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## David Langford

# Appear

## Preface



. S. Lewis once wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." If the claims of Christianity are true, then the world has never seen a light shine more brightly than Jesus Christ, the light of the world. If Christianity is true, this whole world is colored by that light, and no truth is more central. This month Consulting Editor David Langford asks this immensely important question, "Is Christianity really believable?"

Curtis Shelburne

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#### By David Langford

Faith in Christ is more than believing an argument about Jesus; it is believing in Jesus himself.



"He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit. was seen by angels, was preached among the nations. was believed on in the world. was taken up in glory."

> The Apostle Paul 1 Timothy 3

CHRISTIAN APPEAL



Is Christianity really believable?

This is a question people seem to ask more these days as our culture becomes more secular and less friendly to Christianity.

From time to time movies have come out that present Jesus as just a man. One such movie was The Davinci Code, which came out in 2006. The second highest grossing film that year, it made over 750 million dollars. The premise of the movie is that Jesus was not the Son of God but rather was a good man who married Mary Magdalene and had a daughter, a truth kept hidden all these years by the Catholic Church. As you might imagine, the film was controversial, but it was also a hit!

Christians protested and boycotted the film, crying out, "This is outrageous! How could anyone believe this?" But, of course, to the secular person, the story is far more plausible than the gospel message.

Sometimes we Christians forget that saying the man Jesus was God is outrageous! But the story is incredible, isn't it? Amazing! The idea that the very God who created the world chose to save that fallen, sin-marred world by being born as a baby, growing up and living a perfect life so that he might be killed as a perfect sacrifice. Then he came back to life and ascended into the heavens to prepare for us a "home" so that we can live with him forever when he finally comes back to judge the earth eternally.

Now, really! How could anyone believe such an incredible story? It's actually amazing that anyone did, isn't it?

#### A Barrier to Faith?

I went to school at four state universities for nearly 20 years from the time I was 18 until I was 38 years old. In each of those universities, I had more than one professor

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who told me that intellect was a barrier to faith.

Dr. Deethart was a professor in my junior year. He told his students repeatedly his story of growing up as a Christian but then, after getting his education, finding himself unable to believe in such things anymore.

While I was pursuing my Master's degree, one of my favorite professors, Dr. McGlothlin, sometimes goaded me and asked why I continued to believe, implying that getting doctorate degree, one of my favorite professors, Dr. Lauren



ing that getting John Gulley an advanced degree should

undermine my faith. During my studies for a Wispe, entertained us with his many stories of his own days as a graduate student at

Harvard University where he was an officemate with a student who would become the pioneer of behavioral psychology, B. F. Skinner. He told us

that he and his fellow students were serious in their pursuit of providing an alternative kind of counseling for people and to rescue the country from the superstitions of religion.

#### **Challenges and** "Rethinking"

These professors challenged me and at times caused me to rethink my faith in many ways; at times I went through extended periods of questioning and doubt. But ultimately my faith endured, at least partly because I was blessed to have a father who himself was a scholar in a state university and who

hese professors challenged me and at times caused me to rethink my faith in many ways.

encouraged me to read many universally respected academic scholars who were themselves passionate believers in Christ. Many of them were converted to Christ in their adulthood. And so, as a relatively young man, I was introduced to literary scholars like

C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien from Oxford and Cambridge; philosophers like Stanford

University's Elton Trueblood; psychologists like Harvard University's Robert Coles; journalists like Malcolm Muggeridge; and the Russian dissident, writer, and Nobel Prize winner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Knowing about the faith of such people pretty much answered the argument that to develop one's intellect

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would necessarily threaten one's faith. If anything, I found the oppo-

site to be true. At the end of this article, I've listed several writers and books that have helped me with questions of faith.

#### Worth Considering

Rather than being a challenge to faith. our reason and intellect actually lead to several arguments that should at the very least compel people to seriously consider the possibility that Christianity may be true. I will mention only a few. the part about a resurrection, it would have been easy to



Curtis Shelburne

disprove. Certainly, both the Jewish and Roman authorities gospel was not true, especially had every reason to want to

First, if the story of the

disprove it. All they needed to do was produce the dead body of Christ. They did not, apparently because they could not. They certainly had significant

resources to help them find and display the body, but, as much as they might have wished to, they were unable to do so.

The courage of the disciples' witness is also compelling. If anyone knew

that Jesus died, it would be his closest disciples. Either Jesus came back to life, visited with them, and then ascended, as they all testified, or he did not. But the fact is that almost every one of them died because they refused to recant their testimony. If they knew Jesus was really dead, then they died for a lie; maybe

The same disciples who ran in fear when Jesus was killed are, in a very short time, preaching boldly.

more importantly, they let others die as well. To what end? What did they have to gain by lying?

