

Monthly Update

April 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This “Monthly Update” is going to be different from most others that you have received in that, beginning on the back of this page, it starts off with “Who is this Jesus?” – a reprint of the chapter with that same title from the book *The Issues @ Hand*. I feel led to include it along with some of the other issues facing our United Methodist Church. Of especial interest are the “listening sessions” related to the A Way Forward issue – and what we surmise might be going on behind the scenes. There is a very good article by Dr. Riley Case of The Confessing Movement in our “A Way Forward” section.

After all of the “listening sessions” are held and opinions considered, I believe that many bishops are going to advocate for a position they have supported all along – one of so-called “inclusion” and diversity – that will lead to the fracturing of our church.

During Easter Season, I often greet others – complete strangers along with friends – with “Happy Easter” and a smile. Recently as I was going into the post office, it seemed as if I had roused a guy (about 55 years old) out of a walking sleep. He replied, “Oh, yes, it is, isn’t it?” That got me to thinking about where he might be spiritually.

We need to understand the significance of why we celebrate the resurrection – it is the most important event in the history of the world. We celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25th – but the reason that He came to earth was to suffer and die for our sins. It is important to focus on that reason – and on the reality of His rising from the dead. We need to know that this is not myth, fable, or some “made up tale designed to make us feel good” but that it is firmly grounded in the reality of history. When we lock that into the core of our understanding, we can put everything else in perspective and rest on the assurance that our faith is rooted in fact, the Truth of Jesus. Anything else that is going on with us we can balance with the knowledge that “He is risen!”

Two years ago the late Robert Lankford of Duncanville, Texas had given a response to anger at Concerned Methodists for not supporting the “Global Warming” theories; his observation made at that time applies to what is a fundamental problem in our church – and, indeed, in our nation and our world:

“Concerned Methodists is concerned about the earth. But our main concern is the falling away, as a nation & our Methodist Church leaders, from the study of God’s Word & our task to bring us back to what made this nation great: Christian values as outlined in the Bible.”

The winter months see decreased support for Christian ministries, as it has been for us in recent months. May we ask for your continued financial support and prayers – that we be effective in what He has called us to do? Thank you.

In His service,

Allen O. Morris
Executive Director

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April 2018 Update

Bits and Pieces from across the United Methodist Church

The best sermons are lived, not preached.

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The Good Stuff

+ ***Faithfulness Brings No Regrets.*** Back when I was a parish minister and regularly preparing sermons, I would often find poetry that spoke to me. One such poem that has stayed with me over the years was written by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Let me share it with you.

One ship drives east and another drives west
With the selfsame winds that blow;
'Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales
That tells them the way to go.

Like the winds of the sea are the winds of fate,
As we voyage along through life;
'Tis the set of the soul
That decides the goal
And not the calm or the strife.

Looking back on nearly three score and ten years, that poem still rings true. We are given one life and one life only to live. We make our choices and arrive at our destinations. With the help of my parents and others who touched my life, I was fortunate enough to discover that truth at a young age. So I made a decision to use that one life as a follower of Christ. It was the wisest decision I ever made about anything.

The years have come and gone. They shall never return. I have invested this life in trying to follow where God calls. Had I followed my own preferences, I would have gone another way. If I had my druthers, I would have rather been given

another type of ministry, one where I could have been a hands-on participant in helping the poor and needy. One where I would have gone to my little corner to serve and only a handful of people would have ever heard my name.

But God, in His wisdom, had other plans. He put me down in the very middle of a raging culture war. It was a ministry of confrontation where decisions were not always between black and white but often tinted with gray.

But I thank God there was a place where He could use me. And I thank God for the privilege of serving him in the capacity to which He called me.

Whatever lot God chooses for your life, follow it. It may not be the one you want, but it is the one He has given. When He says for you to take up your cross and follow Him, do it. Life will be richer because of it.

– The Reverend (Dr.) Don Wildmon. From the late 1970s through 2010, Don Wildmon, founder and president emeritus of American Family Association, wrote hundreds of monthly columns for AFA Journal.

+ **Praise Him!** My commute to the office was particularly stressful this morning. The traffic was crazy and unpredictable. The talk radio host was annoying. His subject – the national debt – frightening. New potholes in the pavement downtown jarred my truck's suspension. And elsewhere, road construction narrowed lanes and increased drive time. Thankfully, upon arrival, there were plenty of parking spaces to choose from. As the engine went silent, I sat for a minute and stared through the windshield. An inner voice spoke two words: "Praise Me!"

Instantly, I knew the Holy Spirit was all around me to bless and restore. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1, NIV) The commute was over. Focusing on the frustration would only

drain me more. Being ashamed of it wouldn't help either. No. I needed to start where I was and see the moment as an opportunity for God to order my day and control my thoughts.

