

Jesus and the Witnesses

People want proof. There are a million scams out there and countless ways to get ripped off. How do we know which ones are legitimate and which are scams? How do we know who we can trust, especially when they all look pretty much the same on the web?

When a wandering prophet, an unfamiliar rabbi, coming from the backwoods of Galilee, enters the holy city, the sophisticated, educated, complicated city of Jerusalem, the people in charge want to know if He's legit. In John 5, they discover a man walking through town carrying his sleeping mat under his arm ... on the Sabbath. They protest, "You can't do that; that's not legal on the Sabbath." The man was on the defensive in a hurry: "The man who healed me told me to pick up my mat and walk." "Who was it that said such a thing?" The man didn't know. Later he met up with Jesus again and, once he knew who it was who had healed him, he went to the authorities and told them that it was Jesus. We pick up the story in verse 16:

So the Jewish leaders began harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules. But Jesus replied, "My Father never stops working, so why should I?" So the Jewish leaders tried all the more to kill Him. In addition to disobeying the Sabbath rules, He had spoken of God as His Father, thereby making Himself equal with God.

So, here we have Jesus arriving in Jerusalem, and doing two things that raise opposition: He heals on the Sabbath and tells the man He has healed to carry his mat; then He claims to be God's Son, which stirs the pot even more. It is natural at this point to raise the question, "What's your proof? How can we believe that you have the authority to do and to say these things when you give us no evidence?" Whether that question was actually asked, out loud, or whether it was an internal question that was on the minds of the religious leaders, it's the question Jesus answers.

First, He describes what He does as being dependent on what His Father is doing -- and He does this in a couple of ways. First, He describes the miraculous works He has done as being the Father's works and then adds:

... the Son will do far greater things than healing this man. He will even raise from the dead anyone He wants to, just as the Father does.

Then Jesus tells His listeners that the Father has given all judgment to the Son, to Jesus. He then goes on to say that His judgment is just because He judges according to the will of His Father: "I do nothing without consulting the Father. I judge as I am told."

This can hardly be called "evidence" because it is, at this point, just Jesus' word about who sent Him and whom He obeys. But Jesus is about to go into some detail that will make it clear that the Father is with Him and that the skeptics should believe because of that. Let's get into the evidence that Jesus presents:

If I were to testify on My own behalf, My testimony would not be valid. But someone else is also testifying about Me, and I can assure you that everything

he says about Me is true. In fact, you sent messengers to listen to John the Baptist, and he preached the truth. But the best testimony about Me is not from a man, though I have reminded you about John's testimony so you might be saved. John shone brightly for a while, and you benefited and rejoiced. But I have a greater witness than John -- My teachings and My miracles. They have been assigned to Me by the Father, and they testify that the Father has sent Me. And the Father Himself has also testified about Me. You have never heard His voice or seen Him face to face and you do not have His message in your hearts, because you do not believe Me -- the One He sent to you. You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to Me! Yet you refuse to come to Me so that I can give you this eternal life. (5:31-40)

Now, look at the witnesses that are lined up behind Jesus.

1. John the Baptist has testified about Jesus. One of the things John had said about Jesus that's recorded in this gospel is from chapter 1, v. 29, where he says, "Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." A few verses later we read, "I testify that He is the Son of God." (v.34)
2. Jesus' teaching and His miracles testify about Him. Jesus calls them the "best testimony" and points out that His teaching and miracles demonstrate that He has been sent from the Father in heaven. The compassionate and loving nature of Jesus' teaching and miracles show that He knows the heart of God whereas the religious leaders of the Jews demonstrate that they don't know God's heart.
3. The third witness is the Scriptures themselves which point to Jesus as the source of eternal life. Again, He rebukes the Jewish leaders for their unwillingness to put their faith in the one God had sent to them.
4. Jesus includes this line in His defense: "The Father Himself has also testified about Me." One of the ways in which to understand the Father's testimony is the way in which Jesus "represents" His Father. He comes to earth bringing the love of God, the justice of God and fulfills the truth of God's word, which we have in the Old Testament.

