostic positions which claim we do not know or cannot adequately investigate miracles historically, etc.). Some problematic biases and blind spots will be highlighted regarding these alternative theories; challenging not just the likelihood of these alternative theories, but the presuppositions inherent within the arguments themselves (which I will argue are overly dependent on a modern day worldview & do not adequately account for the 1st Century context in which the resurrection took place, or for the type of Christian community & theology that followed).

In unpacking this position, **I will present three compelling reasons to consider the historicity of Christ’s resurrection in light of these fundamental weaknesses within these alternative theories:** 1) they do not adequately account for the horrifying shame of crucifixion in the 1st Century and the staggering implications of the NT Church embracing the cross as central to her theology & identity (but are instead viewpoints overly influenced by a modern day domesticated view of the cross); 2) they do not adequately address the NT Church’s worldview-altering, gospel-centered theology of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection, and how this change dominants both the NT Scriptures & what Christianity looked like in the 1st Century (a theology that is neither what the Jews were expecting nor is it a spiritualized version of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection); and 3) they do not adequately assess the historical evidence we have within the NT Scriptures and in light of the explosive rise of early Christianity (but are instead viewpoints overly influenced by philosophical naturalism and post-Enlightenment thought).

Through these arguments, **I will put forth the thesis that a cultural, theological & historical assessment of these factors point heavily in the direction of a dependency on Christ actually rising from the dead.** This should challenge seekers, skeptics & those from other religious faiths regarding their willingness to dismiss these considerations and to reconsider the validity of alternative theories. Such conclusions should also confront, exhort & encourage Christians to grow in our convictions about the Christian faith, our theological understanding, & our obedience to the gospel. Hopefully all of us will take these cultural, theological & historical considerations to heart, and recognize the reasonableness of believing in a historical resurrection, and consequently be willing to “hear” what this risen-reigning Christ has to say. As you read the following paragraphs & consider the points being presented regarding the historicity of the resurrection, may you think deeply about the gospel message, not just the evidence being presented for it.

The Centrality of the Cross: in the Theology & Identity of the NT Church

One of the more compelling reasons to seriously consider the historicity of Christ’s resurrection is ironically seen in light of how He died. **What could possibly have happened that would cause 1st Century believers to be willing to embrace the cross as central to who they were and what they believed?** It is historically well documented that the cross became central to Christian theology & identity in a culture that lived under the gruesome shadows of crucifixion. But the unspeakable shame of crucifixion is easily lost on those of us coming from a 21st Century Western worldview, which has a “domesticated” view of the cross. Our commercialized, fashionable & decorative use of crosses in our modern culture is a far cry from the shame & curse associated with the most excruciating

form of execution perfected by the Romans: crucifixion. When this is taken to heart, it stands as a rebuke to our compromised-Christianity and it calls into question the validity of alternative explanations for the resurrection. This does not mean using the cross as a symbol in certain contexts is wrong, even in a way that emphasizes the spiritual life & light of Christ that comes with it, provided we faithfully emphasize & embrace topics like the shame & the call to deny self inherent within its message (e.g. some churches use the word “cross” as part of their name; our church has a cross hanging on the wall with a cloth draped around it, representing both the death & the resurrection of Christ, etc.).

The Episcopal Priest Fleming Rutledge, in her book *The Crucifixion*, says the following (boldface is mine): **“Churches sometimes offer Christian education classes under the title ‘Why Did Jesus Have to Die?’ This is not really the right question. A better one is, ‘Why was Jesus crucified?’** She goes on to say that crucifixion “was supposed to be seen by as many people as possible. Debasement resulting from public agony was a chief feature of the method, along with the prolonging of agony. It was a form of advertisement, or public announcement—this person is the scum of the earth, not fit to live, more like an insect than a human being. The crucified wretch was pinned up like a specimen. Crosses were not placed out in the open for convenience or sanitation, but for maximum public exposure” (B8, pp.75, 92). In his article on Christ’s lordship & the cross (B9*), Trevin Wax elaborates on the horror & shame involved in crucifixion.

It is hard for us to fully comprehend just how awful the crucifixion was. If you’ve seen Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, you’ve seen something of the torment involved. But it’s not just the torture, but the representation—what the cross meant—that was so awful. In a culture built on a code of honor and shame, the cross was the most shameful, most embarrassing way to die ... Even *The Passion* portrayed Jesus clothed while on the cross. But crucifixions almost always involved stripping the person completely naked, so that he was exposed and vulnerable as he hung there. Crucifixion was meant to be a long and drawn-out death. People would suffer, slowly suffocating in their blood, for days, while wild dogs circled below waiting to leap up and tear off their flesh. Thousands were crucified in the time of Jesus. Nothing else better communicated the power of Rome than to see any threat to Roman power hanging on a cross. It was an ever-present sign that Rome’s power was dominant. It was futile to resist.

After the official legalization of Christianity under Constantine, Rutledge says “the word ‘crux’ was sanctified. It fell out of use in ordinary discourse; the word ‘furca,’ meaning ‘gallows,’ was substituted. This is revealing because it shows how the movement is always away from the wretchedness of the cross to something that, however dreadful, is nevertheless not so much associated with the unspeakable as was crucifixion” (B8, p.82). This movement “away from the wretchedness of the cross” has continued down through the centuries. Of course this is not only understandable but in the literal sense it is rightfully desired (do away with crucifixions forever). But living this far removed from the days when crucifixion prevailed as a form of capital punishment, our church subculture & mainstream culture overall end up with a domesticated view of the cross, which makes it much harder to grasp how repulsive it would be to embrace the cross as central to one’s identity & theology.

This domesticated view of the cross is one of the factors contributing to a half-hearted version of Christianity that must consistently be confronted & repented of within the church, before we go preaching it to the world (Mark 8:31ff; 1 Corinthians 1:18ff; Galatians 6:14; Revelation 2-3). While the evangelical church has grown over the last 70 years, in part due to those leaving mainline or liberal churches, and also through what God is doing among ethnic minority groups, there’s been some serious compromise within both the traditional & contemporary evangelical church as well. Some of this stems from a domesticated view of the cross, in which we enjoying singing about “the old rugged cross” while not comprehending or caring what “its shame & reproach gladly bear” really means. We can be like Peter who boldly professed that Jesus was the Christ, but immediately rejected Christ’s words about the central role of the cross for Israel’s Messiah, and how that cross must be symbolically embraced for all those who would follow their Lord Jesus by faith (Mark 8:31ff). **The full impact of such compromise is often felt a few generations after the fact, which we are seeing more & more of today.** This leads to some in the church embracing either a traditional or contemporary compromise with the culture (or a combination thereof), and to others abandoning the faith altogether (some of which is addressed in Section A above).

There are numerous contemporary examples of how a shallow or domesticated view of the cross perpetuates compromise within the church, here's just a few (which are sins I have to repent of & guard against myself): 1) a worldview that embraces materialistic or tribalistic idolatry & political compromise rather than loving Christ and living as sojourners with a joyful-prophetic witness that rises out of suffering & sacrificial living; 2) a celebrity-dominated Christian subculture liken to that which Paul rebukes in the Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 1:10ff), over & against the pursuit of being the priesthood of all believers with our eyes fixed on Jesus; 3) relying more on trendy church growth marketing techniques than self-abasing intercessor prayer and a humble, bold witness for Christ; 4) self-serving churches & ministries which neglect both sacrificial giving and an emphasis on evangelism & global missions (while embracing entertainment-driven worship services dominated by feel good songs & emotional experiences lacking theological depth); 5) embracing the modern day idols of sexual immorality as we conveniently avoid the shame of being on the world's version of the wrong side of history, or preaching against these idols without emphasizing the beauty of finding our identity in Christ and ignoring or perpetuating other sins like racism & sexism; 6) church leaders abusing their power rather than sacrificially shepherding the flock, and a male dominated church culture that has failed to cherish, recognize & support women within a complimentary role of godly leadership in the church; and 7) expository-less preaching that under-emphasizes Christ's life-transforming call to "deny self," while being overly preoccupied with "what the Bible has to say about me" over & against the joy & unity we experience when focusing on "that which God does for His own glory."

Perhaps we need a Michael Card song playing on *Positive-Encouraging K-Love* to guard us against preaching a message of the cross that can be too easily "stepped over" instead of embracing the way of the cross as the **scandalon* central to our theology & identity as Messiah's people (*the stumbling stone which demands we put our faith in Christ-crucified, acknowledging our need for Him as Savior & our obedience to His lordship, regardless of the shame it brings). Michael highlights these themes in a very captivating way in his song "Scandalon" (B10*).

Verse 1: The seers and the prophets had foretold it long ago; That the long awaited one would make men stumble; But they were looking for a king to conquer and to kill; Who'd have ever thought He'd be so weak and humble.

Chorus: He will be the truth that will offend them one and all; A stone that makes men stumble; And a rock that makes them fall; Many will be broken so that He can make them whole; And many will be crushed & lose their own soul.

Verse 2: Along the path of life there lies a stubborn Scandalon; And all who come this way must be offended; To some He is a barrier, To others He's the way; For all should know the scandal of believing.

Verse 3: It seems today the Scandalon offends no one at all; The image we present can be stepped over; Could it be that we are like the others long ago; Will we ever learn that all who come must stumble.

Likewise, those outside of Christianity also have a domesticated view of the cross, which makes it much easier for the atheist, agnostic or non-Christians in general to intellectual accept the validity of alternative explanations of Christ's resurrection. When we take a deeper look at crucifixion and all that goes with it (historically, culturally, psychologically, theologically, etc.), we get a glimpse of how extremely unlikely it would be that the early Christians embraced & preached a crucified Messiah as Lord, if Jesus of Nazareth had not actually risen from the dead. Often times in our culture people will erect crosses to mark the location where someone tragically died or where you can bring memorabilia to lay in honor of the deceased. This modern day practice is both understandable and emotionally moving. However, if we were living in the 1st Century and wanted to do something like that, using the symbol of crucifixion is the last thing we would choose.

People have been willing to transform their lives, suffer & die for all sorts of causes & beliefs, but to do so because crucifixion was now at the center of your identity & theology is not one of them. It's understandable that people would be willing to identify with the cross after Christianity rose up & had spread throughout the Roman Empire, and once crucifixion was no longer in use. Like with other movements, outward growth often times perpetuates future growth, regardless of whether or not the movement is based on truth and/or divinely inspired. But it's an entirely different matter altogether to think that Jewish or Gentile people would be willing to embrace the cross as central to their identity & theology, and worship a crucified man as their Messiah, in a time period when Christianity was unknown, when the gospel of a crucified-risen Christ was a threat to Rome and completely counter to what the Jews were expecting, and especially while crucifixion dominated the landscape.

At this point it is worth stating & emphasizing the obvious, in order to pause & dwell upon it for a moment: Jesus of Nazareth was not just executed, He was crucified. Rutledge says John the Baptist's death "was memorably horrible; who can forget the severed head on the platter? Yet even this gruesome image does not carry with it the same stigma as crucifixion. It is the stigma that needs to be emphasized if we are to grasp the extreme peculiarity of a cross as a symbol of faith" (see the full account of Rutledge's enlightening & convicting summary regarding the uniqueness of Christ's death, in contrast to a list of other leaders/martyrs throughout history; B8). If in the unlikely (if not impossible) event multiple disciples had some form of similar postmortem experiences in which they thought they saw Christ or His spirit, we still have to account for how the early church would have been willing to embrace the scandalous stigma of crucifixion as central to their identity as the people of a crucified Messiah. In his article on Christian origins and the resurrection, Biblical Scholar N.T. Wright highlights even the joy that early Christians had in light of (or in spite of) the cross (B11*).

We must, then, ask once again: Why did Christianity even begin, let alone continue, as a messianic movement, when its Messiah so obviously not only did not do what a Messiah was supposed to do but suffered a fate which ought to have showed conclusively that he could not possibly have been Israel's anointed? Why did this group of first-century Jews, who had cherished messianic hopes and focused them on Jesus of Nazareth, not only continue to believe that he was the Messiah despite his execution, but actively announce him as such in the pagan as well as the Jewish world, cheerfully redrawing the picture of messiahship around him but refusing to abandon it? Their answer, consistently throughout the evidence we possess, was that Jesus, following his execution on a charge of being a would-be Messiah, had been raised from the dead.