The takeaway for me was threefold:

1. Life in our modern world is stressful. Jesus said, "I've told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world." (John 16:33, The Message Bible)
2. God can fit everything into a pattern for good. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28, NIV)
3. No matter our circumstances, He remains worthy of our praise and worship. David wrote, "I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth." (Psalm 34:1, ESV)

Graciously, the Spirit reminded me that Christ is above all things: my problems, my frustration, my anxiety, and my fear. By praising Him for His help in that moment, I knew He would raise me above my circumstances. The uplift to my soul was remarkable – and immediate!

Looking back now, I see the whole experience as a teachable moment. So if today – right now – you feel yourself weighed down by the pressures of this world, I recommend "de-stressing" by refocusing on Jesus Christ. Begin verbalizing your praises to Him who is with us always (Matthew 28:20). I'm confident that you will also enjoy a renewal of peace, hope, joy and strength to sustain you through the balance of your day.

There's no better vantage point from which to live and work at the intersection of faith and public policy these days. Take back the high ground of your Spirit-filled life with "the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9, NKJV)

Okay, that's it. Stay awesome in Christ. Good things are on the way!

– Thomas, NC Family, PO Box 20607, Raleigh, NC 27619

Of Interest.

+ *Timothy Alspach*. [Note: I know his son and widow, which brings it home to me. Histories like this abound. – AOM]

For anyone attending religious services this weekend, exercising your constitutional rights to worship freely in your own way, put yourself in the combat boots of soldiers preparing to move from base camp to their attack positions while pilots from air bases and Navy carriers carry out daily bombing missions. No services other than Islam were openly allowed in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Muhammad the Prophet... U.S. Army chaplains were under orders not to be interviewed on the record by journalists, lest their comments offend Saudi sensibilities. But following Bedouin tradition, whatever happened "inside the tent" was permissible. Accordingly, Sunday services were held behind a wall of sand topped with razor wire on January 20 in Abqaiq, the desert home of the Second Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division. The patron saint of paratroopers is Saint Michael the Archangel, who descended from the heavens to fight Lucifer and his legions in Hell, because even the Almighty needs a contingency force. Here's an excerpt from [the book] *Drive On*:

"An Arabian tent that doubled as a chow hall was converted into a chapel. Paratroopers brought their rifles and gas masks to the non-denominational service, taking seats on folding chairs that served as pews. The altar was a wooden table.

Staff Sergeant Timothy Alspach, 33, of Groveport, Ohio, the senior medic for the Second Brigade, assisted at the service. He said a steeple and other niceties weren't required for worship.

'Christianity is not about being in a fancy church. Christianity is like having a personal relationship with God. My faith is a source of strength for me,' Alspach said. 'I've gone over my equipment a hundred times. I got a lot of quiet time to reflect, to think about what's going to happen, how it's going to go down. I wonder how I'm going to react to seeing one of my best buddies dying. It's scary to think about. This isn't about the flag and apple pie anymore. What you think about is the buddy next to you.'

At the service, paratroopers sang hymns and bowed their heads in prayer while armed guards in Humvees patrolled the camp perimeter and mechanics readied vehicles for the move north. In a sign that things were coming to a head, attendance at such services had peaked. Just like their fathers and grandfathers before them, the infantrymen were making inner preparations. Protestants, Catholics and Jews attended. Some gathered in

tight clusters to read and discuss Scripture. Others read Bibles in silence. They were even mindful of what the guys on the other side would be up against.

‘I’ve said prayers for the Iraqi soldiers. When you come right down it, their plight isn’t much different from ours,’ said Major Baxter Ennis, the officer in charge of my detail.”

Footnote: “One of the primary motivations for writing this book was to honor the service of those who carried out the mission at the ground level. I just learned from friends and family of Timothy Alspach that he was killed in 1997 while serving with the 82nd Aviation Brigade (Airborne). He was the medic who gave me a shot of gamma globulin in preparation for the move north. He welcomed me as a brother, and brothers don’t always have the same last name, and brothers don’t forget. Rest in peace, Airborne. You are remembered.”

A Way Forward.

[Note: There are new recipients of “The Monthly Update” who may not be familiar with the Commission on a Way Forward. This is provided for their benefit: “The 32-member Commission on a Way Forward (AWF) was appointed by the Council of Bishops to assist the bishops in their charge from the 2016 General Conference to lead the church forward amid the present impasse related to LGBTQ inclusion and resulting questions about the unity of the church.” – AOM]

+ *Commission on a Way Forward clarifies values as it presents two sketches to bishops.*

DALLAS – What is Christ’s way forward for doing mission and ministry in the worldwide United Methodist Church? That is the question bishops pondered during their February meeting in Dallas as they received an updated report from the Commission on a Way Forward. In the report given to the Council this week, the Commission shared with the bishops two sketches that carry forward many of the values and principles of the three sketches that were presented to the bishops at their meeting in November. “The sketches of these two models represent the values, concerns and feedback we have received since we reported to the Council in November. The two sketches provide avenues for unity, contextualization and mission,” said Bishop Ken Carter, one of the moderators of the Commission.

