

Evidence and Unbelief

The atheist cosmologist Carl Sagan had a saying that became quite famous: extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. He originally used it when discussing whether aliens exist and are visiting earth. But it has also been used to argue against religion. According to some, claiming there is a God is an extraordinary claim, and therefore requires extraordinary evidence to back it up. We need handwriting in the sky, we need global angelic announcements visible and audible to all people at once, we need miracles on-tap to supposedly believe that God exists, that Jesus is His Son, that the Bible is true.

At first this sounds reasonable, until we examine it a little more closely. First, what would qualify as extraordinary evidence? If you met someone who demanded extraordinary evidence for God, what would that be? What would satisfy him, and would it satisfy the next man? Who is the authority on what evidence is persuasive? Who decides what counts as extraordinary, irrefutable evidence?

Second, is the claim that God exists really an extraordinary claim? Who decides that? What if God's existence is not an extraordinary claim, but a very ordinary one, maybe even the most obvious claim you could make? If God's existence is the most obvious claim, then the whole demand for evidence gets turned on its head. It starts to become “why don't you believe? What possible reasons could you have for not believing?”

We're talking about evidence for believing in God, and why people don't believe. A lot of people have convinced Christians that they don't believe because Christians have not supplied enough evidence; we haven't done enough magic tricks to impress them, make them ooh and ahh and come over to our side. But that is all backwards.

We come across this very thing in John 5, where Jesus has just explained to a hostile audience some truths which they did not accept. He has told them He exists in perfect unity with His Father, and that even though He is distinct from His Father, they are completely equal. In other words, He is telling them that He is God – God the Son.

But they don't believe Him. They don't accept His claims.

So from verse 31, the discussion shifts from the doctrine of who He is, to the evidence for these claims, and the reasons for their unbelief. This is going to happen repeatedly in John: we'll see it again in chapter 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. The process is: Jesus does a sign. He then explains His identity based on the sign. There is rejection from some, and Jesus then gives both the reasons they should believe, as well as the reasons they do not believe.

So the key word in this passage is the word translated *witness*, *bear witness*, *testimony* or, *testify*. It is a Greek word – *marturia*, the noun, (14 times in John, 4 in this passage), or *marturio* – the verb (33 times in John, 7 times here in John 5). It means to confirm something is true. A person with knowledge of the truth, knowledge of an event, testifies, gives testimony, bears witness that something is the case. So they become living proof, they become evidence in the form of a person.

In a court of law, people make claims that contradict. One says someone is guilty of something, that someone says he is not. So we bring in witnesses and testimonies that prove who is lying and who being truthful.

In the Law of Israel, the truth could not be established by one man making a claim, or even by one man plus one witness. You needed two or three witnesses to stand as evidence.

Jesus is going to bring out not one or two, but five witnesses that back up His claims. That's extraordinary evidence. But in spite of five witnesses, the people Jesus is talking to do not accept His claims. That's extraordinary rejection. So with five witnesses backing Jesus up, there has to be another explanation for why they don't accept Him.

Jesus gives the explanation and exposes the human heart. He is going to show why people rejected Him then, and why they reject now.

So to begin, let's consider the evidence Jesus gives for believing in Him.

I. The Reasons to Believe

³¹ "If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true.

Jesus begins by pointing out that if all He had was a self-witness, it would not be valid. You cannot sign your own signature; you cannot supply a reference for yourself from yourself. But if what you say about yourself is backed up by others, then it is verified. This is what Jesus means when He says later on "I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me." (John 8:18)

So Jesus now lists out five witnesses, or five evidences that He is who He says He is. Any one of these five could have functioned to persuade. Any one is enough evidence. Taken together they are more than enough.

³² There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true.

Who is this "another"? Now the only clue we have as to who this *another* is that the same Greek word is used in John 14:16:

¹⁶ And I will pray the Father, and He will give you **another** Helper, that He may abide with you forever—¹⁷ the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16–17)

a) The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit witnesses that Jesus is who He says He is. "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. (John 15:26)

The first line of evidence that these people had about Jesus was the Spirit of God, convicting them of sin, righteousness and judgement.

The Spirit of God has an ongoing work of dealing directly with men's consciences, reproofing them for wrong, drawing them to the light. "The spirit of a man is the lamp of the LORD, Searching all the inner depths of his heart." (Proverbs 20:27). We saw in chapter 1 that Jesus is the "the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world." (John 1:9). And that Light comes in the form of the Spirit of God showing people the truth of the Son of God in their consciences.

We can call this line of evidence the evidence or the witness of *intuition* and conscience. Intuition

are those things that you seem to know immediately, instantly, without deduction, without logical reasoning. The Spirit of God working in the human spirit provides inner light that shows up the darkness, and says – you're guilty. You need pardon, cleansing, grace.

Consider the second witness.

³³ You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. ³⁴ Yet I do not receive testimony from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.