The extreme unlikelihood of such alternative explanations to the resurrection is easily lost on us in light of our being so far removed from the horrors of crucifixion, and being so "overly familiar" with a "surface level understanding" that Christ died for our sins, and what it would have been like to live in that culture & put your faith in this crucified Christ. **We live in a culture very concerned about our "identity" regarding race, gender, careers, education, wealth, politics and so forth.** Imagine living in a culture where people were regularly & publicly crucified, and the image of crucifixion had now become the theological symbol for your new found identity in Christ. Imagine embracing a scandalous stigma so terrifyingly shameful to be the very thing that was now central to both your theology of God & salvation and to your identity as His people. Trevin Wax tries to give a modern day example of the shame of crucifixion in mentioning the horrors associated with the Nazi gas chambers (B9*).

Now, imagine someone walking into that gas chamber *voluntarily*, as an act of obedience to God, and then rising again after dying there, so that within a generation's time the symbol of the gas chamber could become the symbol of hope and freedom and victory. Imagine people walking around wearing gas chamber jewelry, or singing "At the chamber, in the chamber, where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away" or "When I survey the wondrous gas chamber."

But even then the comparison fails. The Nazis took their victims out of the public eye to hide the gruesome horrors of the gas chambers, but crucifixions were done publicly for all to see what happens to those who threaten or rebel against Rome. Also, the 8 gas chambers & 46 ovens at Aushwitz were designed to be a sufficiently expedient form of mass execution (B12*), whereas the Romans used crucifixion to prolong death & intensify the shame involved. By pondering the unspeakable horror & gruesome shame of crucifixion in light of how it dominated the social & political landscape of those days, one begins to realize how unthinkable the following would be – that first century Jews & Gentiles embraced a crucifixion theology as central to their faith in the way the NT Scriptures say they did, and in the way NT theology insists it had to be. Again, the point here is not about a willingness to suffer or radically change one's way of life, but rather that crucifixion was foundational to why they did so, what they believed, and the identity they embraced. In 1 Corinthians 1, the Apostle Paul calls the message of Christ-crucified a stumbling block for Jews & folly or foolishness to Gentiles. **It's easy for us today to focus only on the theological or evangelistic aspect of that message as the offensive part, and fail to take into account how sociologically & nationalistically scandalous it would be to identify with & preach "the cross" in a culture all too familiar with crucifixion.** We get a glimpse of the scandalous shame associated with crucifixion from the 2nd Century pagan philosopher Celsus. When addressing the Christians desire to know God, here's a summary of what he says:

Still, I would try to teach them something, slow-witted though they are ... But to begin the journey, you must flee from deceivers and magicians who parade fantasies in front of you. You will be a laughingstock so long as you repeat the blasphemy that the gods of other men are idols, while you brazenly worship as God a man whose life was wretched, which is known to have died (in disgraceful circumstances), and who, so you teach is the very model of the God we should look to as our Father. The deceit you perpetrate with your ravings about miraculous doings ... and the general madness of your beliefs, are to blame for the fact that you are marked for crucifixion (Celsus, pp. 110-11).

This theme is developed further in the next point below, and additional insights related to the shame of crucifixion are referenced in the footnotes regarding the teachings of Islam (B13), and NT Scholar David Garland's insights about the cross (B14). I'm not saying this should convince the seeker or the skeptic of the historicity of Christ's resurrection. But for those who doubt or reject the resurrection, I'm encouraging you to reconsider whether alternative solutions still sound as convincing to you, if you've found, as I have over the years, that the lens through which you've been reading & evaluating the resurrection story and the NT overall, has not adequately taken into account the horrifying shame of crucifixion.

On the other hand, **in the gospel we have the answer** for how & why the early Christians were willing to embrace the cross as central to their identity & theology when living amidst the shame & degradation that crucifixion brought upon their culture: **there was a historical resurrection**. The risen Christ revealed to them the necessity of the cross & how it fit within the unfolding plan of redemption, foretold in an extremely veiled sense by the OT Scriptures. Such theology is only understandable this side of the resurrection, after it's been revealed & explained, which is why no one throughout the days of OT history ever figured it out, and why no one invented such a theology after the failure of countless other Messiah-like figures who had come & gone before Jesus of Nazareth. It is a divine revelation that they would not have thought up themselves, and certainly would not have been willing to personally & corporately identify with & publically proclaim, had they not experienced a supernatural transformation of heart & mind. Along these lines, the risen-reigning Christ is also the One who empowered them to embrace the cross as a way of life in spite of the scandalously shameful, worldview-altering foundation it was to their identity & theology. For those of us in Christ, may we recognize & repent of our domesticated view of the cross as we seek to whole-heartedly embrace the cross as Messiah's people, who bear witness as a prophetic minority in a lost world full of people God loves.

Likewise, for those who are seeking or unconvinced, amidst your in depth & honest searching, hopefully you will give some thought to how much easier it is to dismiss the historical evidence for the resurrection or to think that natural explanations are more credible, if you have been viewing these options thru a modern day lens which has a domesticated view of the cross. Such a perspective is extremely far removed from the worldview & life experience of 1st Century Jews in the Greco-Roman world, who were living under the gruesome shadows of one of the most devastatingly cruel & shameful forms of execution ever devised. Therefore, it is highly unrealistic to think that so many 1st Century believers would be willing to embrace a cross-centered theology & identity that was so radically opposed to their Messianic expectations, and that they did so while living in a culture marred by crucifixion. However, this begins to make more sense if we take seriously the historical possibility that the risen-reigning Christ did the following: 1) gave them divine revelation which explained the purpose behind it all; 2) supernaturally empowered them to radically alter their worldview, identity and way of life; and 3) instilled in them an eschatological hope in spite of the fact that Rome still reigned and even after Jerusalem fell (AD 70). With that in mind, we are now ready to address our next key point, regarding how the resurrection & gospel message of Christ radically altered the NT Church's worldview & overall theology, related to some fundamental beliefs & perspectives the Jewish people had embraced for centuries.

The Gospel-centered Worldview of the NT Church: Regarding Kingdom, Messiah & Resurrection Theology

Here is a second compelling reason to seriously consider the historicity of Christ's resurrection: if the apostles & the other early Christians had formulated a "Christian" theology & started a Messianic community on their own over time (without the revelation given to them from a risen Christ), the Christianity of the NT Scriptures is not the story or theology they would have conceived. Along with how the NT Church was willing to embrace the cross as

central to their theology & identity, as addressed above, we must also answer this question: **what could possibly have happened that caused 1st Century Jewish believers to begin preaching & obeying a worldview-altering interpretation of the kingdom of God, the Messiah and “resurrection from the dead”** in radical contrast to the way in which these same believers & their ancestors had understood these theologically-foundational & culturally-dominating concepts for centuries? What the NT Scriptures give us is not what the Hebrew people were expecting, based on their understanding of the OT & their traditions, nor is it a “spiritualized version” of these concepts, which does not due justice to what the NT actually teaches.

Instead, the NT Church embraced a gospel-centered theology that included, among many other things, the following beliefs & overall worldview-altering perspective: 1) the preaching of an inaugurated & advancing kingdom of God here on earth even though Rome still reigned over them (Isaiah 40-55; Daniel 7:13f; Mark 1:14; Acts 1:3; Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20; Colossians 1:13); 2) the lordship of their crucified Messiah, even though He failed to conquer Israel’s enemies & did not cleanse or rebuild the temple (Psalm 89; Isaiah 9:1ff; Micah 5; Zechariah 14; Matthew 28:17ff; Acts 2:36; Philippians 2:8-11; Revelation 1:5-7; 19:11ff); and 3) the belief & hope in the resurrection of the dead which they now proclaimed had taken place, even though the resurrected Christ did not remain with them on earth, nor did this include the immediate resurrection of all the righteous & unrighteous or the ushering in of the new age (Ezekiel 37:1-14; Daniel 12:2; Luke 24; John 20-21; Acts 1:1-3; 4:2; Romans 6:3-11; 1 Corinthians 15:1ff; 1 Peter 1:3ff). As we dwell further upon the gospel interpretation of these concepts, we will begin to see how alternative theories for the resurrection are based more on our human wisdom & an oversimplified version of Christianity, which do not due justice to the Jewish worldview of the 1st Century, and which do not adequately take into account the Christian theology & way of life embraced by the NT Church.

Unfortunately, the church at times embraces & preaches an oversimplified version of the gospel, which makes these alternative theories seem more intellectually or theologically plausible. In other words, because we have not done a better job teaching the gospel in light of OT history and the fullness of NT revelation, we have contributed to the oversimplified version of the gospel that atheists, agnostics, skeptics & others are using as part of the foundation upon which they reject the Bible. **To put that another way, unbelievers are sometimes rejecting Christ based on an incomplete or oversimplified view of the gospel that is far too small** (I include myself in this critique, as I realize with each passing year how far short I fall in thinking this way and in the terminology I do or do not use when preaching the gospel on a weekly basis). NT Scholar D.A. Carson refers to the gospel as “the embracing category that holds much of the Bible together, and takes Christians from lostness and alienation from God all the way through conversion and discipleship to the consummation, to resurrection bodies, and to the new heaven and the new earth” (B15*).

The gospel includes, but is much more than, my need to “receive Jesus by faith as my Lord & Savior.” The gospel is a royal proclamation of a history altering event, with a biblically-enriched theology, grounded in OT Scripture & salvation history. **God’s gospel incorporates topics like the following:** our faithful covenant-keeping God who fulfills all His promises; Christ as the second Adam who was faithful in temptation, the woman’s offspring who will crush the serpent’s head, Abraham’s seed thru whom all nations will be blessed, our Passover Lamb, and the descendant of David who will reign over all nations forever; God’s self-disclosed revelation in Christ thru His life, teachings, miracles, disciple making, death, resurrection & ascension; the regeneration & gift of the Holy Spirit; the inaugurated-kingdom of God which is transforming our present world; a crucified & resurrected Messiah as Lord; repentance of sin, justification by faith, being rescued from the wrath of God, and becoming a new creation in Christ; adoption into the family of God; the church as a community of sojourners bearing witness in the world; cross-cultural reconciliation & gender equality through our oneness in Christ (& how complimentary roles within marriage visibly demonstrate Christ’s love for His church); and our ultimate hope in the Second Coming of the resurrected Christ, whose Name has been exalted above every name, who has all authority in heaven on earth, who reigns now as ruler of kings on earth & as our High Priest at the right hand of God, and who is with us always ‘til the end of the age, when He returns to usher in the fullness of His kingdom and judge the living and the dead.

For our purposes here, **I'm focusing on the three interrelated concepts of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection, and how the NT interpretation of these concepts cannot be adequately explained without a bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead.** Bible Scholar N.T. Wright has written a great deal on the historicity of the resurrection and its connection to NT Church history & theology. He skillfully demonstrates how what the NT says about the kingdom, Messiah, and resurrection from the dead is not what Christians would have made up or what the Apostle Paul would have written down. Here's a brief summary from his article on Christian origins and the resurrection (B11*), about the Jewish beliefs & expectations related to kingdom, Messiah, and resurrection (boldface is mine).