The bishops offered feedback but did not vote on the two revised sketches, instead asking the Commission to continue working to prepare a final report to be presented to the bishops at their April/May meeting.

Summary of the sketches of the models Here is a summary of the two sketches in process. Details may change based on the work of the Commission at its next meeting.

One Church Model: The One Church Model gives churches the room they need to maximize the presence of United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible. The One Church Model provides a generous unity that gives conferences, churches, and pastors the flexibility to uniquely reach their missional context in relation to human sexuality without changing the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church.

Multi-Branch: One Church Model: This model is grounded in a unified core that includes shared doctrine and services and one Council of Bishops, while also creating different branches that have clearly defined values such as accountability, contextualization and justice. The five U.S. jurisdictions would be replaced by three connectional conferences, each covering the whole country, based on theology and perspective on LGBTQ ministry (i.e. progressive, contextual, traditional branches). Annual conferences would decide which connectional conference to affiliate with; only local churches who choose a branch other than the one chosen by their annual conference would vote to join another conference.

During the week’s meeting in Dallas, the bishops also heard reports on the impact of both models on pension benefits, the connection, central conferences and fiscal responsibilities. Council President Bishop Bruce Ough noted that the process of seeking a way forward was grounded in three major values:

1. A renewed attention to our public mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, especially with those who are not yet a part of our churches.

2. A focus on contextuality in a global church, and our continuing call to learn from each other, listen to each other.
3. Continuing to work with traditional, contextual and progressive values that are present in two models, one that is more aligned with a contextual church with the removed language about human sexuality, a second which differentiates between these values as different branches of one church.

At the close of the meeting, the Council of Bishops offered condolences to the family of the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham, the noted evangelist, who passed away recently. The Council of Bishops meeting began with worship and the presidential address/sermon on Sunday afternoon and ended February 28, with a Love Feast.

The Commission on a Way Forward will meet in Los Angeles in a few weeks and then give its final report to the Council of Bishops at the April/May meeting in Chicago.

– Rev. Dr. Maidstone Mulenga, Director of Communications – Council of Bishops; February 28, 2018.

+ *The 32-member Commission on a Way Forward to prepare final report.*

Washington D.C. – The 32-member Commission on a Way Forward met in Los Angeles on March 19-22 to prepare a final report to be submitted to the Council of the Bishops for consideration by the bishops at their April/May meeting. “The Commission is focused on suggesting a way forward that pays attention to our public mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, especially with those who are not yet a part of our churches,” said Bishop Ken Carter, resident bishop of the Florida Area. “We are also focused on contextuality in a global church, and our continuing call to learn from each other and listen to each other.” Bishop Carter, who is the incoming president of the Council of Bishops, is one of the three moderators of the Commission, together with Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball of West Virginia Area and retired Bishop David Yemba from the Democratic Republic of Congo. In preparing for the final report, the Commission will continue to work with traditional, contextual and progressive values drafted in the sketches of models that were presented to the Council of Bishops at their November and February meetings.

In the report given to the Council at the February meeting, the Commission shared with the bishops two sketches that carry forward many of the values and principles of the three sketches presented to the bishops at the November meeting.

The bishops offered feedback but did not vote on the revised sketches, instead asking the Commission to continue working on a final report to be presented at the April/May meeting. At that meeting, the bishops, in collaboration with the collective work of the Commission, will decide on a report to be presented to the Special Session of the General Conference called for February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri.

– Rev. Dr. Maidstone Mulenga, Director of Communications – Council of Bishops; March 14, 2018.

National Council of Churches. Member Contributions Drop at National Council of Churches. Audited financial reports show that the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA) is receiving significantly less money from its member communions than it has in past years. The ecumenical council has posted an audit of their 2016 year. Grants and contributions are down significantly from the previous year (2015), although they are more modestly down compared to the year before that (2014):

Member Communions 2014: \$613,781

Member Communions 2015: \$847,823

Member Communions 2016: \$582,986

Other giving to the council, which includes gifts from individuals, has also declined:

Others (including individual giving) 2014: \$187,856

Others (including individual giving) 2015: \$202,804

Others (including individual giving) 2016: \$149,669

Decreases in member giving do not mean that the council is in trouble – unrestricted net assets have significantly increased for the past three years, growing from \$1.3 million at the end of 2014 to \$1.6 million at the end of

2015 to \$2.4 million at the end of 2016. Changes in expenses/investment returns have contributed to total net assets for the council. The NCC budget is partly sustained from royalties like the NRSV Bible, as well as investment income. But revenues have dropped a significant amount, and the council is taking in less from Member Communion than ever before:

- Total Operating Revenues (2014): \$2,531,743
- Total Operating Revenues (2015): \$2,833,445
- Total Operating Revenues (2016): \$2,174,484

The council has gravitated towards politically liberal causes for much of its history, but financial difficulties and reorganizations have caused much of that programmatic work to be concluded or spun off into separate organizations. In recent years, the NCC has chiefly focused its resources upon issues of peacemaking (pacifism) and criminal incarceration. In 2006 the NCC had an approximately \$12 million budget and employed 40 staff, most of which were based in the now-shuttered New York headquarters. Today, the council has an annual budget one-quarter the size and lists seven staff and a single office at the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

No member communion has severed a relationship with the NCC since the departure of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America in the mid-2000s, but participation by member communions has decreased. Customarily, about one-third of the NCC’s 38 member communions contribute a significant amount to the council’s budget, typically led by the United Methodist Church and Presbyterian Church (USA). Another third of NCC member communions give a token amount, while the remaining third make no financial contribution.

