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THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN EVIDENCE

Christianity appeals to the intellect. The Bible repeatedly urges us to seek knowledge and wisdom from God, and to flee ignorance and superstition. Jesus told Paul that He was sending him to the Gentiles “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light” (Acts 26:18). The message which Paul took to the Gentiles was not some new philosophy, but was a factual account of events that had occurred at Jerusalem only a few years before – the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And because of these events, Paul urged the Gentiles to abandon their idols and superstitions and come to a new religion of truth and light.

It is important that we understand the uniqueness of Christianity. Some religions are based on the founder's

claim to have received a private revelation from God; some are based on the founder's philosophy of life; some involve a method of thought control; some rely on obvious myths and fables. To such religions evidence is not important. But Christianity is different. For, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty." (2 Pet. 1:16)

Christianity is unique among the world's great religions in its claim to be based on historical fact testified to by many eyewitnesses. Evidence is of vital importance to a religion that makes such a claim. Christians claim that God actually has intervened in human history and that great events have occurred involving nations and governments and many people. As Paul said in his defense before King Agrippa, "The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner." (Acts 26:26)

Some Christians are uncomfortable with a study of Christian evidences. They feel that such a study shows a lack of faith. But God does not call us to a blind faith. He calls us to an intelligent faith. God has provided the evidence and He has given us minds that are capable of understanding and evaluating that evidence. Surely He expects us to be diligent in our study of that evidence and to be honest in our evaluation. He wants our faith to be based on the firm foundation of historical truth.

JESUS' EVIDENCE TO PROVE HIS CLAIMS.

Jesus was careful to provide the evidence necessary

to give a firm factual foundation for our faith. After His resurrection He ate with the apostles, had them touch Him, and gave other proof that He was physically alive. "After His suffering, He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:3)

Jesus often referred people to evidence that proved He was what He claimed to be, the Son of God. After John the Baptist was put in prison, he apparently became concerned as to whether or not Jesus was the long awaited Messiah and sent his followers to ask Jesus. Jesus referred them to the evidence. "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Matt. 11:4-5)

To unbelieving Jews, Jesus also offered the evidence of His miracles. "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me." (John 5:36) He gave them further evidence by referring to the Old Testament prophecies that were being fulfilled in His life. "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5:39-40)

When Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus assured His disciples that anyone who had seen Him had seen the Father, and made this appeal to the evidence: "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (John 14:11).

After His resurrection, Jesus joined two disciples on the road to Emmaus who were in deep despair because this Jesus, whom they had hoped would be the Messiah, had instead been put to death. Jesus admonished them for failing to believe the Old Testament prophets and then gave them powerful evidence of His Messiahship by showing how scores of prophecies, made hundreds and even thousands of years before, had been fulfilled in His life and death. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

Since Jesus was careful to provide so much evidence for our benefit and made such frequent use of the evidence Himself, it is clear that a careful study of Christian evidences is vitally important to us.

EVIDENCES IN THE APOSTLES' PREACHING

The last instructions the apostles received from Jesus before He departed into Heaven stressed their role as witnesses. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

True to this command, the apostles went forth testifying as to what they had seen and heard during their time with Jesus. In the very first sermon preached to the new Church, Peter spent most of his time talking about the evidence for Christ's deity. He said "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you

yourselves know." (Acts 2:22) Note Peter's emphasis on the fact that many of his hearers had themselves witnessed these miracles, and that these miracles proved Jesus was accredited by God. Continuing in verses 24 to 31, Peter used the proof of fulfilled prophecy, quoting from Scriptures written a thousand years earlier by King David and fulfilled by the resurrection of Jesus. Finally at verse 32, Peter gave the eye-witness testimony of himself and the others with him of the fact that Jesus had risen from the tomb.

About three thousand people who heard this sermon, believed and were baptised that very day. Their faith was not a blind faith. They had heard evidence that was sufficient to convince any reasonable person that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Their faith was an intelligent faith and the action they took was an intelligent response to that faith.

Other sermons recorded in Acts repeatedly make use of Christian evidences. For example, in his sermon at Antioch of Pisidia, Paul said, "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning Him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath." (Acts 13:27) Thus, not only were the ancient prophecies fulfilled in the life of Jesus, they actually were fulfilled unwittingly by the very ones who were trying to discredit and destroy Him. And as always, Paul appealed to the great evidence of the Resurrection. "But God raised Him from the dead, and for many days He was seen by those who had traveled with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now witnesses to our people." (Acts 13:30-31)

The extensive use of Christian evidences by the inspired apostles gives further proof of the importance

of this subject for our study today.

EVIDENCE: ONE PURPOSE

The Gospel writers were inspired, not only to record the life and teachings of Jesus, but also to present evidence of His deity. Matthew was especially careful to show how Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in the life of Jesus, frequently making such statements as:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" – which means, "God with us" (Matt. 1:22-23).

Luke began his Gospel with this statement of purpose:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

John declared the purpose of his Gospel as follows:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

In his first epistle, John explained the purpose of the New Testament writers as follows:

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 seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the 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 our joy complete (I John 1:1-4)

Certainly if it were a purpose of the New Testament writers to present the evidence to us, it should be our purpose to study that evidence very carefully.