Remember that these were the same disciples who ran in fear when Jesus was killed. But then, in a very short time, they are standing on the steps of the Temple, in the synagogues, and in various political courts boldly preaching the gospel. How

does one explain such a transformation?

#### Another Amazing Transformation

Speaking of transformations, consider the conversion of Saul the persecutor to Paul the saint. How does one explain such a change? Saul was persecuting and killing

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Christians—right up to the time when he became one.

I'm told the story of an atheist who felt obsessed to debate preachers. He was so

very knowledgeable, articulate, and intimidating that many preachers were understandably afraid to face him in a public forum. One simple country preacher did accept the invitation, however, and asked the atheist to explain

atheist to explain the conversion of Paul.

The atheist had a quick answer. He said that psychologists have proved that very often when one is extremely opposed to an idea or belief system, it is actually a sign that he is about to accept it. The country preacher then gave his own quick response: "Well, then, it shouldn't be too long until you, sir, become a Christian!"

#### Fact or Legend?

Many argue that the resur-

### Saul of Tarsus was persecuting and killing Christians—right up until the time he became one. Why the change?

rection story is actually not a historical fact but a legend that began to be told hundreds of years later. They say it was added to the story of Jesus to enhance his role as a spiritual leader.

It is an inter-

esting idea, except that it is demonstrably not true. Both believing and unbelieving scholars largely agree that the gospels were written within 50-70 years of the events they report. Paul's letters were written even earlier. Peter writes in his letter, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories" (1 Peter 1:16-18).

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And John states that he and the other apostles proclaim "that which we have heard, which we have looked at and touched" (1 John 1:1). These defenders of the gospel make their defense far too close historically to the actual events for it to be considered a legend.

John F. Kennedy died in 1963. Elvis Presley died in 1977. Imagine someone today arguing that Kennedy really didn't die but is still alive today, or that Elvis didn't actually "leave the building" but is still hanging around somewhere. Would any sane person take such testimonies seriously?

Yet thousands of believers did take the disciples' testimony seriously within days after the resurrection, and others believed the written testimonies within 30-50 years later. It may be that we moderns are more sophisticated in many ways than our ancient counter-



John Gulley

parts in first-century Palestine. But they understood what it meant to be dead no less clearly than we do today.

When I was a graduate student at Oklahoma University,

I attended a seminar led by Dr. Martin Marty, a universally respected scholar of American religion. The seminar addressed issues concerning the relationship between religion and modern society.

Several of the students who attended were not actually believers but students interested in religion for more sociological reasons. One very articulate student who did not believe in Jesus or God or any "spiritual realities" spoke up in class one day.

"Why in the world should I believe in an obscure rabbi from some remote part of the world?"

Marty didn't skip a beat with his answer.

## Why Would They Believe?

"You're absolutely right. Why in the world would anyone believe this obscure, unknown rabbi whose followers were no less obscure and unknown? But, of course, they did, didn't they? And, after them, most of the world!"

Then he turned the question around on the student. "Why do you think they believed?"

And, of course, that is the point. There is no shortage of very good reasons why people would not have believed the gospel. The basic story of

the gospel is extraordinary, if not outrageous. The messengers were among the least influential or impressive people in society. The cost of believing the story was high, often requiring one's life and endangering the

lives of one's loved ones. It's crazy that anyone believed. But they did, didn't they?

#### Faith Must Not Only Satisfy the Mind

So I would submit that there are plenty of good, rational reasons to believe the gospel story. But faith is more than believing an argument

Faith is more than believing an argument about Jesus; faith is believing in the man Jesus.

about Jesus; it is believing in the man Jesus. Faith must not only satisfy the mind; it must change the heart.

We learn this from Peter

especially. Peter tells us he didn't follow a cleverly invented story. He was an eye witness. Peter claims he saw the miracles. He heard the voice from heaven. He personally explored the empty tomb. He says he was

there when Jesus mysteriously appeared to the disciples in that locked room, alive and not a ghost!

But Peter followed Jesus not just because of the evidence he found so hard to deny; he followed even more because of the love he found so hard to believe.

After the resurrection, Peter

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f Peter were

here, he would

tell us about the

man he put his

faith in, the man

who can heal our

wounded hearts.

seems depressed. The Gospel of John says Peter is fishing. It seems almost as if he's gone back to the life he had before he met Jesus. He knows Jesus

is alive, but he also knows too well that he has failed his Lord. I wonder if he feels he is now unfit to follow Jesus. Then, once again, Jesus comes to meet the disciples on the shore of the lake, the same place where Jesus first met Peter.

#### "Do You Love Me?"

As they sit around a fire eating a meal together, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?"

Three times Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." (One confession for each of Peter's denials?) Then the Lord says to Peter, "Feed my sheep."