Regarding the kingdom of God he says: Within Judaism the coming kingdom of God meant the end of Israel's exile, the overthrow of a pagan empire and the exaltation of Israel, and the return of YHWH [Yahweh; the LORD] to Zion to judge and save. These are the motifs that emerge from that great kingdom-prophecy, Isaiah 40-55, and from numerous Psalms and other parts of the Hebrew scriptures. And, as Josephus makes clear, in Jesus' day the conviction that their "only Ruler and Master" was God was a particular mark of the revolutionaries (Ant. 18:23). For a second-Temple Jew, then, the coming of the kingdom was not about a private existentialists or Gnostic experience but about public events. At its narrowest, it was about the liberation of Israel. At its broadest, it was about the coming of God's justice and liberation for the whole cosmos. Thus, if you had said to a first-century Jew, "The kingdom of God is here," and had explained yourself by speaking of a new spiritual experience, a new sense of forgiveness, or an exciting reordering of your private religious interiority, **he or she might well have said that they were glad you had had this experience, but why did you refer to it as the kingdom of God?**

Regarding the Messiah he says: There were, to be sure, several variations on Jewish messianic belief in this period. None of them envisaged a Messiah who would die at the hands of the pagans. On the contrary, where Jewish expectations of a Messiah did exist, they regularly possessed a dual focus. In a line of tradition stretching from David to Bar-Kochba, including the Maccabees and Herod, we find that the king would have to defeat the pagans, and that he would have to rebuild (or at least to cleanse) the Temple. The two actions would, of course, go together: as long as the pagans remained undefeated, YHWH had not returned to Zion, presumably because his house was not ready. **If a messiah was killed by the pagans, especially if he had not rebuilt the Temple or liberated Israel, that was the surest sign that he was another in the long line of false messiahs.** It is surely clear what follows. If the messiah you had been following was killed by the pagans, you were faced with a choice between two courses of action. You could give up on the whole idea of revolution and abandon the dream of liberation. Some went that route, notably, of course, the rabbinic movement as a whole after 135 AD. Or you could find yourself a new messiah, if possible from the same family as the late lamented one. Some went that route: witness the continuing movement that ran from Judas the Galilean in 6 AD to his sons or grandsons in the 50s; to another descendant, Menahem, during the war of 66-70; and to another descendant, Eleazor, who was the leader of the ill-fated Sicarii on Masada in 73.7

Regarding resurrection from the dead he says: The resurrection of the dead was thus both a symbol for the coming of the new ages, and itself, taken literally, one central element in the package: when YHWH restored the fortunes of his people, then of course Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, together with all God's people down to and including the martyrs who had died in the cause, would be reembodyed, raised to new life in God's new world. Where second-Temple Jews believed in resurrection then, that belief concerned on the one hand the reembodyment of formerly dead human beings, and on the other the inauguration of the new age, the new covenant, in which all the righteous dead would be raised simultaneously. Resurrection meant both that the dead would be alive again with new or renewed bodies and that the Age to Come had at least been inaugurated. **If therefore at any time in this period you had said to a Jew, "The resurrection has occurred!" you would have received the puzzled (or irritated) response that it obviously had not,** since the patriarchs, prophets, and martyrs were not walking around alive again, and since the restoration spoken of in Ezekiel 37 clearly had not occurred either—not to mention the great prophecies of Isaiah and the rest. And if, by way of explanation, you had said that you did not mean all that, that what you meant was that you had had a wonderful new sense of divine healing and forgiveness, or that you believed the former leader of your movement was alive in the presence of God following his shameful torture and death, **your interlocutor might have congratulated you on having such an experience, and discussed with you such a belief, but he or she would still have been puzzled as to why you would talk of "the resurrection of the dead" in referring to either of these things.** These things imply were not what "the resurrection of the dead" was about.

So regarding alternative theories of the resurrection, one is hard pressed to explain, without Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead, why the NT Church believed that the resurrection had taken place, when their description of the resurrection and its connection with the kingdom of God & their crucified Messiah stands in radical contrast to the way in which these same believers & their ancestors had understood these theologically-foundational & culturally-dominating concepts for centuries. The resurrection from the dead referred to all people or at least all the OT believers (not just one person), and it implied that the new age had dawned in which the

Messianic kingdom of God had brought to fulfillment God's promises for Israel here on earth (Daniel 7:13ff; 12:1-4; cf. Ezekiel 37). **So if, in the unlikely (if not impossible) event, there were multiple disciples who thought they "saw" Jesus in postmortem-like experiences, they might well have shared their testimony. But they would not have said He was raised from the dead,** because that was a concept which included a bodily resurrection of Jesus in which Christ remained present with them (not a "temporary" postmortem experience), along with the bodily resurrection of all believers as well as unbelievers (which clearly hadn't happened). Also, again, along with this extremely unlikely scenario of inventing such a theology on their own (sincerely or deceptively), one would still have to account for why they embraced the cross instead of a Gnostic-like theology as found in the false gospels that rose up later, and how they were willing to do so under the scandalous shame of crucifixion.

So in light of the Jewish view of the resurrection, which included the ushering in of the new age in which the kingdom of Israel was restored, how could they be preaching that the kingdom of God had come or that their crucified Messiah was Lord, when He had clearly not conquered the Romans and was not visibly reigning among them as their king? Of course it would also be completely contradictory & absurd to preach a "crucified" Messiah in the first place; the Messiah conquers; he does not get crucified. **Living this far removed from the first century context, it's hard for us to grasp these distinctions.** When we think of the Messiah (or Christ), we naturally think of the cross, forgiveness of sins & eternal life in relation to Jesus the Messiah. But the 1st Century Jews would think of a king, the conquering of their enemies & a reclaiming of the temple, and certainly not crucifixion. Likewise, when we think of the resurrection, we think of Christ rising from the dead as an event that precedes but is connected to our future resurrection at His 2nd coming. But 1st Century Jews would think of a universal resurrection and an immediate restoration of the kingdom in Israel (hence the disciples' question about when the resurrected Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel; Acts 1:6).

It is also important to recognize that the early Christians did not invent a spiritualized-reinterpretation of OT concepts like kingdom, Messiah, and resurrection. "When they spoke of a new internal or 'spiritual' reality, they used the language not of the kingdom of God, but of the new heart, the indwelling of the spirit, and so forth" (Wright; B11*). Their reinterpretation of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection was not an overly spiritualized version of these concepts. Rather, they primarily used different terms like new creation or being in Christ, while simultaneously preaching a kingdom that had already been inaugurated by a Messiah that was literally risen from the dead, and who alone holds the title of "Lord." Regarding those who try to reconcile what the NT says with the belief that Christ did not rise bodily from the dead, Wright says the following ([B11*] boldface is mine):

In particular, we have no reason to suppose that after the crucifixion of a would-be messiah anyone would suppose that he had been exalted to a place either of world rulership or divine lordship. Nobody, so far as we know, ever suggested that this was the case after the deaths of Judas the Galilean, Simon bar-Giora, or Simeon ben-Kosiba. Actually, such a suggestion would most likely have been regarded as at best ridiculous and at worst scandalous. The failure of such men to lead a *successful* messianic movement debarred them from further consideration as candidates for such a position. Even if someone had made such a suggestion, however, they would not then have gone on to say that this person had been "raised from the dead." **Belief in exaltation alone would not lead, in the world of first-century Judaism, to belief in resurrection.** If, by contrast, we suppose that the followers of a crucified would-be messiah *first* came to believe that he had been bodily raised from the dead, then we can trace a clear line by which they subsequently would have come to believe that he must be the Messiah. And if he was the Messiah, then he was also the world ruler promised in Psalm 89 and Daniel 7, and thus he was exalted over the world, and so on. All our texts suggest that this actually was the train of thought that the early Christians followed.

Therefore it's not just the rise of Christianity that must be explained (addressed below), but also how the NT Church conceived of & embraced a gospel-centered worldview of kingdom, Messiah and resurrection that was non-existent in their own theology & unheard of in the worldview of their day (while at the same time necessitating the absolute unthinkable – embracing the role of crucifixion as central to it all). When we think about what is actually taught & recorded in the NT Scriptures (in light of the 1st Century context in which Christianity arose & exploded onto the scene), and the gospel-centered nature that Christianity took upon itself (viewing kingdom, Messiah & resurrection thru the lens of the life, death and resurrection of Christ), such reflection should increase our

awareness of the credibility behind the historical accounts of the resurrection recorded in the four books of the gospel & explained throughout the NT. Wright sums all of this up well ([B11*]; boldface is mine).

If we are to think in first-century Jewish terms, it is impossible to conceive what sort of religious or spiritual experience someone could have [postmortem or whatever] that would make them say that the kingdom of God had arrived when it clearly had not, that a crucified leader was the Messiah when he obviously was not, or that the resurrection occurred last month when it obviously did not. However strong the disciples' sense may have been that Jesus had been vindicated, that they had been forgiven, or whatever, they would still not have said he had been raised from the dead.

The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection: within the NT & in light of the Rise of Early Christianity

The two main points presented above for why we should seriously consider the historicity of Christ's resurrection are significant in & of themselves. The staggering implications of embracing the cross as central to one's theology & identity, combined with the worldview-altering, gospel-centered theology of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection embraced by the NT Church, both highlight the credibility of believing in the resurrection and expose some of the weaknesses inherent within alternative viewpoints. However, these two main points also lay a foundation for our third main point, and all three of these points are interdependent themes with one another: **the historical evidence we have recorded within the NT Scriptures and viewed in light of the explosive rise of early Christianity point heavily in the direction of Christ actually rising bodily from the dead.** One could argue that 1st Century believers were willing to embrace the cross as central to their identity & theology without the revelation & power of the resurrected Christ. But this perspective seems highly influenced by a modern day domesticated view of the cross, more than one that fits within a culture dominated by the scandalous shame of crucifixion. One might argue as well that these same believers would be able & willing to formulate, preach & obey a worldview-altering, gospel-centered theology of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection, which radically contradicted their longstanding cultural traditions, nationalistic priorities & eschatological expectations, without the revelation & power of a resurrected Christ. But this perspective seems highly influenced by a modern day, oversimplified version of the gospel, more than a reasonable explanation based on a 1st Century understanding of the Jewish worldview, Israel's overall history & the apocalyptic hope of their Hebrew faith.

Then one could also argue that the significant amount of historical evidence we have for the resurrection of Christ recorded within the NT documents, along with the explosive rise of Christianity under Rome (each addressed below), can also be explained without the revelation & power of the resurrected Christ. But as we shall see, this perspective seems highly influenced by a worldview that is overly dependent upon or limited by philosophical naturalism & post-enlightenment thought, than one which is more open-minded towards the historical evaluation of divine interventions, or one which adequately takes into account the scholarly research of Christian & non-Christians alike (regarding what is actually said about the resurrection in the NT). Each one of these three points in & of themselves should cause us to pause & consider the credibility of the resurrection. When viewed collectively, however, these three points together give us compelling reasons why we should take to heart both the credibility of believing in Christ's resurrection, and of recognizing that His resurrection is indeed the history-altering event upon which Christianity truly stands (and without which its own Scriptures & history cannot sufficiently be explained or accounted for).

There are multiple factors contributing to the explosive rise of early Christianity, which are addressed below and some of which are not dependent upon divine intervention or a historical resurrection. Sometimes Christians are not aware of these factors, or do not acknowledge their impact in Christianity's history & global spread around the world today. Overemphasizing the role of the resurrection & the NT Church's devotion to Christ in explaining the rise of early Christianity, without acknowledging the many other factors involved, gives us a biased & extremely oversimplified version of Christian theology & history. However, trying to explain what is written in the NT documents & what we know about early Christian history without acknowledging the resurrection is also an oversimplified & biased view of the NT & the explosive rise of Christianity (including a failure to recognize God's sovereign reign thru & use of these other "non-spiritual" factors). Without factoring in Christ's resurrection, we are left with a gaping hole (that cannot be reasonably filled by other factors) in the foundation of our explanation for what the NT documents say, in how Christianity started & the shape it took, and in its explosive rise onto the scene

under the Roman Empire (in a culture dominated by the scandalous shame of crucifixion, and as a movement which embraced a worldview-altering gospel-centered theology, far different than what the Jews had embraced for centuries).

Multiple considerations will be presented below, seeking to show that alternative theories which deny Christ's resurrection are not adequately assessing the historical evidence we have for Christ's resurrection within the NT documents, and cannot sufficiently explain the rise of early Christianity. Before investigating this point further, let me first acknowledge that **all of us view history thru a biased lens**. I'm very grateful for the Judeo-Christian influence on our world, including how this worldview & its values have benefited our society as a whole (the belief in the equality of all humans, the importance of family & marriage as foundational to the health & survival of our culture, etc.). I'm also humbled by and thankful for Christianity's impact on our nation's history, in the formation of our constitution, the source of strength it has been to immigrants & minority groups (African American, Anglo, Asian, Latino, etc.), and its promotion of education, medical care and other socially beneficial blessings provided by the sacrificial service of Christians in our nation & throughout the world.

However, some Christians, myself included, have also viewed church & American history thru a lens that overemphasized the positive foundational role of Christianity in our world, and underemphasized some serious sins that were overlooked or perpetuated by the church along the way (e.g. the treatment of Native Americans, condoning or promoting slavery & racism, gender discrimination & abuse, nationalistic & ethnic pride, oversimplified views of illegal immigration, overreactions against anti-Christian forms of environmentalism, supporting wars based more on fear or political aspirations than the just war theory, and so forth). We need to repent of such biased perspectives of our history and continually sharpen our critiques of ourselves, including learning from those outside of our own religious groups & subcultures, all while giving thanks for the church & our country, and the tremendous good that has taken place within our nation and throughout her history, and within Christianity and throughout church history.

Many who rightly critique the church's blind spots regarding our view of history, however, are themselves operating with pre-conceived biases that limit their historical assessments of the NT's history & theology, and of early Christian history. **The dominant alternative theories to the resurrection are largely dependent upon a worldview overly influenced by philosophical naturalism**, which limits our view of truth & the study of history to the physical or natural realm, or unknowingly creates an inherent bias against the legitimacy of recognizing historical evidence for the supernatural. **These theories are also heavily influenced by post-enlightenment thought**, which, amidst the insights it gives us, overreacts against the Enlightenment's & modernism's overconfidence in our ability to know truth, especially when such certainty & convictions stand over & against competing or alternative viewpoints (as addressed in Section A above). Consequently, many in our modern culture too easily dismiss what we can learn from the historical study of divine interventions, in the cause and effect of historical events, including what is recorded in the NT Scriptures.