The second witness was

b) John the Baptist

We've already seen much about John the Baptist in this Gospel. Israel flocked to him. They recognised him as the first prophet in 400 years. They went out to be baptised by him, to show publicly that they were ready for Messiah. John quite clearly and unambiguously told people that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. If they liked John, trusted John, were baptised by John, then they should have believed his testimony about Jesus.

Even though Jesus says He did not require human testimonies to be true, John nonetheless stands as a witness. If John were called to the witness stand, asked to swear that he would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and then asked, Who is the Son of God?, he would have said Jesus of Nazareth.

But the enthusiasm for John died down, and when he was arrested by Herod, no one protested or tried to deliver him.

We call this line of evidence *Christian experience and testimony*. People who become Christians tell others of their conversion. Like John the Baptist, they testify to others that Jesus Christ has made the difference. They tell their stories. They live out their faith. In many cases, they are willing to die for their faith. And as people see other people changed by Jesus, transformed by the power of the gospel, they have a living witness, a living testimony that God is real, Christ is powerful, new creations do happen.

Consider the third witness.

³⁶ But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.

c) The miracles

Jesus has just made a lame man walk. He has hurdled normal healing, pole vaulted normal medicine and spoken perfect health into man's legs. And there is more than lame legs healed. There is water into wine, a man's dying son healed at a distance, we'll soon see feeding of 5000 people, walking on water, a man born blind healed, storms calmed, demons cast out, and even the dead restored to life. Now no one who sees these is denying that Jesus is doing them. They simply have to decide the source of Jesus power. Jesus has explained that His works are God the Father's works; He is simply working out what God does. To see the works is to see living evidence that Jesus is the Son of God.

This is the evidence of *miracles and the supernatural*. History is full of events in which God's power intervened. Whether it is the Exodus of Israel, or the miraculous victories Israel had, or the

miracles of Jesus, they are evidence pointing in some direction. Even the Jewish historian Josephus reports on the miracles of Jesus. He wrote: “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks.” All of this culminated in what some call the most attested historical event in ancient history: the resurrection of Jesus. You have to do something with all this historical evidence of supernatural intervention in human history.

Jesus gives the fourth line of evidence in verse 37.

³⁷ And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. ³⁸ But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe.

d) The Father

The Father testified of Jesus in an audible voice at the baptism of Jesus, and again at the Transfiguration. But Jesus says of His critics, you have not heard His voice, seen His form, or have His Word. The reason they do not, is that they reject Jesus. And who is Jesus? Jesus is God's Word. He will later tell Philip, if you have seen the Son, you have seen the Father. If they believed in Jesus, they would have been hearing the Father's voice in Jesus, the Father's word in Jesus, the Father's form in Jesus.

This is the evidence of the *Incarnation*. We do not hear the audible voice of the Father, but we all have the witness of history that Jesus lived, claimed to be God, was crucified and reported alive by His followers. Jesus was either God or not. If He was not, but made claims that He was, no one should follow Him or worship Him. If He was, then He becomes the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him.

The final witness Jesus gives for Himself is

³⁹ You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.

⁴⁵ Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is *one* who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?”

e) The Scriptures

Jesus tells them that though His listeners scrutinise the Bible, and though they claim to believe and trust Moses, they have missed the central message of the Scriptures – which is Messiah. Jesus says that Moses wrote about Him. He may be referring to Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses writes

¹⁵ “The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, (Deuteronomy 18:15)

He may simply be referring to all the ways that the Law pointed to Messiah in the symbols, types, pictures, sacrifices, ceremonies. The point is, they read it with a wooden literalism and a hard-hearted rejection. Like the rich man in Hell, they had Moses and the prophets, and if they did not believe them, they would not believe a sign or a miracle.

This is the evidence of the Bible: its prophetic power, how it pointed, predicted and portrayed Messiah. It is the wonder of the Bible's accuracy, truthfulness, unity, beauty, and prophecies that show it to be the Word of God with Christ at its centre.

Now let's step back and look at the evidence which Jesus has put before them, and the evidence that is before us. His five witnesses: the Holy Spirit, John the Baptist, the miracles, the Father, the Scriptures. Those five witnesses for us are: intuition or conscience, Christian experience or history or testimony, the historical miracles, the Incarnation, and the Bible.

This seems to be a fairly powerful stack of evidence. Why are they not persuaded? What evidences are missing? What reasons don't exist? Jesus is now going to expose the nature of their unbelief.

II. The Real Nature of Unbelief

⁴⁰ But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

⁴² But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you.

You are not willing. The word for will means desire. You do not want to come to Me. You don't see pleasure in coming to me. You aren't moved by longing, you aren't drawn by any beauty, because you don't see any. As verse 42 says, you don't have the love of God, or love for God in you. The great problem here is again, not that the people don't have information. It is not that God has not supplied them with reasons, facts, evidences. They have those things. They have truth, and they have proof of the truth.