. TWO GOALS OF THIS STUDY

By now it should be clear that God wants us to study Christian evidences. He wants us to have a firm factual foundation for our faith, so nothing can move us away from Him. In the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, after presenting evidence to prove that Jesus “has indeed been raised from the dead,” thereby assuring us that our faith is not in vain, but is firmly grounded on historical truth, Paul concluded with this reasonable exhortation:

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain (I Cor. 15:58).

So one important purpose of this study is to strengthen our faith by giving us convincing evidence that the things we believe are true. This does not mean that feeling is eliminated and our faith consists solely of intellectual conviction. Love, joy, peace – the beautiful feelings that go with our faith are essential. The important thing to remember is that these wonderful feelings are the result of our faith – the fruit of the Spirit – and not the cause of our faith. Facts, not feeling, should be the foundation of our faith.

Feelings are vitally important to a Christian. They show that our faith is real and that the Holy Spirit dwells within. They are blessings that greatly enrich our lives. But our faith should be based on the facts, on the evidence, on God's truth. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus said some seed fell on rocky ground and, because of shallow roots, withered away when the sun became hot. He explained this part of the parable as follows:

The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away (Matt. 13:20-21).

We have all experienced times of discouragement when we have wondered if the things we believe are real. At such times, when our good feelings fail us, how important it is to know that our faith is deeply rooted in sound reason and the facts of history.

The other main purpose of a study of Christian evidences is to prepare Christians to witness to others. Even in the days of the apostles, people demanded

proof of the facts upon which Christianity is based. As the body of human knowledge has increased up to our own time, the demand for sound evidence has become more insistent. Plenty of evidence is available, but few are aware of its existence. Christians have a duty to supply that need.

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15).

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Col. 4:5-6).

When people came to Jesus seeking the truth, He referred them to the evidence. The apostles did the same. When Christians are asked "the reason for the hope that you have," they should be prepared to "make the most of every opportunity." They should know the facts of history upon which Christianity is firmly grounded.

NOT EVERYTHING HAS TO BE PROVED

Because our faith is based on good evidence does not mean that everything has to be proved. Many things are not subject to proof. When Jesus tells us our sins are forgiven, or says He has prepared a place for us in Heaven, we believe Him because we trust Him. We trust Him because we are convinced He is the Son of God and we arrived at this conviction

because of the evidence. Martha shows the way in this in her conversation with Jesus after the death of her brother Lazarus.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:25-27).

It is doubtful that Martha fully understood what Jesus had said to her. But understand or not, she could quickly answer that she believed all that He said because she had already been convinced by the evidence that He is the Son of God.

Like Martha, when we are convinced by the evidence that Jesus is the Son of God, we believe all that He says whether we can prove it or not, or even whether we understand it or not. In like manner, when we are convinced by the evidence that the Bible is the Word of God, we accept all that it says, even those parts we cannot prove by direct evidence.

THE DEGREE OF PROOF REQUIRED

The study of Christian evidences is a study of matters of fact. Factual matters or events are not subject to absolute, mathematical proof. They are always subject to some possible doubt. For example, we all believe that George Washington was the first president of the United States. But it would be impossible to prove it beyond all possible doubt. The record in all the history books in the world could be doubted on

the ground that history books do sometimes make mistakes. The inscriptions on all monuments could be doubted on the ground that inscriptions are sometimes in error. No matter what proof is offered, some possible doubt could be raised.

But it is not reasonable to raise such doubts as to George Washington's presidency. It is not reasonable to expect any factual matter to be proved beyond all possible doubt. The highest standard of proof required in our courts of law is that required in criminal cases, where juries are instructed that they must find from the evidence that the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Upon such a finding a defendant can be sentenced to death. No greater proof is possible.

In our study of Christian evidences, we accept this same high standard. We will be looking for proof beyond a reasonable doubt. It is wrong to expect more. This is the mistake Thomas made when he refused to believe that the risen Lord had appeared to the other ten (John 20:24-25). Thomas had been with Jesus for three years and had seen plenty of evidence to show He is the Son of God; he had heard Jesus repeatedly predict His resurrection; he had heard reports of the resurrection from the women and others; he had probably been out to see the empty tomb; and he had the direct testimony of ten good men whom he had every reason to trust. Certainly this was ample evidence to prove the matter beyond a reasonable doubt. Thomas' doubt was unreasonable, and Jesus rebuked him:

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who would not demand a personal appearance, but with honest, open minds would consider the evidence and come to a reasonable decision. This is how we should approach our study of Christian Evidences.

Study Questions

1. Why is a study of evidences important to Christianity and not to other religions?
2. Explain why the Christian faith is an intelligent faith and not a blind faith.
3. Give an example of the use of evidences by Jesus.
4. What use of evidence did Peter employ in his sermon on Pentecost in Acts 2?
5. What use of evidence do you find in Peter's sermon at the temple in Acts 3:12-26?
6. What reason did Luke give for writing his Gospel?
7. What two things should we accomplish by a study of Christian evidences?
8. Why is it not necessary for everything we believe to be proved by direct evidence? How did Martha show us the way in this?
9. What degree of proof should we require? Explain why. How did Thomas error in this respect?
10. Why should our faith be based on facts, not feeling?