NT Scholar Gary Habermas has devoted his life to the study of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, dating back to the 1970's, and has contributed an enormous amount of scholarly research to this field, much of which is available on his website (B16*). Here I will briefly summarize some insights gleaned from his article addressing what he considers to be the foundational historical issue regarding the proclamation of the resurrection (B17*). In this article, he raises a question to highlight what he sees as "the single most crucial aspect of the historical question" of the resurrection: "Do the disciples' beliefs that they had witnessed resurrection appearances provide any clues as to what may really have occurred?" **Habermas lists eight primary reasons from Scripture why *contemporary scholars "widely conclude that after his death, Jesus' followers at least thought that they had seen appearances of the risen Jesus"** (*including scholars who do & do not believe in a historical resurrection; boldface is mine).

That the vast majority of scholars, in spite of extensive disagreements in other areas, recognizes that the disciples had some sort of experience is a significant starting point. How these experiences are explained is another matter. But there are some rather impressive reasons that explain such a widespread, initial conclusion. We will begin by listing eight pointers, four from Paul and four more from various other sources. **(1)** Contemporary critical scholars agree that the apostle Paul is

the primary witness to the early resurrection experiences ... **(2)** In addition to Paul's own experience, few conclusions are more widely recognized than that, in 1 Corinthians 15:3ff., Paul records an ancient oral tradition(s) ... **(3)** Paul was so careful to assure the content of his Gospel message, that he made a second trip to Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1-10) specifically to be absolutely sure that he had not been mistaken (2:2) ... As Martin Hengel notes, "Evidently the tradition of 1 Cor. 15.3 had been subjected to many tests" by Paul ... **(4)** Not only do we have Paul's account that the other major apostles confirmed his Gospel message, but he provides the reverse testimony, too. After listing Jesus' resurrection appearances, Paul tells us he also knew what the other apostles were preaching regarding Jesus' appearances, and it was the same as his own teaching on this subject (1 Cor. 15:11) ... **(5)** Critical scholars usually recognize that James, the brother of Jesus, was a rather skeptical unbeliever prior to Jesus' crucifixion (Mk. 3:21-35; Jn. 7:5). Not long afterwards, James is a leader of the Jerusalem church, where Paul finds him during his two visits (Gal. 1:18-19; 2:1-10; cf. Acts 15:13-21). In-between, the pre-Pauline statement in 1 Corinthians 15:7 states that the risen Jesus appeared to James ... **(6)** Many other early creedal texts are found throughout the New Testament. Many scholars think that the Book of Acts incorporates some of these early traditions, located in the sermons contained there ... They are generally identified by factors such as their compactness, theological simplicity, and because the structure, style, and/or diction reflect word patterns other than the author's ... **(7)** Virtually no critical scholar questions that the disciples' convictions regarding the risen Jesus caused their radical transformation, even being willing to die for their beliefs. Their change does not evidence the resurrection appearances *per se*, but it is a clear indication that the disciples at least *thought* that they had experienced the risen Jesus ... Alternatives must account for this belief ... **(8)** In the study mentioned at the outset of this essay, I found that approximately 75% of the surveyed scholars accept one or more arguments for the historicity of the empty tomb. The remaining 25% accept one or more arguments against the early church's knowledge of an empty tomb. If the majority is correct that Jesus' burial tomb was later found empty, this perhaps adds some credibility to the disciples' claim that they saw the risen Jesus. If the minority view is correct, this reason would of course not support Jesus' appearances.

Habermas then mentions three options for how the resurrection is usually explained: 1) thru natural explanations; 2) thru an agnostic appeal (we do not know what happened); and 3) thru acknowledgement that Christ actually rose from the dead (in some form). Although Habermas is a Christian and well known for his defense of a historic resurrection, he does not offer a conclusion in this particular article. Instead, he urges the reader to consider whether "the disciples' beliefs that they had experienced resurrection appearances provide any clues as to what caused these convictions." He also encourages readers to reflect deeply upon the clues we have from the beliefs of the disciples and draw our own conclusions. However, here I want to mention two insights from his article. First, he challenges the "philosophical misgivings" about the historical evidence of the resurrection, which are "aimed at miracles in general" (held by various people, such as "naturalists or more deistic thinkers" who do not believe miracles occur). This point is further expounded upon in the quotes by N.T. Wright and D.A. Carson listed below. Second, the **widespread agreement among scholars, that the disciples thought they saw Jesus, gives added weight to the credibility of at least considering a historic resurrection of Christ.** A summary is listed here (see his article for a detailed account (B17*)).

The substantially unanimous verdict of contemporary critical scholars is that Jesus' disciples at least believed that Jesus was alive, resurrected from the dead. Reginald Fuller refers to the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection as "one of the indisputable facts of history." Upon what was their claim based? Fuller continues that it is clear that the disciples had real experiences, characterized as appearances or visions of the risen Jesus. Whether these are explained naturally or supernaturally, this experience "is a fact upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree."^[1] ... Fuller adds that "[e]ven the most skeptical historian" must do one more thing: "postulate some other event" that is not the disciples' faith, but the reason for their faith, in order to account for their experiences. Of course, both natural and supernatural options have been proposed.^[32] ... Helmut Koester points out that, "We are on much firmer ground with respect to the appearances of the risen Jesus and their effect." Jesus' appearances "cannot very well be questioned."^[33] Bart Ehrman declares: "we can say with complete certainty that some of his disciples at some later time insisted that . . . he soon appeared to them, convincing them that he had been raised from the dead."^[34] Ehrman adds: "Historians, of course, have no difficulty whatsoever speaking about the belief in Jesus' resurrection, since this is a matter of public record."^[35] Holtz thinks that the disciples' "experience of resurrection . . . is in fact an undeniable historical event."^[36]

With this scholarly consensus in mind, from both Christian & non-Christian scholars (that the disciples at least thought they saw Jesus alive after His crucifixion), **it is then wise to ask the following three interrelated questions:** 1) are we taking seriously the possibility of divine interventions in human history; 2) do we recognize our ability to historically investigate such considerations regarding divine intervention; and 3) does not a denial of the legitimacy of such historical investigation rise out of, & contribute towards, our preconceived biases & willingness to dismiss

the historical evidence of Christ's resurrection? In chapter one of his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, N.T. Wright effectively challenges the notion that the resurrection of Christ is something that cannot be investigated historically (proven, no; historically investigated, yes). He gives an enlightening summary & critique about five different senses regarding how history is understood & used in the popular-scholarly critiques of the resurrection. In so doing, **he exposes the misleading scholarly biases present in our modern, post-enlightenment dominated views of a historical resurrection.** Here's a brief summary (see chapter one for his full account; boldface is mine).

'History' and its cognates have been used, within debates about Jesus and the resurrection, in at least five significantly different ways. **First**, there is history as *event* ... in this sense, it happened, whether or not we can know or prove that it happened ... **Second** there is history as *significant event* ... 'a historic event' ... one whose occurrence carried momentous consequences ... **Third**, there is history as *provable event* ... we can demonstrate that it happened ... This is somewhat more controversial. To say 'x may have happened, but we can't prove it, so it isn't really *historical*' may not be self-contradictory, but is clearly operating with a more restricted sense of 'history' than some of the others. **Fourth** ... there is history as *writing-about-events-in-the-past* ... it was written about, or perhaps could in principle have been written about ... A variant on this ... is *oral history*; at a time when many regarded the spoken word as carrying more authority than the written, history as *speaking-about-events-in-the-past* is not to be sneezed at ... **Fifth** and finally, a combination of (3) and (4) is often found precisely in discussions of Jesus: history as *what modern historians can say* about a topic. By 'modern' I mean 'post-Enlightenment', the period in which people have imagined some kind of analogy, even correlation, between history and the hard sciences. **In this sense, 'historical' means not only that which can be demonstrated and written, but that which can be demonstrated and written within the post-Enlightenment worldview.** This is what people have often had in mind when they have rejected 'the historical Jesus' (Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 13).

Neither Lüdemann's alternative scenario of Easter, in which Peter and Paul experience fantasies brought on by grief and guilt respectively, nor Crossan's, in which a group of scribal Christians begin, years after the crucifixion, to study the scriptures and to speculate about Jesus' fate, is based on any evidence whatsoever. Those who feel the force of Marxsen's doubts over evidence for Jesus' resurrection ought to be even more anxious about these reconstructions. In particular, the common tradition-historical scenarios owe a good deal more to nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories about how early Christians 'must' have preached and lived than to any sustained attempt to reconstruct the world views and mindsets of actual communities in the first century. **The suggestions on offer as to what the evangelists, their sources and earlier redactors or handers-on of tradition were wanting to convey to their communities are usually remarkably trite and have more in common with the piety of post-reformation (and often post-Enlightenment) Europe than with early Judaism or Christianity.** When all is said and done, the historian is still bound to address the question: how did Christianity actually start, and why did it take the shape it did? Despite their ingenuity, the very different solutions of Lüdemann and Crossan are not, as we shall see, capable of answering that question in terms which make sense within actual first-century history. This objection to the study of Easter as a historical phenomenon, like the first two, will not hold water. Those who say the target cannot be seen do not seem to be looking in the right direction (20).

D.A. Carson offers a similar critique when addressing the historical nature of the gospel in Paul's teachings found in 1 Corinthians 15 (B15*), including the historical account of the resurrection of Christ. This is a passage even non-Christian scholars acknowledge is referencing an early creed of the church (underlining & boldface are mine).

The gospel is historical. Here four things must be said. First, 1 Corinthians 15 specifies both Jesus' burial and his resurrection. The burial testifies to Jesus' death, since (normally!) we bury only those who have died; the appearances testify to Jesus' resurrection. Second, the manner by which we have access to the historical events of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, is exactly the same as that by which we have access to almost any historical event: through the witness and remains of those who were there, by means of the records they left behind. Third, we must see that, unlike other religions, the central Christian claims are irreducibly historical ... we are not saved by theological ideas about Christ; we are saved by Christ himself. The Christ who saves us is certainly characterized by the theological realities embraced by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but this Christ is extra-textual; he is the historical God-man to whom the text bears witness. Fourth, we must face the fact that in contemporary discussion the word "historical" is sometimes invested with a number of slippery assumptions. **For some who are heavily invested in philosophical naturalism, the word "historical" can be applied only to those events that have causes and effects entirely located in the ordinary or "natural" or time-based stream of sequence of events.** If that is the definition of "historical," then Jesus' resurrection was not historical, for such a definition excludes the miraculous, the spectacular intervention of the power of God. **But it is far better to think that "historical" rightly refers to events that take place within the continuum of space and time, regardless of whether God has brought about those events by ordinary causes, or by a supernatural explosion of power.** We insist that in this sense, the resurrection is historical: it takes place in history, even if it was caused by God's spectacular power when he raised the

man Christ Jesus from the dead, giving him a resurrection body that had genuine continuity with the body that went into the tomb. This resurrection body could be seen, touched, handled; it could eat ordinary food. Nevertheless, it is a body that could suddenly appear in a locked room, a body that Paul finds hard to describe, ultimately calling it a spiritual body or a heavenly body (1 Cor 15:35-44). And that body was raised from the tomb by the spectacular, supernatural, power of God—operating in history.

Now, with this historical assessment of the internal evidence for the resurrection within the NT Scriptures in mind, **we must also consider the multiple factors involved in the explosive rise of early Christianity.** This is a complicated topic that historians & scholars rightly point out includes numerous social & religious factors, which are not solely dependent on divine power or intervention. They are also not easily evaluated and are understandably debated. Before addressing the foundational role of the resurrection in Christianity's history, I will give two summaries that highlight the multiple factors involved, from both a non-Christian as well as a Christian point of view. The first summary is based on insights gleaned from a book entitled *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World*, written by Bart Ehrman (religious studies professor). Ehrman is a former evangelical who converted to agnosticism and who does not affirm a historical resurrection of Christ from the dead. Evangelical Scholar Michael Kruger, who is a former student of Ehrman's, & who strongly disagrees with his theology, nevertheless recommends Ehrman's book. He calls it "an intriguing, helpful, and well-balanced volume exploring the development, and eventual dominance, of early Christianity" (B18*). Here are some excerpts from Kruger's review of Ehrman's insightful book, which sheds some light on the multiple factors involved.