Listen to these words from verses 41-44:

Your approval or disapproval means nothing to Me, because I know you don't have God's love within you. For I have come to you representing my Father and you refuse to welcome Me, even though you readily accept others who represent only themselves. No wonder you can't believe! For you gladly honor each other, but you don't care about the honor that comes from God alone.

The Jewish leaders approached the Scriptures as a book of rules to be interpreted and applied, rather than as a revelation of God's loving character. They missed the very nature of God and therefore it was easy for them to miss the One who came to represent God to them. But their miss didn't negate the fact that the Father was a witness to Jesus because Jesus represented Him as He is.

And then in the final section of His argument, Jesus tells them that their hero, their lawgiver, Moses, actually wrote about Jesus and then adds that this same Moses will accuse them before the Father for their failure to honor the Son of God. Listen to this:

But if you had believed Moses, you would have believed Me because he wrote about Me. And since you don't believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?

These people call themselves disciples of Moses, but Jesus says they don't even believe what Moses wrote because his writings pointed to Jesus.

So, a long list of witnesses: John the Baptist, the teaching and miracles of Jesus, the Scriptures that point to Him as the source of eternal life, the specific teachings of Moses and the Father Himself whose character and purposes are being revealed in His Son.

There's another passage in John's gospel where Jesus is challenged as making invalid claims about Himself:

Jesus said to the people, "I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." The Pharisees replied, "You are making false claims about yourself!" Jesus told them, "These claims are valid even though I make them about Myself. For I know where I came from and where I am going, but you don't know this about Me. You judge me with all your human limitations, but I am not judging anyone. And if I did, My judgment would be correct in every respect because I am not alone -- I have with Me the Father who sent Me. Your own law says that if two people agree about something, their witness is accepted as fact. I am one witness, and my Father who sent Me is the other." "Where is your father?" they asked.

Jesus answered, "Since you don't know who I am, you don't know who my Father is. If you knew Me, then you would know My Father, too."

You can picture this scene, can't you. Jesus is talking about the Father being His witness, the Father who sent Him, the Father who is now with Him. And the Jewish rulers are looking high and low for this Father and finally they say, "Well, where is he?" They can't see him to ask him any questions and they don't get the bit about Jesus representing the Father. Jesus tells them that they don't know where He came from or where He is going, but He does. Jesus then tells them that if they knew Him, then they would know His Father, meaning that He reveals the Father to those with eyes to see. He shows us what God is like. And because He shows us what God is like, then God is with Him in everything He does. It's an argument that doesn't convince the religious people, because they don't have a positive impression of Jesus in the first place. Because they have rejected Him, and because they are looking for ways to discredit Him, they can't know who He is or what He's come to do. Their bias against Him has made it impossible for them to know Jesus or His Father.

These passages from John 5 and John 8 are different from what we usually see in the gospels. Usually we see Jesus doing amazing things, teaching His disciples

about the Kingdom and confronting the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Here we see Him defending Himself against their accusations of giving invalid testimony. I can't think of anything else quite like this in any of the other gospels. This is a different way of asking for faith. Jesus is citing evidence for His claim to be God's Son and representative on this earth.

Sometimes you'll see that there is a book or a course or a conference on "Apologetics" that's being offered. This term "apologetics" simply means presenting evidence for what you believe. How do you make a clear and convincing "apology" for the truth of the Christian faith? It's not the same as saying, "I'm sorry", but is a defense, a set of arguments, on which you say, "I believe." Plato's "Apology", for example, is his remembering Socrates' self-defense at his trial.

Christian Apologetics is based on an impressive array of evidence from history, from experience and from observation. Historically, we look to things like the life of Jesus, His death and resurrection, the life of the early church and the many answers to prayers that people can testify to in their personal history. In experience, we look to the reality of changed lives, radically changed lives, that so many testify to. We experience hope, joy, peace, the grace to forgive and the courage to persevere when times are darkest. On the observation side, we observe what God has made, the finely tuned balances in the universe that point to a designer. We observe that Scripture speaks truth and is relevant to our lives, that it convicts us of sin and helps us to understand the love and forgiveness that is being offered to us.