The NCC has not organized a governing General Assembly since 2010, when the council held annual gatherings jointly with the Church World Service. A more modestly-sized Christian Unity Gathering has convened outside of Washington, D.C. for the past few years. In 2017, the gathering was themed “Resilience, Resistance, and Persistence.”

The NCC describes itself as “a leading voice of witness to the living Christ,” claiming to represent more than 40 million individuals from Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, historic African-American, and Living Peace traditions. The council has mostly focused around the Mainline Protestant churches, joined by historically African-American and Eastern Orthodox churches “to advance a shared agenda of peace, progress, and positive change.”

Statements made by the NCC in the past year oppose the U.S. decision to declare Jerusalem as capital of Israel, oppose GOP tax reform plans as biblically indefensible, and call for gun control measures. At the same time, the council has remained silent on issues of marriage and sanctity of life.

– The Institute on Religion & Democracy post, 1023 15th Street NW, Suite 601, Washington, DC 20005; February 5, 2018.

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You tell us that the man who has striven to live a good life and has tried to be religious... – that he is in the same position as a man who has never prayed, never been near a place of worship, and has lived only for sin and evil..., you say that they are in the same lost condition? That is precisely what the Cross of Christ says. – Dr.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, evangelist

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Who is this Jesus?

What makes Christianity unique? What is the “logic” behind the existence of this faith? This is a question that needs to be examined. In other words, we need to know why we believe what we do. The questions we need to answer are, “Why do we think that we are so unique among the world’s religions? Why shouldn’t there be many paths to God? What makes us think that Christianity is so special?”

The Historical Jesus

Central to our faith as Christians are the person and works of Jesus Christ: He claimed to be no less than the Son of God – and our Savior. Central to his claim is possibly the single most important event in the history of the world: the resurrection. This single event has been called the linchpin of Christianity. So, for critics to claim that Christianity is just one of many religions, they must explain the empty tomb.

Some people tried to claim that Jesus never really existed on earth in human form. C. A. Bower was the last person to attempt to do this – in 1857. The “problem” is that there is just too much proof that he actually lived, walked, talked, and associated with people. There are over ten secular accounts that Christ walked the face of the earth. Let’s look at just three.

Flavius Josephus – a Jewish historian wrote, “Now there was about this time Jesus [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.”¹

As far as Josephus’ writings, Regis Nicoll makes the point in his article “All Evidence Beyond Reasonable Doubt” that, “There are several remarkable things about this passage. First, Josephus was a member of the community most offended by the Christian message. Second, there is no hint of criticism about the reports of Christ’s post-resurrection appearances; to the contrary, Josephus seems to give credence to the apostolic account. Third, Josephus’ indictment of his countrymen and his Roman rulers was sure to rile both groups, and stands as a testimony to his objectivity. And lastly, this first-century account runs counter to the historical revisionists who propose that Christ’s divinity was a concoction of a fourth-century theocracy.”¹

Cornelius Tacitus – a Roman historian wrote, “While Rome burned, Nero accused the Christians; ‘Christ’ who was founder of the sect, was put to death during the reign of Tiberius, but the pernicious superstition (i.e., Christianity) repressed for a time was not only in Judea, but broke out in Rome.”²

A third reference is found in a letter from Publius Lentulus, Governor of Judea, to the Roman Senate, that reads – in somewhat modernized language, “There has appeared in these times, and still is, a man of great power named Jesus Christ, who is called by the Gentiles the prophet of truth, whom his disciples call the Son of God; raising the dead and healing diseases, a man in stature middling tall, and comely, having a reverend countenance, which they that look upon may love and fear; having hair of the hue of an unripened hazel-nut and smooth almost down to his ears but from the ears in curling locks somewhat darker and more shining, waving over his shoulders; having a parting at the middle of the head according to the fashion of the Nazareans; a brow smooth and very calm, with a face without a wrinkle or any blemish, which a moderate color makes beautiful. With the nose and mouth no fault can be found; having a full beard of the color of his hair, not long but a little forked at the chin; having an expression simple and mature, the eyes gray, glancing, and clear; in rebuke terrible, in admonition kind and lovable, cheerful yet keeping gravity; sometimes he has wept, but never laughed; in stature of body tall and straight, with hands and arms fair to look upon; in talk grave, reserved and modest so that he was rightly called a prophet....”³

So we know that Jesus physically existed in human form.