Ehrman argues that the emergence of Christianity as the victor over pagan religions in the ancient world was "the single greatest cultural transformation our world has ever seen" (4). And, consequently, there are few historical questions more important (and interesting) than how and why that happened. After all, argues Ehrman, how did a small band of uneducated Galilean disciples lead a religious revolution that eventually conquered the world? How does a religion go from a handful of people to 30 million people in just 300 years? The book answers these sorts of questions. Central to Ehrman's argument is that Constantine's conversion (which he explores in chapter 1) wasn't the decisive factor in the triumph of Christianity, as is so often supposed. A much more important conversion happened centuries earlier: the apostle Paul. In chapter 2, Ehrman argues that Paul was foundational to the eventual triumph of Christianity because he advocated for a "salvation that was not tied to explicit Jewish identity" (72). This, in turn, opened the doors wide to the conversion of the Gentile pagan world.

Before exploring *why* the pagan world began to convert to Christianity, Ehrman devotes chapter 3 to the question of what pagan "religions" were like. Although they were all different, he suggests they shared the following characteristics, each of which is nearly the opposite of Christianity: (a) they worshiped many gods instead of one; (b) they were more concerned with ritual acts than with doctrine or ethics; (c) they focused on this life instead of the afterlife; (d) they were local instead of global; and (e) they operated on the basis of custom instead of books. So how did early Christians go about converting people out of this pagan background? According to Ehrman in chapter 4, it's because Christianity was both *missionary* and *exclusive*. Ehrman states, "One reason Christianity grows is that it is the only religion like this: the others are not missionary and they are not exclusive. These two features make Christianity unlike anything else on offer" (120).

The missionary commitment of early Christians was relatively unheard of in other religious systems. The reason isn't difficult to find: other religions didn't think people were "lost" if they didn't commit to their particular deity. Indeed, pagan religions didn't see themselves in competition with other religions. If people chose to worship a particular god, nothing prevented them from also worshiping another god. So pagans lacked a motive to try to "convert" someone to their own religion. The combination of Christianity's missionary heart and exclusive worship led to its eventual triumph. Christianity, on the other hand, affirmed that only Jesus is the true God and that without him people face eternal judgment. Thus, Christians were motivated out of love for their fellow man to reach out to the world around them. And when people converted, they were told they had to give up their pagan past entirely and now give full and exclusive devotion to Christ. So, Ehrman argues, the combination of Christianity's missionary heart and exclusive worship led to its eventual triumph.

Here is a second summary by Scott Manetsch (an evangelical church historian). In his lecture "Factors Advantageous: For the Explosive Rise of Early Christianity" he gives an excellent summary of the many factors involved. He also emphasizes God's sovereign timing & reign over when Christ came to earth and how the church grew, quoting Paul's words, ironically (& prophetically) written before the explosive growth of the church had taken place: "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son" (Galatians 4:4). Manetsch also mentions

some implications for early Christianity's explosive rise with each of the points listed, which are based on his evangelical & scholarly perspective (this is my summary adapted from his outline, using many of his own words).

1st, Political Factors (Pax Romana): The Empire was at peace and had a structured legal justice system; Young religious groups could flourish; Rome brought prosperity and structure; and the mindset of the days was that "wars are legendary things of the past." **Implications:** church growth & effectiveness can be hindered during times of war/civil war, and Christianity grew in part due to the relative peace & order under Rome's reign.

2nd, Communication Factors: Trade routes were open to the Mediterranean, which provided freely flowing travel & Romans built roads unifying the Empire. **Implications:** this promoted the ability of missionaries to travel & enhanced inter-church communication.

3rd, Linguistic Factors: Greek was the common language of intellectuals & commerce; the Judicial system was in Latin; & about 70 million people lived in the Empire during the 1st Century (about 5 million were citizens). **Implications:** early Christians could communicate the gospel in Greek [and within a worldview that understood biblical issues of justice].

4th, the Jewish Diaspora: In the 1st Century there were possibly about 5 to 6 million Jews living in & dispersed throughout the Empire (Rome/Asia), with perhaps 1 million in Palestine; The Jews were thoroughly Hellenized (influenced by Greek culture); They used the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the OT, and many Jews could no longer read Hebrew; They worshipped in the Synagogues they erected in the different places they settled; They welcomed teachers from Jerusalem to teach; They promoted Paul's missionary work; Judaism was legal in the Roman Empire; Rome allowed religious expression as long as people would worship the emperor & the Jews were given permission not to worship the emperor (Rome was well acquainted with the Jews willingness to fight). **Implications:** Judaism had laid a foundation for the gospel by exposing the Greco-Roman world to the OT Scriptures, and they provided a protective shade for Christianity (ironically this protective shade was provided by the very ones who were also the first persecutors of Christianity – the Jews).

5th Social Factors: Rome was notorious for gross immorality (violent crimes, sex, prostitution, gladiators, barbarity; Tacitus said "Rome is common receptacle of all that is else where vile"). **Implications:** Gross immorality instills spiritual hunger, people were interested in the after life, and Christianity's prophetic stand was attractive.

All of these factors listed above should be considered when evaluating how & why early Christianity grew so fast in the Greco-Roman World, during the first few centuries of church history. However, without acknowledging the role of the resurrection in starting the Christian movement and in how it shaped the theology & mission of the NT Church, we are left with a gaping hole in the foundation of our explanations that these other factors cannot fill. The multiple factors listed above are foundational to Christianity's growth, but they cannot in & of themselves adequately replace the role of the resurrection regarding the two main points mentioned earlier (and those factors should also be viewed in light of God's sovereign timing & reign over it all, as Manetsch points out). These two points are not only evidence for the resurrection, they are also foundational aspects of Christianity's explosive growth. Let me briefly summarize each point while adding a word about their respective roles in Christianity's explosive growth. First, without the revelation & power of the resurrected Christ, we are hard pressed to explain how the NT Church would be willing to embrace the cross as central to her theology & identity while living under the scandalous shame of crucifixion. Yet, it was her exclusive devotion to Jesus of Nazareth as her Christ (& Lord) that played a foundational role in Christianity's explosive growth. Therefore, without believers being supernaturally enlightened & empowered by the resurrected Christ to embrace the cross, we cannot adequately account for Christianity's exclusive devotion to Jesus of Nazareth, which empowered her explosive growth throughout the Roman Empire. **Yes, Christianity's exclusive devotion to Christ perpetuated her growth, but how & why were these Christians in the 1st Century Greco-Roman world exclusively devoted to a crucified Messiah in the first place?**

Second, without the revelation & power of the resurrected Christ, we are hard pressed to explain how & why the NT Church embraced a gospel-centered worldview & theology that was so radically counter-cultural to that which they had cherished for centuries. Yet, her missionary zeal that empowered Christianity's explosive rise over the next few centuries was not only fueled by a passion to reach lost people headed for hell, but also by an unshakeable confidence that the kingdom of God had already been inaugurated, thru a crucified Messiah who had been seen bodily resurrected from the dead by hundreds of His disciples. Therefore, without the NT Church being

supernaturally enlightened & empowered by the resurrected Christ to embrace this worldview-altering theology of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection, we cannot adequately explain this missionary zeal which empowered Christianity's explosive rise in early church history. **Yes, Christianity's evangelistic drive empowered her explosive growth, but how can we explain this zeal when it was directly dependent upon the early Christians believing that the kingdom of God had come & that the resurrection from the dead had taken place** (even though the kingdom had not been restored to Israel, her crucified Messiah had failed to reclaim or rebuild the temple, conquer His enemies, & was no longer present with them, and the OT saints still lied in their graves)? Once again, as Wright rightly concludes, "The historian is therefore bound to seek an explanation not only as to why early Christianity began in the first place, but also as to why it took the shape it did" (B11*).

However, Jesus Christ was indeed alive and was scene bodily resurrected from the dead. He gave His disciples this Christ-centered revelation, and empowered them to embrace & proclaim this message with an eschatological hope grounded in an inaugurated version of the kingdom (Acts 1-2; 9). This all happened in a world in which the horror & shame of crucifixion dominated the landscape, under an empire that would not tolerate anyone other than Caesar being proclaimed as lord, and with a people whose view of the kingdom, their Messiah and "resurrection from the dead" had been fundamentally altered, all because this crucified Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead. **For those of us who are Christians, we would do well at this point to consider whether or not our passions & lifestyles adequately reflect our belief that Christ is risen from the dead, and to what degree we are following in the footsteps of the NT Church.** This includes her humble embracing of the cross as her identity, her unshakeable confidence in an inaugurated & advancing kingdom she could not see (& which did not deliver her from the earthly powers of Rome), her following a crucified Messiah who "failed" to reclaim the temple & was no longer bodily present with them, and whose devotion to reaching the lost world around her brought about "the single greatest cultural transformation our world has ever seen" (B18*). To what degree is Ehrman's assessment of the early church true for you & me? "Christians were motivated out of love for their fellow man to reach out to the world around them. And when people converted, they were told they had to give up their pagan past entirely and now give full and exclusive devotion to Christ. So, Ehrman argues, the combination of Christianity's missionary heart and exclusive worship led to its eventual triumph" (B18*).

In conclusion, we have seen three overarching & interrelated points that should be weighed heavily when considering Christ's resurrection as a historical event: 1) the NT Church's ability to understand & embrace the scandalous shame of the cross as central to her theology & identity as a people (in the days when crucifixion dominated the landscape) is heavily dependent upon Jesus of Nazareth rising from the dead; 2) the NT Church's gospel-centered worldview & theology of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection (in contrast to the long-standing Jewish interpretation of, & passions regarding, these concepts), is heavily dependent upon these truths being revealed by the risen Christ, who empowered His people for bold witness & gave them eschatological hope (even though Rome still reigned & the temple was not reclaimed); and 3) the evidence within the NT Scriptures themselves, along with a historical assessment of Christianity's beginnings, highlight Christ's bodily resurrection as one (but not the only) foundational factor behind the explosive rise of Christianity in the 1st Century Greco-Roman world (in contrast to alternative theories that are overly dependent on philosophical naturalism & post enlightenment thought, and are unfairly skeptical concerning the existence of divine intervention in history, our ability to historically investigate the supernatural, and our ability to know truth, especially when it is exalted over & above other points of view).

Therefore, from a cultural, theological & historical point of view, it is my conviction that the evidence we have from the NT Scriptures, understood in connection with the shape Christianity took & the historical account we have of its rise out of Judaism within the Greco Roman world of the 1st Century, leans heavily in favor of affirming Christ's historical & bodily resurrection from the dead. **Consequently, alternative theories, including a denial that we can know what actually happened, reveal a perspective overly dependent upon & influenced by a modern day "domesticated" view of the cross, an oversimplified view of the gospel that is too small, and an overly skeptical view of the historical & scholarly evidence we have for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** These alternative perspectives stand over & against the 1st Century context of the NT church, a rich theological understanding of the gospel, and an objective openness to seriously acknowledge the possibility of divine interventions in our study of

Christianity & human history. When taking these points to heart, we should see or at least be willing to consider the following: regarding this well-documented story of the resurrection (that led to the centrality of the cross within the NT Church's theology & identity, a gospel-centered theology of kingdom, Messiah & resurrection, and the explosive rise of early Christianity), **alternative theories are found to be historically much less likely than the view that embraces a historic resurrection of Christ, as recorded and proclaimed in the gospel.**

In light of the summary listed in the Sections A & B above, regarding both the prophetic-truth of the gospel amidst our ever-changing pluralistic culture, and the credibility of the resurrection of Christ, may we all be inspired to consider afresh what this risen-reigning Christ has to say and the world-view altering, life-transforming revelation His gospel brings to those willing to believe & obey. If you are not a Christian but have been sensing the Spirit of God revealing Himself to you & drawing you into a relationship with Jesus, and if you are at a point in which you are ready to profess your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior, listed below is a suggested prayer which you can use to guide you in taking this step of saving faith in Christ (or to guide you in thinking more about what all of this means). If you do receive Christ by faith, tell someone, and then find a loving, gospel preaching, Bible believing & God-glorifying church, where you can grow in your faith and in fellowship & service with other Christians. Thanks for considering these thoughts, and regardless of your view of truth or your spiritual beliefs, feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss any of these topics further.