The problem is, they don't *want* the truth, even if it is true. This is a question of desire, not deduction. This is a question of what their heart wants, not what their mind deduces. Do you remember when Jesus said something like this to Nicodemus in John 3?

¹⁹ And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. (John 3:19–20)

Human beings are not computers processing information and facts. Humans are beings of love, driven by what we find beautiful and compelling and lovely. We choose what we love, not always what we find reasonable or logical or even sensible. We live our lives not around facts (as much as we like to think so), but around treasures: what we find valuable, pleasurable, delightful. We are moved by beauty, not by argument.

Argument has a place in life. We are supposed to be reasonable. But here is a perfect example of how reason malfunctions. Here are people with five irrefutable lines of evidence, five proofs for the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. But instead of their minds changing their hearts, it is their hearts that are shutting their minds. They don't want to come to Jesus. They don't have love for God. His message, His person, seems to them unattractive, so like engineers redirecting a river, they redirect the logic and reason of their mind to somehow reject these plain evidences.

Paul tells us something very similar about the human race. We all have the witness of conscience, Christian testimony in history, recorded miracles, the historical Jesus and His resurrection, the perfect Bible, but what do we do with this?

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. *Suppress* is what you do when you have the truth and don't want

it to get out.

²¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:21)

They knew mentally, but they did not glorify, they didn't *treasure, value*, love Him as God.

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge. (v28) The word *like* translates a Greek word which mean regard it as worthwhile. They didn't value the knowledge of God.

This is all about love, desire, pleasure, value. Not about information. Wherever your heart is inclined, your mind will find reasons to justify. But Jesus, the true Physician of the Soul looks one layer deeper and tells you what unbelief really loves.

III. The Reason For Unbelief

⁴³ I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. ⁴⁴ How can you believe, who receive honour from one another, and do not seek the honour that *comes* from the only God?

Jesus says, how is it possible for you to believe, if you seek honour, and the word is *glory*, from one another. You do not seek the glory that comes from the only God. What you really want is the short-sighted and small-minded goal of pleasing man. You want to please people and have people be pleased with you.

We read the same thing when John summarises the vast unbelief of the Jewish nation.

⁴² Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. (John 12:42–43)

You see, there is something about being man-pleasing, and man-centred, and living for man's approval that crowds out and suffocates faith in God. It's as if you cannot have both. For example, look at Jesus. Back in verse 41, Jesus tells you that He doesn't live for the praise of man.

⁴¹ "I do not receive honour from men.

And similarly, He isn't preaching to them in His own name, trying to get fame and followers for Himself. But ironically, the man who does do that, will be received by them! ⁴³ I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.

And in fact, that's just what happened. There were several false Messiah's leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. And then 65 years later, Shimon bar Kochba was a false Messiah, acclaimed by Rabbi Akiva that the nation followed as a messiah, leading to their near destruction as a people by the Romans, and their expulsion from the land for another 1800 years. Bar Kochba came in his own name and they received him. And I think this verse even points forward to the future antichrist – a man who will come in his own name, speaking great blasphemies, and will be received by many as the Messiah.

In fact, in the end, it is fear of the crowds leaving the synagogue that leads the Pharisees to reject Jesus. It is fear of the Pharisees casting them out the synagogue that leads the crowds to reject Jesus. It is fear of Rome that leads the scribes to take Jesus to Pilate. It is fear of man that leads Pilate to condemn Jesus.

Man-pleasers are drawn to man-pleasers. People following the religion of man-worship are happy to worship man. Glory to man and glory from man.

It seems at the very heart of belief is a question: do you want God and God alone, even if your friends don't come with you? Do you want the treasure of God and God alone, even if you aren't popular, or if you lose your status, or your respect, or your family, or your position? Do you want the reward of God Himself, or do you want the more immediate, tangible reward of peer approval, and fitting in, and being a good 'ol boy, or a party girl?

You can't have both. It's love God first and ultimately, and then you are free to love your neighbour. But if you start there, wanting and craving love from others at all costs, you can never get to God. The idol of man excludes the living God.

So we began by asking if extraordinary claims need extraordinary evidence. Even if the gospel of Jesus Christ is an extraordinary claim, it truly has five lines of extraordinary evidence. What is really extraordinary is not the evidence, but the rejection, the stubborn unbelief both then and now.

When we put unbelief under the magnifying glass, we see it is not about reasons and evidence. It is about what we love, what we desire, what we treasure. And if what we want, love and desire is the small reward of man's praise, glory from man, then we cannot believe, we will not come, we will not have love for God. We are consumed with the small idol of man, and we cannot look up to see the great glory God.

But if you give up man's approval, die to self and your image and your reputation, and say, "I want God, no matter who comes with me, no matter who approves of me", then suddenly, those five lines of evidence will seem perfectly obvious and completely persuasive to you. Or to quote King Solomon: ²⁵ The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe. (Proverbs 29:25)