Indeed, there are many religions. We can even visit the tombs of some of their spiritual founders: Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha. As a matter of fact, when I was stationed in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, I had a chance to travel. During one of these trips I visited what is reputed to be the tomb of Buddha.

We can visit the tomb of Jesus, too, but there’s one difference: it’s empty! The Bible itself points out the importance of the resurrection, “...and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover, we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised; for if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”⁴

Even our enemies recognized this fact. Gulen Ahmed leader of the Amadia sect of the Muslim faith told his followers on his death bed, “In your war against Christianity, attack at the point of the Resurrection.”⁵

Apologetics

Now let’s look at what we know: We know that Jesus was a literal, historical man. We know that he was executed. And we know that three days later, the tomb was empty. So if a person is to successfully discredit the Christian faith, he must account for the missing body. There are four theories used to try to explain away the empty tomb.

The Pharisees Stole the Body

The first is that the Pharisees stole the body. The reasoning was that the Pharisees got together after they had succeeded in having Jesus crucified and talked about how his disciples had claimed that he would rise from the dead. To prevent them from stealing Jesus’

body and causing even more trouble, they would steal it first to forestall any such attempt by the disciples. The problem with this theory is that when Jesus’ followers started growing in number claiming that they had seen him risen from the dead, the Pharisees would have produced the body – and Christianity would have died right then. This theory is the weakest of the four and cannot be supported in the least.

The Disciples Stole the Body

The second theory is that the disciples stole the body. There are many problems associated with this. The first is the Roman seal; of itself, it would not have stopped anyone. But whoever dared to break a Roman seal would incur a death sentence that would be carried out with all of the persistence of the Roman Empire. Not many people were brave enough to take such a drastic, fatal step.

The second problem with this argument is the issue of fighting the Roman soldiers who had been stationed to guard the body of Jesus. At that time, the eleven disciples would have had to overcome the sixteen Roman guards, the most efficient fighting machine on earth at that time. The contention that the Roman guards might have gone to sleep enabling the disciples to steal the body is equally implausible. Given the high state of discipline and the camaraderie among these men; their knowing that the penalty was death if they should fail in their assigned duty; and the impossibility of the disciples’ being able to steal the body without waking the guards renders this idea insupportable.⁶

In addition, prior to the crucifixion the disciples were like scared rabbits; they had all fled when Jesus was taken captive on the Mount of Olives, and only one had dared to attend his crucifixion. After the resurrection there was a remarkable change; they suddenly became brave and fearlessly preached that Jesus had risen from the dead! History shows that ten out of eleven of the disciples went to their deaths claiming Jesus’ resurrection. Tradition has it that “Doubting” Thomas was killed in Madras, India. John, the lone survivor, was reportedly boiled in oil and then exiled to Patmos.⁷ This last reason was one of the factors that led to the conversion of Chuck Colson. A student of human nature, Colson had reasoned that people don’t die trying to uphold a lie; if a person’s life is about to be taken for what he knows is false, he will admit to the truth. This aspect was supported by Dr. Lehman Strauss when he stated, “...we cannot imagine the disciples...going into all the world to preach a living Christ at the sacrifice of their own lives under such false pretenses.”⁸

Dr. George Schweitzer, a chemistry professor, analyzed possible alternative explanations for the empty tomb. After affirming the resurrection, Dr. Schweitzer concluded that a miracle almost as great as the resurrection was the change in the disciples. Nothing less could account for their courage, vision, and sacrifice in proclaiming Christ.⁹

Finally, Colson drew from his own personal experience as special counsel to President Nixon and states that a hoax such as the disciples would have had to perpetrate would not hold. He personally saw how conspiracies fall apart under pressure and the truth would have leaked out despite the attempts by some of the most powerful men on earth during that era.¹⁰ He further elaborated, “Is it really likely that a deliberate cover-up, a plot to perpetrate a lie about the Resurrection, could have survived the violent persecution of the apostles, the scrutiny of early

church councils, the horrendous purge of first-century believers? 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 these men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive.”¹¹

On the Watergate conspiracy compared to the disciples’ behavior, Nicoll further observed that, “Even for the impartial critic, nothing short of steadfast belief could explain how a band of cowards could be transformed into men of valor overnight. Despite the constant threat of torture, alienation, imprisonment, and death, the disciples held firm to their account of a resurrected Messiah. They surely had ample opportunity and motive for coming clean about the “cover-up,” or at least, for reconsidering their testimony. Yet, although ten of the eleven original apostles were martyred for their faith, there is no evidence that any one of them ever recanted.

“The behavior of the disciples only makes sense once we accept that they actually believed that the incredible story they were telling was true.”¹²

“In his book *Loving God*, Chuck Colson writes about his involvement in the Watergate conspiracy. Colson describes “hand-picked loyalists” who believed passionately in their leader, and who had sacrificed everything – lucrative personal careers, privacy, and family – for the sake of their leader and their noble cause.