Father God in heaven, I believe You created me in Your image for Your glory, and that You love me. I believe You are the faithful covenant-keeping God who will fulfill all of Your promises through Your Son, Israel's Messiah, our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ. I believe that You are the one true, holy & righteous triune God (one God who is three persons; Father, Son, & Holy Spirit), who judges sin and delights in redeeming sinners. I believe You sent Your Son Jesus Christ into this world, that His kingdom is present now & going forth in power to the ends of the earth, and that He will return to judge the living & the dead, and usher in the fullness of His kingdom here on earth. I confess that I am a sinner who is alienated from You, who has fallen short of living a God-glorifying life, who deserves judgment in hell, and who cannot rescue or free myself from the penalty of sin or its power. I ask You to reconcile me with Yourself and forgive my all of my sins; for all the times I have lived in unbelief & rejected You, and loved myself, other people or the things of this world more than You, and for the times I have dishonored and not trusted You. Please forgive all of the evil deeds I have ever thought or done, or the good works I have left undone, and all the times I have not followed You by faith, and for the ways I have sinned against others. I believe Jesus Christ lived a righteous, sinless life, willingly laid down His life and died on the cross for our sins, and rose from the dead to offer us eternal life, and reigns now at Your right hand as our High Priest who intercedes for us. And now, by faith, I receive You Jesus Christ, as my Lord & Savior, and ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit who You sent, with Your love & power to live a holy, Christian life, with the joy of being adopted into Your family as Your precious child. Father, may You preserve me in the faith to remain steadfast, in Christ, thru the trials & persecutions of this life. May You fill me with Your peace & joy, and guide & heal me as I seek reconciliation with those I've wounded & sinned against or those who have sinned against & wounded me, while bearing witness to Your glorious Name. I ask you to protect me from the power & deception of Satan, the dangers of this world, the sinful intents of humanity, & my own sinful nature, and to establish me in the fellowship of Christ's church & grow me in my Christian faith & in loving others unto Your eternal glory, until I die or King Jesus returns. In Christ's name, Amen.

Romans 15:5-7, 13

⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God ... ¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Footnotes

Our Ever-Changing Pluralistic Culture (Section A)

A1* – “The Underlying Questions Behind Our Faith-based Questions” – interview with Ravi Zacharias (video).

A2 – **Influential Social, Historical & Religious Factors & Events from the 20th & 21st Centuries** (a personal reflection).

Here’s a list of various factors & events that have impacted our worldviews, perspectives, passions & beliefs, including our belief in human progress or lack thereof, and the grand meta-narrative of our purpose in life, our nation’s role in the world, and topics related to God & truth: 1) Our overall parental & family experiences (including the role of the extended family); 2) a change from a modernist to a postmodern or late-modern worldview (while “self” remains largely at the center of both perspectives); 3) the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression, the urbanization of America & the declining populations of small towns; 4) poverty, gambling, the recent housing market crash, the digital age & globalization; 5) WWII, the Vietnam War, the attack on 9/11, the Iraqi War, the war on terror & Islamic extremists; 6) ongoing immigration, the Great Migration (of African Americans out of the rural South), & increased ethnic diversity overall; 7) racism & civil rights, sexism & gender equality (including black lives matter & the me-too movements, and the recent & numerous revelations of sexual harassment & abuse scandals); 8) increased inner-city violence, gangs, & massive incarceration of African American males; 9) increased divisiveness & hostility amidst politics, tribalism & antifa movements, and an increasingly violent culture overall (& the role guns do or do not play in this problem); 10) a changing church culture (e.g. the fundamentalist-modernist split, the rise of evangelical churches & theological institutions, the decline of mainline Protestant denominations, the impact of liberal-modern scholarship, the rise of mega churches & para-church ministries, evangelical political engagement, church growth among immigrants & ethnic minorities, changes in missiology & missions overall, and scandals among televangelists, prosperity preachers, celebrity pastors & within the Roman Catholic Church); 11) the changing manifestations of the secularization of our culture amidst an increase in pluralism & religious diversity; 12) advances in, & the influence of, medicine & modern science; 13) the legalization of abortion; 14) radical changes in sexual ethics & increased sexual immorality (including the acceptance of & addiction to pornography and the hook-up culture); 15) the redefinition of marriage & gender identity; 16) an increase in co-habitation before marriage, premarital pregnancies, single parent families, domestic violence & divorce; 17) epidemic levels of drug & alcohol addictions, depression & suicides; 18) a growing elderly population; 19) increased recognition of special needs persons & human trafficking; and 20) the overall impact of public schools, a growing home school movement, higher education (largely liberal colleges & universities & the growing cost of it), the arts, music, sports, Hollywood, TV, the mainstream liberal media, conservative talk radio, 24 hour cable news & talk shows, the internet, gaming, social media, and multiple other factors that could be mentioned.

A3* – “Postmodernism and Its Critics” by Daniel Salberg, Robert Stewart, Karla Wesley & Shannon Weiss (University of Alabama).

A4* – “Postmodern to Post-Postmodern: The Po-mo Page” by Martin Irvine (Communication, Culture & Technology Program, Georgetown University).

A5* – “The Resurrection and the Postmodern Dilemma” by N.T. Wright.

(Originally published in *Sewanee Theological Review* 41.2, 1998). Here Wright offers some insightful analysis of where things were and where they were heading at that time, which he rightly perceived (selected excerpts below; underlining is mine).

First, knowledge and truth. Where modernism thought it could know things objectively about the world, postmodernism has reminded us that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge. Everybody has a point of view, and that point of view distorts. Everybody describes things the way that suits them. There is no such thing as objective truth. Likewise, there are no such things as objective values, only preferences. I heard somebody say at a meeting in 1996, “Today, attitudes are more important than facts—and we can document that!” That statement trembles on the brink between modernity and postmodernity. The cultural symbols that encapsulate this revolution are the personal stereo and the virtual-reality screen; everyone creates their own private world.

Second, the self. Modernity vaunted the great lonely individual, the all-powerful “I,” symbolised perfectly in Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* and in the proud claim, “I am the master of my fate. . . the captain of my soul.”¹ But postmodernity has deconstructed the self, the “I.” The “I” now may be just a floating signifier, a temporary and accidental meeting place of conflicting forces and impulses. Just as reality collapses inward upon the knower, the knower deconstructs itself.

Third, the story. Modernity implied a narrative about the way the world was. It was essentially an eschatological story. World history had been steadily moving toward, or at least eagerly awaiting, the point at which the industrial revolution and the philosophical enlightenment would burst upon the world bringing a new era of blessing for all. This huge overarching story—such overarching stories are known in this postmodernist world as metanarratives—now has been conclusively shown to be an oppressive, imperialist, and self-serving construct. It has brought untold misery to millions in the industrialized West, and to billions in the rest of the world, where cheap labor and raw materials have been ruthlessly exploited. It is a story that serves the interest of Western industrial capitalism. Modernity stands condemned of building a new tower of Babel. Postmodernity has gone on to claim, primarily with this great metanarrative as the example, that all metanarratives are suspect. They are all power games.

A6* – “The Postmodernism that Refuses to Die” by D.A. Carson (Themelios 43:1 [2018]: 1-3; selected excerpts below).

Recently, Christian students at a fine West Coast university engaged in a thoughtful survey of their fellow students, focusing on what they thought about religion in general and Christianity in particular. Some of the questions focused on the afterlife: e.g., What would it take to know that there is a new heaven and a new earth to be gained? A not uncommon answer was, “How can you claim to know anything at all?” Or again, when asked how they understood the exclusive truth claims of Christianity (e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12), most responses fell into one of two pools: (1) “Christians are so bigoted. We all have our own distinctive approaches to spirituality. Christians don’t have the right to rule out of camp the claims of other religions.” Or: (2) “Deep down, all religions are really saying the same thing anyway, so why should one view others as distinctively different or in some way inferior? Of course, the adoption of such stances should not be traced exclusively to the impact of postmodernism. Other competing streams have brought to bear important influences: contemporary understanding of what “faith” means, the shifting tides of “tolerance,” and the broader cultural developments that some wag has identified as “a thin crust of vehement hostility masking a vast sea of apathy.” Yet we would be avoiding the obvious if we did not sniff out something of the impact of postmodernism on contemporary epistemologies.

A7* – “Late Modern or Post-Modern” by Tim Keller (The Gospel Coalition).

A8* – Selected Articles on Superheroes: "The Death of Superman: Superheroes in Contemporary Hollywood" by Corey Shaw; "From Superman to Superbland: The Man of Steel’s Popular Decline Among Postmodern Youth" by Timothy Aaron Pevey; "'Wonder Woman': A Peculiar & Unexpected Heroine" by Gina Dalfonzo; "How the Black Panther has Inspired Me since I was Nine Years Old" by Chris Williamson; "'Black Panther' and the Longing for Home" by Kyle Mann.

A9* – “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences” by Lawrence S. Mayer & Paul R. McHugh, M.D. (John’s Hopkins University).

A10* – “Empowering Parents of Gender Discordant and Same-Sex Attracted Children” by Michelle Cretella. (Principal author of the article; American College of Pediatricians).

A11* - The FAQs: Pornography as a Public Health Crisis” by Joe Carter.

A12* *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* by D.A. Carson (selected excerpts below).

The Bible’s constant references to truth can scarcely be blamed on the absolutizings of some modernists. If the emerging church movement, or conversation, wishes to remain faithful to Scripture, it must speak of truth and our ability to know it as sweepingly and confidently as Scripture does. If it does not, its underlying assumptions about epistemology remain fundamentally flawed. Equally, if Christians face nonbelievers who are hard postmodernists, part of a faithful Christian witness insists that there *are* truths to be believed and obeyed (193).

When we reflect on how many of the emerging church leaders warn *against* using truth categories, can we help but sense the huge gap between their position and that of Jesus? The reasons why the truth was not acceptable to Jesus’ hearers may not be exactly the same as the reasons why the truth is not acceptable to some contemporaries. Nevertheless, if we Christians are to take our cue from Scripture, this does not mean that we *stop* appealing to the truth, but that we recognize that sometimes the truth itself is what will actually repel people (213).

A good deal of the discussion in this book could be recast as a debate between the claims of truth and the claims of experience. From the side of the emerging church movement, traditional evangelicalism appears to be hard-edged and inflexible because it constantly thinks in truth-categories and does not perceive the legitimate place of experience – not least the fact that the personal experience of the knower plays a part in what he or she thinks is the truth. From the perspective of the traditional Christian, the emergent Christian may appear to be so committed to new experiences and subjective evaluations that the truth can easily be left behind. Certainly some kinds of appeal to experience lend themselves to distorting the truth. Many revivals, genuine movements of God, end in disarray because Christians begin to pant after the experiences associated with them rather than the gospel and the Christ of the gospel that alone anchor them. Even the most sympathetic observer of the Welsh Revival of 1904-5 recognizes with regret the sad way it staggered to a close however glorious its beginning. Still, we need to be careful. The Bible itself appeals to experience in various ways ... [Paul] prays that believers might have the power to grasp the limitless dimensions of the love of God, without which there is no maturity – and what he has in mind is certainly more than a merely intellectual apprehension of the doctrinal formulation of the love of God (Ephesians 3:16-19). And what shall we say of the Psalms, with their kaleidoscopic reflections of the full range of human experience, including hope, despair, fear of death, friendship, adoration, love indignation, betrayal, and wonder? Of course, truth and experience do not have exactly the same sort of footing. Truth itself, *rightly understood*, may correct experience, but not the other way around. On the other hand, experience may prompt us to revise our previous understanding of the truth. Truth in the Bible is often propositional (though it is often more than that), but mere knowledge of merely propositional truth does not necessarily save us: just ask the Devil himself. Both truth and experience, wrongly functioning in our lives, can be corrupting; our memories of our experiences may easily become idolatrous, making it necessary to turn our backs

on some of these memories (Philippians 3:13-14), and knowledge may become that which puffs up, while love builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1) (218-19).

A13* – “**A Secular Age**” by David Trujillo, Tom Waltz & Joey Woestman.
(A Discipleship Research Project, Faith Church, Indianapolis, 2018; www.faithchurchindy.com).

A14* – “**Discipleship in a Secular Age**” by David Trujillo, Tom Waltz & Joey Woestman.
(A Discipleship Research Project, Faith Church, Indianapolis, 2018; www.faithchurchindy.com).

A15* – “**Shame, Fear, Guilt**” by Tim Challes (challies.com).

A16* – “**The Threat of Tribalism**” by Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld (*The Atlantic*; October 2018).

A17* – “**3 Ways Our Culture Is Different from Every Other Culture in History**” by Gavin Ortlund (The Gospel Coalition).

A18* – “**The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About Antifa**” by Joe Carter.

A19* – “**Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy**” by Stephen McGlinchey (E-International Relations).

A20* – “**The Gospel of the Kingdom & the 2016 Presidential Election**” by Marcus Johnson.
(Based on a sermon preached in October 2016, at Lake Region Bible Church, Round Lake, IL).

A21 – *If Christ is the Answer, What are the Questions* by Tom Skinner (selected excerpts below).