Jesus uses similar foundations, but in a very different way than we might use them today. Historically, He points to the evidence of the Old Testament Scriptures which predicted His coming. In experience, He talked about His own experience of knowing where He had come from and where He was going, His experience of knowing and doing the Father's will. And for observation, He pointed to the miracles and the teachings which His accusers had observed many times.

Why did the Jewish leaders not accept Jesus' evidence? Why did they refuse to believe in Him? Because it wasn't really evidence that they wanted. What they wanted was for Jesus to go away, for Jesus not to matter to the people, for Jesus to blow it in some way so that the crowds would forsake Him. They didn't want Jesus to be God's Son and they didn't want His message to penetrate their hearts and to change their lives. When you don't want to believe something, you can usually find a reason not to believe it. When you don't like the implications, the consequences, of a particular system of ideas, you will find reasons to reject that system.

Once in awhile you'll hear or read of someone who gives in to the weight of evidence, who has a conversion experience despite not wanting to. One of those people was C.S. Lewis, who became a believer while a professor of English Literature at Oxford University. He writes about it in a book called Surprised by Joy:

You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelen-

ting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Perhaps we all feel some reluctance about welcoming the One who calls Himself Lord into our lives, that giving up of total independence (at least that's how it feels to us). But few have stood in such determination against the faith and then backed down. Lewis had been a rationalist atheist, but that same rationality led him to believe the claims of Jesus and to surrender his life to Him. Centuries earlier, a man named Saul had also backed down. He had been a persecutor of the church until he met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus and allowed his life to be radically redirected -- he became the premier missionary of the first century and the writer of a large portion of the New Testament.

For some, overwhelming evidence leads to the conviction of faith -- I am convinced so I will believe, I will follow. For others, there is no evidence that will be sufficient. They have their minds made up, they are committed in some way to unbelief, and so they rationalize the evidence and move on in their unbelief. You could say that that was true of the Jewish religious leaders and you could say that it is just as true of those who are committed to naturalism in today's scientific community. Evidence is only evidence -- it can never compel faith, if the heart of a person isn't open to change.

Week after week we've seen Jesus calling for faith and now we see Him presenting evidence that would provide a foundation for faith among those who heard Him. I think this is something we should get good at, not because everyone who gets their questions answered will then put their faith in Jesus, but because someone will. There are some people like C.S. Lewis who will follow the argument to its conclusion and yield to the evidence and there are some who will refuse to go further once they see where the evidence leads. But our role in all of this is to give as many people as possible the chance to make that choice. How do we do that? By offering them a look at history, at our experience and at the real world.

History answers questions like, "Did Jesus really live on this earth? What's the evidence for His crucifixion and His resurrection? Why shouldn't I believe the claims of some of the moderns who say that He lived a full life, married, had kids and died somewhere in India? Why should I believe that the New Testament gives a reliable picture of who Jesus was?" There are hundreds of questions that have been answered well through the ages, but which still surface every once in awhile as if new discoveries demanded their inclusion in the debate. Because people are confused by these things, we should have answers.

Our experience is only our experience, but it has great value in a world that puts a premium on experience. If you have had prayers answered, if you have encountered God's love for you, if you have experienced forgiveness and grace and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, you have a testimony. You have a story to tell. You have

something that is uniquely yours, a gift from heaven to give others.

The real world is the world we observe, day in and day out. It is a world that the Bible describes as fallen, as broken, as rebelling against God. Is that description accurate or are we on the verge of a new golden age of global peace and cooperation? The Bible describes the creation as the work of God's power and wisdom. When you observe the cosmos, or read about it, do you observe order, design, wisdom, beauty ... or is the universe mostly random and chaotic?

If there is some interest, I would like to do a seminar, an ongoing discussion, in the area of apologetics. I'd love to ask and help find answers to the questions that so many need an answer for. If you're interested, let's talk.