Nicoll goes on to make the point that, “These were men who had the power and prestige of the highest office in the land. Men whose leader was victorious, having just won a landslide election. Men who, with a word, could mobilize the military, fire personnel, or order a private jet or limo. Men who had everything to lose from a failed cover-up. Yet with all that was at stake, Colson writes that this small inner circle ‘could not hold a conspiracy together for more than two weeks.’¹³

“Unlike Christ’s disciples, who faced beatings and execution, the Watergate conspirators faced at most, a prison term, embarrassment, and an end to the perks and clout of the White House. But within weeks after hints of the cover-up reached Judge Sirica, “the natural instinct for self-preservation was so overwhelming that the conspirators, one by one, deserted their leader, walked away from their cause, [and] turned their backs on the power, prestige, and privileges,” writes Colson.

“In contrast, the disciples were powerless men whose unpopular leader had been defeated, and who quickly found themselves guilty by association. Yet these “marked men” boldly entered Jerusalem, the most hostile place on earth to deliver their thoroughly unwelcome message – a message that would have been readily contested by any number of persons, had the counter evidence existed.

“Both the Jewish leadership and the Roman authorities were not only highly motivated to quash any resurrection ruse, but had the political muscle and wherewithal to extract confessions and find the body, if indeed it existed. That no such evidence came forth is reflected in the late first century account by the Jewish historian, Josephus.”¹⁴

It can be seen that neither can this theory be supported.

The “Wrong Tomb”

The third attempt to explain away the missing body is called the “Wrong Tomb” theory. The reasoning was that everyone, in their

grief and anguish, went to the wrong tomb. There! That explains it! The only problem is that if one is to support this idea, he would also have to believe that: Mary in her grief went to the wrong tomb; Peter & John in their hurry went to the wrong tomb; the Pharisees in their anger and fury also went to the wrong tomb; the sixteen Roman soldiers fainted in front of the wrong tomb; and Joseph of Arimathea owned a tomb and didn’t even know where it was! This would be laughable in the extreme. This theory cannot stand the test of serious reasoning.

The “Passover Plot”

The last and most sophisticated theory is known as the “Passover Plot.” This idea is that a resurrection hoax would be perpetrated by Jesus. Since he knew there would be a coming confrontation with the Jewish religious leaders, he would stage it so as to appear to rise from the dead. To do this, he worked out an elaborate plan. When he spoke the code words, “I thirst,” a sponge with drugs would be put to his lips, he would drink the

mixture which would then put him into a death-like coma. In the coolness of the tomb, he would revive, push the stone aside and walk away so that His disciples would think that he had risen from the dead. This seems to be a pretty good explanation – until you examine the facts.

First, is that when the Roman soldier pierced his side, blood and water flowed out. When asked about this, a surgeon remarked that this was a clinical sign of death and explained that the blood separates from the clear watery-like liquid and accumulates in the chest cavity. So for Jesus to fake this, he would have had to know this – some 1900 years before this medical reality had been discovered. This is reinforced by the testimony presented in an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, “Clearly the weight of the historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound on his side was inflicted. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.”¹⁵

The second problem with this explanation is the beating Jesus had received, the lashing of 39 stripes with a flagrum – a whip. Once I was talking with two men who were discussing a mutual friend of theirs who lived in the Middle East: he had gotten drunk and killed an Arab. Rather than being executed as was the law, he was given 39 lashes and sent back to the United States. I responded, “Man, he was really lucky!” One of the men looked at me and replied, “No, Allen, you don’t understand. That beating was so severe that it almost killed him!” I understood the truth of what they meant when I saw a picture of a man being whipped in an Islamic country. It made me sick. Such a beating would have a devastating effect on any man receiving it.

So to describe how this theory would work out: In Jesus’ weakened condition, he would have had to get out of His burial wrapping by himself; push away a stone weighing over a quarter of a ton; overcome sixteen Roman guards, the most efficient fighting machine on earth at that time; and walk away so that no one had seen him. Not believable!

The Bible narrates the visit to the empty tomb on the third day after the crucifixion with the words “...saw and believed.”¹⁶ Dr. Thomas states that, “The construction in the Greek language makes it clear that early on the morning of the resurrection the grave clothes were still wrapped up like a cocoon, but with no body in them.”¹⁷

History is replete with countless First-century martyrs who died believing in the physical resurrection of Christ. For them to have paid the ultimate price, something would have had to persuade them that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead.

The Deaths of the Apostles

Do you know how the apostles themselves died?