Regarding “The Church as the New Community” (49-50) – *What is your attitude toward the Church, present and past?* My past attitude was that the Church is an ecclesiastical system, nothing more than a social club that meets on Sunday morning, that it is a reflection of the society by which it was instituted to give theological credence to everything performed politically and economically. Now, my attitude towards the institutional church has not change too much from that. Yet I do have a new attitude since becoming a Christian; I understand better what Jesus Christ had in mind for the Church. The word “church” is taken from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “called-out people.” The Church is to be a lived model on earth of what is happening in heaven. The Church is made of people who are committed to Jesus Christ living in fellowship with each other, in community with each other, to be vehicles through whom Jesus Christ expresses Himself. So if the world ever wants to know what is going on in heaven, all they have to do is check with us. When – God’s people called the Church – should be able to stand up and say, “Love is practiced here.” Not theorized here, not preached here, but practiced here. When the rest of the earth’s disenfranchised oppressed stand up and ask, “Where is justice?” the “new community” should be able to stand up and say, “Over here justice is practiced among us.” It was never God’s intention that the Church becomes an institution. It was never God’s intention that the Church be a rally or a social club or a political entity. The Church is to be a community of people living in relationship with each other, and that relationship is so intense it is unto death. So my attitude now is that I am both critical and excited by the Church because I’m a Churchman. I’m a product of the Church. It is through the Church that I’ve come to know Christ. I’m an evangelist, and as an evangelist I know that evangelism begins and ends with the Church; but at the same time my commitment to the Church necessitates my criticizing it and calling it to repentance and calling it back to being a New Testament community rather than the social institution it has become in many places. I thank God there are some notable exceptions throughout the country of people who are seeking to be New Testament churches.

A22* – “**Evangelical History in Black & White**” by Douglas A. Sweeney.

A23* – **Fullydeconverted.com** by Arael Avinu (atheist).

See his interview on YouTube entitled – “Michael Jones of Inspiring Philosophy” by Fully DE/converted – (also the footnote below).

A24* – **InspiringPhilosophy.org** by Michael Jones (Christian Apologist).

This is an audiovisual apologetics website which provides numerous resources related to the Bible, philosophy & science. A few of his videos are available on our Apologetics webpage. Regarding his videos on the Bible, he has done an outstanding job putting difficult-to-understand concepts together in relatively brief & understandable ways, relying heavily on some evangelical Bible Scholars I respect. Note: I do not endorse all of his perspectives, and am referencing only his videos on the Bible, not philosophy or science. In his interview with atheist Arael Avinu mentioned above (A23*), Michael seems to overemphasize his belief in Christ being dependent upon what he has found to be true, based on the evidence we have, at the expense of under-emphasizing the role of God’s self-revelation in Christ & our need to put our faith in Him. However, his emphasis on his own investigation of the truth (and lack of emphasizing God’s self-revelation) might be based on the focus of the specific topics being addressed in that interview. Overall, I appreciate the videos he has put together on Christianity & the Bible, and agree with the Statement of Faith on his website.

A25* – “Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism and Forgotten Missiological Lessons” by Michael T. Cooper (see the quote below).

Today, as western missions continues to dominate the world-wide missionary effort (Jaffarian, 2002) and is burdened with guilt related to colonialism (Sanneh, 1995), it is this missiologist’s contention that we have not fully learned from our past. In fact, under the guise of globalism, a new form of colonialism has emerged and threatens to confuse the notion of bringing Christ to the nations with bringing Him to the nations in western garb. This paper will discuss neo-colonialism by locating it within the context of mission history and forgotten missiological lessons. Then, it will offer suggestion in order to guard against repeating history.

A26 – “Non-Foundational Epistemologies and the Truth of Scripture” by R. Scott Smith. (Chapter 26 in *The Enduring Authority of the Scriptures*, D.A. Carson, Editor). The following excerpts are taken from Smith’s footnotes (838-39).

30. To require that our beliefs be “bomb proof” in order to count as knowledge is *extremely* unrealistic; to hold this requirement plays right into skeptics’ hands. A skeptic could always reply, “But isn’t it just *possible* [no matter how unlikely] that you *could* be mistaken?” If we are honest with ourselves, we most likely should answer “yes.” Does this mean the skeptic wins the argument? If we assert that we know that we aren’t a brain in a vat because we know we ate breakfast this morning, the skeptic can demand a criterion: “But, how do you know that? Surely you *could* be deceived on that matter, *couldn’t* you? This position is known as *epistemic methodism*. If we take that bait and play by the skeptic’s rules, we are doomed, for the skeptic can keep demanding a criterion for how we know anything, such that we cannot ever get started and know *anything*. The answer, therefore, is not to play the game of epistemic methodism. Instead, there are some things we simply know, without having to provide a criterion to anyone else to show how we know them. For example, I simply know my daughter is named Anna; that $2 + 2 = 4$; that red is a color; that murder is wrong; and many more such things. There are particular things I simply do know (a view called *epistemic particularism*), and now the burden is on the skeptic to defeat my knowledge claim. I simply *rebut* the skeptical assertions; I don’t have to shoulder the additional burden of *refuting* or *proving* him or her to be wrong. Nor do my knowledge claims require “bomb proof” certainty.

32. I went through a painful time of doubting a year after becoming a Christian, after having been challenged by two professors I respected about the basis for my Christian belief. This type of doubt can be the result of a mindset that if you have doubts as a believer, there is something wrong with you, for we are to accept the Bible as true simply by faith – that is, without other evidence. In *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*, 124-31, I discuss this period of my life and how I grew out of it, not by embracing postmodernism or postfoundationalist views, but by finding evidences for my belief, as well as finding committed, truthful, and gracious believers who dearly love the Lord.

A27 – Some Resources for Global, Cross-cultural Christian Perspectives (see also A29).

Globalizing Theology edited by Craig Ott & Harold A. Netland; *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions* edited by Martin I. Klauber & Scott M. Manetsch; *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* by Timothy C. Tennent; *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* by Leslie Newbigin; *Cross-Cultural Conflict* by Duane Elmer; *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* by D.A. Carson; *Africa Bible Commentary* edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo; *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Dubois; *In Darkest England & the Way Out* by General William Booth (founder of The Salvation Army); *Why We Can’t Wait* by Martin Luther King Jr.; *Contextualization and Syncretism* edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen; *Toward a Prophetic Youth Ministry* by Fernando Arzola Jr. *Social Injustice: What Evangelicals Need to Know about the World* edited by Cooper & Moulder; *The Peaceable Christian: Five Evangelicals Reflect on Peace* edited by Cooper & Williams (see the chapter entitled “Necessity of Worldview Understanding for Sustainable Peace: A Case Study of United States Relations with Native Americans in the 18-19th Centuries” by Michael T. Cooper); *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis--and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance* by Ben Sasse; *Daniel* (NIVAC) by Tremper Longman III; *Acts* (NIVAC) by Ajith Fernando; also *1 Peter* (ECNT) by Karen H. Jobes, as referenced above.

A28* – “What Can Christianity Offer Our Society in the 21st Century” by Tim Keller.

(A message presented at the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast in Westminster Hall, London, England, June 2018).

A29 – Some Recommended Resources for Religious & Historical Perspectives/Christian & non-Christian (see also A27).

General or Non-Christian Sources: *World Religions Today* by John Espisito; *The Q’uran: Text, Translation and Commentary* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali; *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* by Reza Aslan; *God is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens; *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins; *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* by Juan Gonzalez; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told to Alex Haley; *I am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai.

Christian Studies & Theology: *ESV Study Bible*; *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*; *Documents of the Christian Church* edited by Bettenson & Maunder; *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius of Alexandria; *Confessions* by St. Augustine; *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin; *Total Surrender* by Mother Theresa; *The Drama of Doctrine* by Kevin J. Vanhoozer; *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem; *Spiritual Leadership* by J. Oswald Sanders.

Christian Apologetics: *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* edited by D.A. Carson (authored by 37 different evangelical scholars & referenced above); *The Reason for God*, and *Making Sense of God*, by Timothy Keller; *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* by Timothy George; *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* by D.A. Carson; *The New Atheism* by R. Albert Mohler; *The Kingdom of the Cults* by Walter Martin (General Editor Ravi Zacharias); *A Ready Defense: The Best of Josh McDowell*

compiled by Bill Wilson; *Who is Jesus?* by Michael Green; *Man Myth Messiah* by Rice Broocks; & *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel. See also the Apologetics webpage of LakeRegionBibleChurch.org.

Christian History & Biographies: *Introduction to The History of Christianity* edited by Tim Dowley; *Pocket History of the Church* by D. Jeffrey Bingham; *Feminine Threads: Women in the Tapestry of Christian History* by Diana Lynn Severance; *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* by Roland H. Bainton; *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* by George M. Marsden; *The Black Church in the African American Experience* by Lincoln & Mamiya; *Sojourner Truth* by Terry Whalin; *Frederick Douglass: Abolitionist & Reformer* by Rachel Phillips; *Bonhoeffer* by Eric Metaxas; *Serving God & Country: U.S Military Chaplains in World War II* by Lyle W. Dorsett; *In God's Underground (Christ in the Communist Prisons)* by Richard Wurmbbrand (founder of Voice of the Martyrs); *A Prophet with Honor: the Billy Graham Story* by William Martin; *Black & Free* by Tom Skinner; *Let Justice Roll Down* by John M. Perkins; *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* by Nabel Qureshi.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ (Section B)

B1* – “April 3, AD 33” by Andreas Köstenberger (argues for the date of AD 33 over AD 30).

Regardless of one’s conclusion, this article offers some excellent historical insights regarding Christ & NT history.

B2 – “Antiquities xviii. 3.3” by Josephus (1st Century Jewish historian). While addressing Pilate’s troubles, he wrote the following: “And there arose about this time Jesus a wise man ... a doer of marvellous deeds, a teacher ... who led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks ... Pilate had condemned him to the cross ... and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.”

B3* – “Explaining Away Jesus’ Resurrection: The Recent Revival of Hallucination Theories” by Gary R. Habermas.

After detailed scholarly documentation (see the online article), Habermas concludes with the following summary below.

After a century hiatus, it appears that we recently have been observing a limited trend toward the reformulation of naturalistic approaches to Jesus’ resurrection. The hallucination and related subjective hypotheses are again the most popular, as they were at the close of the last century. But we have argued that these strategies have failed to explain the known, critically-ascertained data on several fronts. For almost twenty reasons, we have concluded that they fall short in their attempt to provide an alternative to the New Testament proclamation. Clinical psychologist Gary Collins summarizes a few of the issues here: Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly are not something which can be seen by a group of people ... Since an hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it. [xxxvi] In fact, the problems with this thesis are so serious that these critics “would have to go against much of the current psychiatric and psychological data about the nature of hallucinations.” [xxxvii] This would seem to place these approaches at odds with current scientific knowledge on this subject. We conclude that applying the hallucination and similar subjective theses to Jesus’ resurrection appearances is severely mistaken across several disciplines and at many points. (See also B7* below, where the Hallucination theory is addressed starting about the 8:20 minute mark).

B4* – “A Dozen Evidences for the Resurrection” by Kenneth Hultgren (reflectionsbyken.wordpress.com; selected excerpts below).