As if to say, "Peter, I know your failures; I know your weaknesses. What I need to

know is this: Do you love me? I won't give up on you, Peter. Don't give up on me!" I believe that

if Peter were here today sharing his testimony with us, he could tell us all we need to know about

a faith that can satisfy any doubts we might have in our minds about the gospel story.

But I don't think those arguments are what Peter would want to talk about most. I think he would want to tell us about the man he put his faith in, the man who can heal any wounds we might have in our hearts.

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Are there questions in your mind that are disturbing and troubling? That's okay. Ask them!

Believers have done that from the very beginning. Believers should do that. Are there things you've done that you fear God may not be able to forgive? Believers have also struggled with that from the beginning.

But if the Cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that there is no limit to the forgiveness that is offered to us by God. As Paul (another who must have wondered about the limits to God's forgiveness) so eloquently wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for

If the Cross teaches us anything, it teaches that there is no limit to the forgiveness offered to us by God.

us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies" (Romans 8:32-33). Perhaps our

greatest difficulty is not the challenge of believing the gospel but the demands of facing the reality of what it will mean if we do take the message

of Jesus seriously.

That is a legitimate concern. If we choose to seriously follow Jesus, there is no question Jesus will choose to seriously change our lives. That may give us some pause. When the disciples decided to follow Christ, their decision certainly turned their world upside down!

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But surely a greater concern is what it would mean if we choose not to follow him. If

Peter and all the disciples were standing before us and speaking to us today in the flesh, I have no doubt they would say that taking Jesus seriously was the best decision they ever made. And they would tell us it is the best decision we could ever make as well. So. I would close by returning to John's great words:

seen it and testify to it, and

we proclaim to you the eter-

nal life, which was with the

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That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make your joy complete (1 John 1:1-4).

## Books That Have Helped My Faith

Many books have been written to help people who are wrestling with doubt, or struggling to believe, or reaffirming faith, or wanting to learn how to present the faith in more credible ways. The books below are not necessarily the "best" books (though some are on many "top ten" lists), and, obviously, I'd not agree with every word written in them, but each has a central message that has been overwhelmingly helpful to me at particular times in my life. Most are written by people widely respected by believers and non-believers alike for their intellect and their faith. I list them here in hope that someone might find in one or more of them the kind of help that I did. -David Langford

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#### "The Apostles' Creed." The actual words were not written by the apostles, but it is an early

earliest Christians believed, this will

and very important statement

of basic Christian beliefs, and

it dates back to the second cen-

do quite nicely. Now notice. please, that when we make these and similar statements

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of faith. we use the word "believe."

It's been years since I first read C. S. Lewis'

paper, "On Obstinancy in Belief" (published as the second essay in The World's Last Night: And

Other Essays), but in it Lewis masterfully analyzes what we mean when we say regarding our faith, "I believe." May I summarize a bit?

Often, Lewis says, when we use the term "believe," we're expressing a rather weak opinion, and we'd not be very surprised to find that it is wrong. "Where's my book?" "In the living room, I believe." "When was Martha born?" "I believe it was 1958."

"Where did Jack go?" "He ran off with his secretary, I believe." "I don't believe that!" Note that the latter is conveying a much stronger opinion based on a real knowledge of Jack and his character.

But when a Christian says, "I believe," he's saying something stronger still. While "belief" can't be called absolute "knowledge" of the sort that can be completely and irrefutably mathematically proven, enough evidence does exist that choosing to believe is at least a plausible option not just for the gullible. Certainly not all, but certainly some, very fine scientists are Christian believers.

Forgive me (and this part is not from Lewis), but if you watch most religious TV networks-shows and ads-I'd not be surprised if you think all Christians must be fools.

But it is an obvious fact that since Christ's era and to the present, many highly intelligent people have weighed the evidence for Christian faith against the arguments skeptics have arrayed against it, and have chosen to put their faith in Christ as Lord.

Still, the word is "believe." I believe strongly in the truth of Christianity. My neighbor may believe just as strongly that God does not even exist. (But I promise you, everyone puts their faith in something, even if it is just themselves.) One of us is wrong, and we both know it.

We both may falter at times. In a moment of personal pain or weakness, I may briefly wonder if my prayers are reaching higher than the ceiling. In a moment of personal pain and need, he may utter a short prayer just on the outside chance that Someone hears. But the fact is, we've each made a decision and our lives are our vote.

I may be the one who is wrong. But, in this case, I think not. And I believe that betting eternity on Christ is a very good wager.



believe in the Holy Yes, I do. With

strength, I do. Some of you will quickly

believe in God, the

Father almighty, creator of heaven

and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ,

recognize those words and phrases as coming from what is traditionally known as

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his only Son,

Spirit . . ."

our Lord. . . . I

all of my heart.

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InThis Decision

Our Lives Are Our Vote

The time comes when every person must choose in

whom or what he will place his ultimate trust.

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