1. Matthew: Suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia, killed by a sword wound.
2. Mark: Died in Alexandria, Egypt, after being dragged by horses through the streets until he was dead.
3. Luke: Was hanged in Greece as a result of his preaching to the lost.
4. John: Faced martyrdom when he was boiled in a huge basin of oil during a wave of persecution in Rome, but miraculously delivered from death. He was then sentenced to the mines on the prison island of Patmos, where he wrote his prophetic Book of Revelation. He was later freed and returned to serve as Bishop of Edessa in modern Turkey. He lived to be an old man – the only apostle to die peacefully.
5. Peter: He was crucified upside down on an x-shaped cross. According to church tradition it was because he told his tormentors that he felt unworthy to die in the same way that Jesus Christ had died.
6. James the Just: The leader of the church in Jerusalem, was thrown over a hundred feet down from the southeast pinnacle of the Temple when he refused to deny his faith in Christ. When they discovered that he survived the fall, his enemies beat James to death with a fuller’s club. This was the same pinnacle where Satan had taken Jesus during the Temptation.
7. James, the Great: Son of Zebedee, was a fisherman by trade when Jesus called him to a lifetime of ministry. As a strong leader of the church, James was ultimately beheaded at Jerusalem. Reportedly, the Roman officer who guarded James watched amazed as James defended his faith at his trial. Later, the officer walked beside James to

the place of execution. Overcome by conviction, he declared his new faith to the judge and knelt beside James to accept beheading as a Christian.

8. Bartholomew: Also known as Nathaniel, he was a missionary to Asia. He witnessed for Jesus in present day Turkey. Bartholomew was martyred for his preaching in Armenia where he was flayed to death by a whip.

9. Andrew: Was crucified on an X-shaped cross in Patras, Greece. After being whipped severely by seven soldiers they tied his body to the cross with cords to prolong his agony. His followers reported that when he was led toward the cross, Andrew saluted it in these words: "I have long desired and expected this happy hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ hanging on it." He continued to preach to his tormentors for two days until he expired.

10. Thomas: Was stabbed with a spear in India during one of his missionary trips to establish the church in the sub-continent. Another source says that he was witnessing to a crowd in Madras, India. One of the leaders put a knife to his throat and demanded that Thomas recant. When Thomas refused, his throat was cut and he died.

11. Jude: Was killed with arrows when he refused to deny his faith in Christ.

12. Matthias: The apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot, was stoned and then beheaded.

13. Paul: Was tortured and then beheaded by Emperor Nero at Rome in A-D 67. Paul endured a lengthy imprisonment, which allowed him to write his epistles to the churches he had formed throughout the Roman Empire. These letters, which taught many of the foundational doctrines of Christianity, form a large portion of the New Testament.

Jesus Through the Years

For almost 2,000 years, people have attempted to explain away the resurrection in one of the ways cited above – but have failed.

We know of skeptics who have disbelieved the resurrection. One was Dr. Simon Greenleaf, a professor of law at Harvard in 1842, who was an atheist; he wrote a widely-used book on how to present evidence that cannot be refuted in a court of law. One day, a Christian student challenged him to apply the rules of evidence that he taught to the information that they (the students) had that Jesus rose from the dead. After his attempt, he wrote, "Evidence that such as we have that supports the fact that Jesus rose from the dead has never failed in a court of law." Dr. Greenleaf became an enthusiastic follower of Christ.

Two other atheists were fed up with Christianity and were going to get rid of it by proving two different points: Benjamin Gilbert West set out to prove that "Christ did not rise from the dead." His friend Lloyd Littleton set out to prove that "Saul of Tarsus never converted to Christianity." Two years later they met and discovered that each had failed to prove their original theses but rather confirmed them – and each had become a Christian.

Dr. Frank Morrison, was a British journalist and an atheist, who was determined to rid the world of what he called "the scourge of Christianity" once and for all. After aggressive research, he wrote a book called *Who Moved the Stone? – The book that refused to be written*; this was later published by Zondervan. Dr. Morrison himself became an enthusiastic follower of Christ.¹⁸

Irwin H. Linton, a lawyer who has argued cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, writes that the resurrection "is not only so established that the greatest lawyers have declared it to be the best proved fact of all history, but it is so supported that it is difficult to conceive of any method or line of proof that it lacks which would make [it] more certain." Even for lawyers not inclined to accept the Christian message, Linton states they have been "unable to refute the irresistible force of the cumulative evidence upon which such faith rests."

All conspiracy theories collapse under the weight of historical evidence, as acknowledged by authorities hostile to the Christian message. For instance, historian Michael Grant admits, "Their testimonies cannot prove them to have been right in supposing that Jesus had risen from the dead. However, these accounts do prove that certain people were utterly convinced that that is what he had done." Duke professor E. P. Sanders, has stated, "That Jesus' followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences, I do not know."