1. Jesus’s Empty Tomb The empty tomb is a critical part of the resurrection account, for if Jesus’s body had been recovered, then Christianity would have been falsified right as it had just begun ... It should also be recognized that the first alternative naturalistic explanation for the resurrection presupposed the truth of the vacated tomb. The Jewish authorities insisted that the tomb was empty because they planned to tell people that Jesus’s followers had come in the night and stolen the body.
2. Jesus’s Postmortem Appearances According to the apostle Paul’s letters as well as the four Gospel accounts, Jesus appeared alive after his death on numerous occasions. These appearances of Jesus were reported to be both physical and bodily in nature (he was seen, heard, and touched) and not purely spiritual or ghostlike. The resurrection appearances were also diverse and varied in that Jesus appeared to men and women, to friends and enemies, to single individuals as well as to small and large groups of people, to some persons on a single occasion and to others more than once, during the day and the night, as well as indoors and outdoors. It is this diverse and varied nature of the appearances that makes it extremely improbable, if not impossible, to account for these encounters in terms of hallucinations ... It is also important to note that if one rejects the miraculous explanation of Jesus’s appearances, then two naturalistic alternative explanations are required—one to explain the empty tomb and another to explain the numerous appearances. But the more complex these alternative theories are, the less likely they are to be true and viable.
5. The Greatest Religious Conversion Ever Some people have had dramatic religious conversions. In fact, my three favorite Christian thinkers outside of the biblical authors—St. Augustine, Blaise Pascal, and C. S. Lewis—all experienced amazing life-changing conversions to Christianity. But there is one person whose conversion to the Christian faith changed the world forever. That individual said that his spiritual transformation was due to encountering the resurrected Jesus Christ. Saul of Tarsus was a respected, first-century Hebrew scholar of the Torah (the Law), a member of the Jewish party of the Pharisees, and a Roman citizen (Acts 21:37–22:3). Fervent in his devotion to God and in his intent to protect ancient Judaism from what he perceived as false and heretical teaching, he became the central adversary of the primitive Christian church. Saul expressed his impassioned hostility toward Christians by having them arrested and inciting physical persecution and execution of believers, including Stephen (Acts

7:54–8:3; Galatians 1:13–14). Traveling on the road to Damascus to further persecute the church (ca. AD 31–33), Saul underwent an extraordinary life-changing experience. According to his claim, Saul saw and spoke with the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9:1–30; 22:5–13). Following his dramatic conversion to the movement he once hated, he took on the Gentile name “Paul” and became the greatest advocate of the newfound Christian faith. After Jesus Christ himself, many scholars view the apostle Paul as the second most important figure in the history of Christianity. Paul went on to become the faith’s greatest missionary, theologian, and apologist as well as the inspired author of 13 New Testament books ... The conversion of the apostle Paul, not to mention his life and accomplishments, seems truly inexplicable apart from the fact of the resurrection. It seems the only thing that could have possibly changed Saul’s incredibly negative opinion about primitive Christianity was for him to encounter its leader, Jesus of Nazareth, raised from the dead.

7. Emergence of Sunday as a Day of Worship The Hebrew people worshiped on the Sabbath, which is the seventh day of the week (measured from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday). Nevertheless, the early Christian church (which was viewed initially as a sect of Judaism) gradually changed the day of their worship from the seventh to the first day of the week (see Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; “the Lord’s Day,” Revelation 1:10). For the early Christian church, Sunday uniquely commemorated Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. Sustained reflection on Christ’s resurrection to immortal life transformed Christian worship, uniquely influencing the formulation of the sacraments of the early church (baptism and communion), and thus it distinguished the Christian faith in its theology and practice from traditional Judaism. Apart from the resurrection, no reason existed for early Christians (as a sect of Judaism) to view Sunday (the first day of the week) as having any enduring theological or ceremonial significance. The resurrection of Jesus therefore set historic Christianity apart from the Judaism of its day. That same truth of resurrected life sets the faith apart from all other religions through the centuries. So the happening of Easter Sunday—Jesus’s resurrection—explains two things well: (1) why the Christian religion emerged as a historical movement and (2) why Christians worship on a different day of the week than the Jews. And, in turn, both of these historical elements support the factual nature of Jesus’s resurrection.

B5* – “4 Reasons to Believe in the Empty Tomb” by Paul Rezkalla (selected excerpts below).

The belief in the empty tomb predates the Gospels and even the writings of Paul. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Paul lays down the earliest-known creed of the Christian church: *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 Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters 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.* The language of “received” and “passed” indicates Paul was relaying an oral tradition. He wrote this letter in the mid-50s. Therefore, this creed had to date earlier. If Jesus died around 30, this creed can be dated to, at most, 25 years after Jesus’s death. Furthermore, there are good evidences to show that Paul received this creed from the church leaders in Jerusalem in the 30s, and this exchange is recorded in Galatians 1:18-20. Many prominent New Testament historians such as Bart Ehrman, James Dunn, and Gerd Ludemann date this creed to between two and five years of Jesus’s death. Gerd Ludemann says, “[T]he elements in the tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus . . . not later than three years . . . the formation of the appearance traditions mentioned in 1 Cor. 15:3-8 falls into the time between 30 and 33 CE.” Within three years of Jesus’s death, the early church was circulating a creed that affirmed Jesus’s bodily resurrection from the dead. And you can’t have a bodily resurrection without an empty tomb.

B6 – Loving God by Chuck Colson.

In his chapter “Watergate and the Resurrection” he compares the disciples trying to cover up a lie about Christ’s resurrection to the failed cover-up of the Watergate scandal by the President of the United States and his close advisors. President Nixon and his aides were spying on their Democratic political opponents. One of their plans backfired, some people were caught breaking into the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee, and then President Nixon and his advisors tried to obstruct the investigation by the CIA. Here’s some selected excerpts regarding what was taking place in March 1973. Colson writes: “The White House was like a front-line command post under heavy shelling. Daily headlines fed the public fresh tidbits, mostly from stories leaked by aides or their lawyers seeking to clear their skirts or entice the prosecutors into a better deal. The cover-up was discovered – and doomed. Though the cover-up technically dated back to the June 1972 break-in, the serious cover-up – the part everyone knew or should have known was criminal – really began March 21, 1973. And it ended April 8, 1973. With the most powerful office in the world at stake, a small band of hand-picked loyalists, no more than 10 of us, could not hold a conspiracy together for more than 2 weeks. Think of what was at stake. To enter government service for [President Nixon] we had sacrificed very lucrative private law practices, our family lives & privacy. Think of the power at our fingertips: a mere command from one of us could mobilize generals and cabinet officers, even armies, and manage billions in agency budgets. Think of the privileges: a call to the military aide’s office would produce a limousine or jet airplane; secret service men were always within sight. Even the prospect of jeopardizing the President we worked so hard to elect, of losing the prestige, power, and personal luxury of our offices was not enough incentive to make this group of men contain a lie. After just a few weeks the natural human instinct for self-preservation was so overwhelming that the conspirators, one by one, deserted their leader, walked away from their cause, [&] turned their backs on the power, prestige, & privileges.” Now with those highlights in mind, Colson asks the question: “so what does all of this have to do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ? ... If one is to assail the historicity of the Resurrection & therefore the deity of Christ, one must conclude that there was a conspiracy – a cover up if you will - by eleven men with the complicity of up to five hundred others. To subscribe to

this argument, one must also be ready to believe that each disciple was willing to be ostracized by friends and family, endure prison, be tortured, and ultimately die – all without ever once renouncing that Jesus had risen from the dead! That is why the Watergate experience is so instructive for me. Is it really likely, then, that a deliberate cover-up, a plot to perpetuate a lie about the Resurrection, could have survived the violent persecution of the apostles? Is it not probable that at least one of the apostles would have renounced Christ before being beheaded or stoned? Is it not likely that some “smoking gun” document might have been produced exposing the “Passover plot”? Take it from one who was inside the Watergate web looking out, who saw firsthand how vulnerable a cover-up is: Nothing less than a witness as awesome as the resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive & Lord. As Blaise Pascal correctly observes, man in his normal state will renounce his beliefs just as readily as Peter renounced Jesus before the Resurrection. But as the same Peter discovered after the Resurrection, there is a power beyond man that causes him to forsake all. It is the power of the God who revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

B7* – “2. The Resurrection of Jesus (The Historical Evidence)” by InspiringPhilosophy.org.

Addresses 4 different theories that seek to explain the resurrection story (including hallucinations & a historic resurrection).

B8 – *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* by Fleming Rutledge.

Regarding the contrast in how Jesus died compared to other leaders or martyrs, she says “Many great figures of history have died prematurely and violently as a result of their activities. Here again, however, Jesus’ death is singular. He was not hanged by Nazis (Bonhoffer), murdered by a crazed dictator (Luwum), assassinated by right-wing thugs (Romero), or shot by a small-time racist fanatic (King). These men’s deaths were to varying degrees aberrant, unlawful, or clandestine, but as Paul says of Christ in the Acts of the Apostles, “This was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). Jesus was put to death publicly, deliberately, and with impunity ... His execution was carried about by all the best people, representatives of the highest religious and governmental authorities. We might think of other luminaries who have been put to death by their governments, but once gain, the analogies fail; Socrates was permitted a death of extraordinary dignity, Joan of Arc was the process of becoming a sainted embodiment of France even as she was burning, Thomas More was allowed an elegant witticism as he put his head on the block. Public impaling and the hang-drawing-quartering of Tudor England probably offer the closest parallels, but they were administered to all classes of society, even the aristocracy – whereas crucifixion was almost entirely used for the dregs of humanity, and never for Romans citizens. John the Baptist’s ... death was memorably horrible; who can forget the severed head on the platter? Yet even this gruesome image does not carry with it the same stigma as crucifixion. It is the stigma that needs to be emphasized if we are to grasp the extreme peculiarity of a cross as a symbol of faith” (pp.73-74).

B9* - “The Most Surprising Lyric in Philippians 2: ‘Even to Death on a Cross’” by Trevin Wax.

B10* – “Scandalon” by Michael Card (Song from *The Life* album).

B11* – “Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem” by N.T. Wright.

B12* – “The Killing Evolution” by pbs.org.

An article on the topic “Auschwitz, Inside the Nazi State” which states the following: “By the early spring of 1943, four huge crematoria became fully operational at Auschwitz II (Birkenau). They housed eight gas chambers and forty-six ovens that could dispose of some 4,400 corpses per day. Trains would arrive at the camp and those most fit—approximately 10-30 percent of the arrivals—would be selected for a work detail. The remaining prisoners were sent to the gas chambers.”

B13 – *The Q’uran: Text, Translation and Commentary (book)* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

There is some irony in the fact that Muslims do not believe Jesus was divine and they also do not believe He was crucified, but Christians believe both. From the Q’uran: “That they said (in boast), “We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Apostle of God”; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow for of a surety they killed him not— Nay, God raised him up unto Himself; and God is Exalted in Power, Wise—” (Surá An-Nisáa 4.157). From the study notes: (663) “The Quranic teaching is that Christ was not crucified nor killed by the Jews, notwithstanding certain apparent circumstances which produced that illusion in the minds of some of his enemies: that disputations, doubts, and conjectures on such matters are vain; and that he was taken up to God.” (664) “One school holds that Jesus did not die the usual human death, but still lives in the body in heaven, another holds that he did die (5.120) but not when he was supposed to be crucified, and that his being “raised up” unto God means that instead of being disgraced as a malefactor, as the Jews intended, he was on the contrary honoured by God as His Apostle.” On the contrary Christians acknowledge both the divinity & exaltation of Christ (He is God the Son & Lord over all), as well as His humanity, humility, suffering, shame & death (the incarnation & the cross).

B14 – *1 Corinthians* by David Garland.

These selected quotes from Garland’s New Testament commentary help put this into perspective, and adds to the quote above from Fleming Rutledge, when she says the question we should be asking is not “why Jesus had to die” but “why was Jesus crucified?”

Garland says the following, “The death of Jesus is one of the foundational symbols that determined Paul’s vision of the Christian community ... The Corinthian’s quarreling reveals that they have absorbed, uncritically, the ideals and values of the pagan world around them, and Paul wants to replace pagan paradigms [or ways of thinking] with the ideals and values exhibited in the cross. When he proclaimed the crucified Christ, however, every hearer [all over that world] knew that this so-called Christ had suffered “a particularly cruel and shameful death ... reserved for hardened criminals ... slaves, and rebels against the Roman state” (Hengel). The story behind Jesus’ death discloses that he was rejected by the very people he came to save, was deserted by his own disciples, was strung up by the proper authorities, and apparently was powerless to save his own skin. Paul did not sweep the crucifixion under the carpet as an unfortunate episode remedied by the glories of the resurrection ... Crucifixion and resurrection belong together as part of the gospel story (15:3-5), but the cross was repugnant to ancient sensibilities and assailed the world’s self-centeredness and self-destructive ways. It was not yet the “old rugged cross” sentimentalized in hymns, embalmed in stain glass windows . . . or fashioned into gold charms ... To proclaim a crucified Jew from some backwater of the empire as “a divine being sent on earth, God’s son, Lord of all and the coming judge of the world, must have been thought by any educated man to be utter ‘madness’ and presumptuousness” (Hengel). Christianity was cradled in what looked like disastrous defeat ... and exposed the preacher of this message to woeful contempt. Paul, however, did not refer to Jesus’ death with embarrassment or skip over the awkward facts . . . it was central to his preaching, because the resurrection disclosed Christ’s suffering and death to be God’s [mode of operating] in the world.”

B15* – “**The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1–19)**” by D.A. Carson (The Gospel Coalition).

B16* – **garyhabermas.com** (History, Philosophy, and Christian Apologetics: Specializing in Resurrection-of-Jesus Research).

B17* – “**Experiences of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection**” by Gary Habermas.

B18* – “**Bart Ehrman on How Christianity Defeated Paganism**” – by Michael Kruger.

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