Even for the impartial critic, nothing short of steadfast belief could explain how a band of cowards could be transformed into men of valor overnight in the face of torture, alienation, imprisonment, and death. The disciples

held firm to their account of a resurrected Messiah. Although ten of the original 11 apostles were martyred for their faith, as was Paul, there is no evidence that any one of them ever recanted.¹⁹

Lee Strobel, himself an investigative reporter and former atheist, cites multiple extra-biblical references surrounding the crucifixion, two describing the unnatural darkness at the time of Jesus' death. If this had really happened it would surely have been mentioned by others. One is a man named Thallus who wrote a history of the eastern Mediterranean in 52 A.D. Although his work has been lost, reference was made to it by Julius Africanus in 221 A.D.: "Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away the darkness as an eclipse of the sun – unreasonably it seems to me."²⁰ Paul Maier referenced a Greek author who wrote, "This phenomenon, evidently, was visible in Rome, Athens, and other Mediterranean cities." According to Tertullian...it was a "cosmic" or "world event." Phlegon, a Greek author from Caria writing a chronology soon after 137 A.D., reported that in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad (i.e., 33 A.D.) there was "the greatest eclipse of the sun" and that "it became night in the sixth hour of the day [i.e., noon] so that stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea."²¹

The weight of this information is in a testimony given by the late Sir Lionel Luckhoo, a man of extremely logical reasoning and reputed to be the world's greatest lawyer. He states, "I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."²² His reasoning is very similar to that of Dr. Greenleaf, the professor mentioned earlier.

There is no logical choice other than to face the reality that Jesus was crucified, died (was as dead as he could be), and on the third day, rose from the dead. This is a "logical" analysis that has led so many people to understand the truth of the Resurrection. The Bible reassures us on this when Paul the Apostle wrote, "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep."²³

The best summation is given by C. S. Lewis, the brilliant Cambridge University professor and former atheist who was eventually won over by the evidence for Jesus Christ:²⁴

"I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

This is a logical analysis of the resurrection and it has brought many, logical, thinking people such as Lee Strobel to faith in Jesus Christ simply through the compelling proof of the Resurrection.

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One Solitary Life²⁵

Born in an obscure village, he was the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty years old, and then for three years he traveled around the country, stopping long enough to talk and to listen to people and to help where he could.

He never wrote a book. He never had a hit record. He never went to college. He never ran for public office. He never had a family or owned a home. He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

But when he was only 33 years old, the tide of public opinion turned against him, and his friends all rejected him.

When he was arrested, very few wanted anything to do with him. After the trial, he was executed by the state along with admitted thieves. Only because a generous friend offered his own cemetery plot was there any place to bury him.

This all happened over 19 centuries ago, and yet today he is the leading figure of the human race, and the ultimate example of love.

Now it is no exaggeration to say that all the armies that have ever marched, and all the navies that have ever set sail, all the rulers that have ever ruled, all the kings that have ever reigned on this earth; all put together have not affected the life of man on earth like this one solitary Life.²⁵ The man – Christ Jesus.

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Notes:

Who is this Jesus?

Much of this material was originally published in the book *New-Life Witnesses* by Allen O. Morris. Permission granted.

1. Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.3; p. 480. Translated by William Whiston, published by Hendrickson Publishers. (Antiquities) As quoted from the book *New-Life Witnesses* and in the article “All Evidence Beyond Reasonable Doubt” By Regis Nicoll, Articles on the BreakPoint website, 3/30/2007. BreakPoint is a ministry of Chuck Colson or his “Prison Fellowship.” Regis Nicoll is a freelance writer and a Centurion of the Wilberforce Forum. His “All Things Examined” column appears on BreakPoint every other Friday.

2. The Reverend Billy Riggs, United Methodist Minister, taken from a message entitled “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

3. Publius Lentulus, letter as quoted in “A Description of Christ” by Edgar Johnson Goodspeed, and found in *The Book of Jesus* by Calvin Miller.

4. *The Bible*, Corinthians 15:14-19, NASB.

5. Acknowledgements go to Dr. D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and The Reverend Billy Riggs, for background material provided in two separate sermons.

6. Personal experience of the author Allen Morris.

7. The Reverend Billy Riggs.

8. Dr. Lehman Strauss, *Certainties for Today* (Fincastle, Virginia: Scripture Truth Book Company, 1956), p. 144.

9. *Adult Life and Work Lesson Annual* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1989), p. 213.

10. Testimony heard by the author.

11. Lee Strobel, “Beyond a Reasonable Doubt” *The Christian Reader*, March/April 1999; p. 61.

12. “All Evidence Beyond Reasonable Doubt” by Regis Nicoll.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Strobel, p. 59.

16. *The Bible*, John 20:6-8.

17. Dr. Ralph Richardson, President Emeritus of Carolina Bible College, lecture. Dr. Thomas N. Davis III, M.D., *No Final Exit* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1992), p. 164.

18. The Reverend Billy Riggs.

19. Nicoll.

20. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), p. 84.

21. Ibid, p. 85. Paul L. Maier, *Pontius Pilate* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1968), 366, citing a fragment from Phlegon, *Olympiades he Chronika 13*, ed. Otto Keller, *Rerum Naturalium Scriptores Graeci Minores, 1* (Leipzig: Teurber, 1877), 101. Translation by Maier.

22. Ibid, Strobel, p. 255. Personal testimony heard by the author.

23. *The Bible*, 1 Corinthians 15:20, NASB.

24. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan-Collier, 1960), pp. 55-56.

25. The Navigators, P.O. Box 6000, Colorado Springs, CO 80934