

THE CASE FOR CHRIST: A COURSE ON CHRISTIAN WITNESS

A Teen Study Guide based on Lee Strobel's popular book, *The Case For Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan. 1998. Also utilizing the **Student Version of The Case For Christ**.

A Study Guide written by Fr. David Subu as used at Camp Vatra, Summer 2003.

Goals:

1. To examine critically and honestly the claims of Orthodox Christianity
2. To learn how to respond to skeptics and defend the faith
3. To gain knowledge to support one's own ability to choose faith
4. To engage the gospels in a new and exciting way based on courtroom dramas

Objectives: By the end of the course students should be able

1. To hear about and discuss each of the major facets of evidence for Christ in Strobel's book, *The Case for Christ*
2. To respond positively and constructively to typical criticisms or arguments against Christian faith
3. To identify and articulate the main reasons we have Christian faith
4. To choose for themselves the Christian faith on an informed basis

This course will take place in 9-10 sessions of 45 minutes each.

Session

- I. Christ on Trial
- II. The Gospel: The evidence we have
- III. The Evangelists on the witness stand
- IV. The Documentary Evidence
- V. Corroboration, Science, Rebuttals
- VI. Jesus on the Witness Stand I
- VII. Jesus on the Witness Stand II
- VIII. The Resurrection on Trial
- IX. Summary Arguments
- X. Sentencing

Each session should begin with a prayer, "O Heavenly King," include some review of the main points from the day before, and involve at least one activity or worksheet. Begin each class with the "Opening question" if given, allowing each person to answer that question in turn. Close each class with the "Deliberations" which they are to answer in their journals. Some are given on the worksheets.

An Outline of Lee Strobel's, The Case for Christ:

I. Examining The Record

Eyewitness Evidence:

- Can the biographies be trusted?
- Do the biographies stand up to scrutiny?

Documentary Evidence:

- Were the biographies reliably preserved?

Corroborating Evidence:

- Is there evidence outside the biographies for Jesus?

Scientific Evidence:

- Does archaeology confirm or contradict Jesus' biographies?

Rebuttal Evidence:

- Is the Jesus of history the Jesus of faith?

II. Analyzing Jesus

Identity Evidence:

- Was Jesus convinced he was the Son of God?

Psychological Evidence:

- Was Jesus crazy for claiming to be the Son of God?

Profile Evidence:

- Did Jesus fit the attributes of God?

Fingerprint Evidence:

- Did Jesus and Jesus alone match the Identity?

III. Researching the Resurrection:

Medical Evidence:

- Was Jesus' death a sham and the resurrection a hoax?

Missing Body/ Empty Tomb Evidence:

- Was Jesus' Body really absent from the Tomb?

Appearances Evidence:

- Was Jesus seen alive after His death on the Cross?

Circumstantial Evidence:

- Are there any supporting facts that point to the Resurrection?

IV. Conclusion: The Verdict of History

Session I: Christ on Trial?

This session serves as an introduction to Christian apologetics.

Questions:

- Do you think it is alright to ask questions about faith?
- What does it mean to be skeptical?
- What does it mean to question authority?

Activity: A Biblical comparison: Zachariah and Elizabeth

Read each section together out loud (Luke 1:5-25 and Luke 1:26-38). Compare the two.

- What is similar? Notice highlights in bold.
- How are they different? Do the outcomes differ?
- What are some reasons that might explain why the outcomes different?
- Was it wrong for either of them to question the angel of the Lord?

Asking the question is not what gets Zachariah in trouble. If asking questions was so wrong, then wouldn't the Virgin Mary likewise deserved to be punished? Is God partial, unfair? So what is the difference between the two questions and questioners?

Zachariah's question: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years." He is basically saying, "How am I expected to believe this?" He of all people should be aware that God can do these things. He has no excuse for his unbelief. His question is rhetorical, not genuine. Thus his question is not rewarded, and he is unable to respond to the angel or anyone else.

Mary's Question: "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" is a legitimate question. She is not asking how is it possible for her to believe, but believing it, she asks how it will actually take place. She is receptive to new knowledge, and does not assume she knows it all. Thus her question is rewarded, and she is able to respond affirmatively to God's will.

Discussion: It's all in the Questions:

God actually does want us to ask questions, because this is the way we learn things. Matthew 7:7: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." This is particularly true when it comes to the Truth about Jesus Christ, and why Christians put their faith in Him.

This class will be about asking the tough questions about Christian faith.

- Is it possible to be a rational intelligent person and believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, risen from the dead?
- Do you have to put aside your mind and accept the Creed on blind faith alone?
- Is Christianity actually nothing more than an old superstition that scientists have disproved?
- Do you have to believe the Bible literally? What does that actually mean?

Discuss with your group and write down now on an anonymous blank sheet of paper all the possible objections a person might have towards believing in Jesus Christ. These may be doubts or questions you yourself might have experienced or someone you know or have heard. Copy these into your journal for your own notes. Turn in the sheets/ report them out loud to the teacher.

The key to being a good Christian lies in being an honest Christian. If we are unable or unwilling to discuss the challenges to our faith than either we really don't have any faith in Christ or the faith we have is rooted in the wrong reasons. To be a good Christian means more than doing what your parents taught you. It also means believing in the Lord for the right reasons and in the correct way.

- Why do you think most people believe in God and go to Church?
- What do you think it would take for most people to believe in Jesus Christ?
- What would you say are the biggest obstacles for people believing in Jesus Christ today?

Recently, in Brookfield OH, a middle school student was assigned an essay about the most influential person in his life. When he asked the teacher if he could write on Jesus Christ, the teacher told him, in front of all the students, that he could not because “Jesus is not a real person.” Besides violating the boy’s civil rights and freedom of religion, the teacher’s words revealed a basic ignorance that now exists among Americans about the simple facts of Christianity. Indeed, if Jesus is not a real person, then neither is any other person in history, based on our historical evidence alone! Our hope is that through this class as well as all your camp experience, you will be able to defend your self and your faith against such basic ignorance and be able to teach others the basic facts of Christian faith.

Lee Strobel was once the legal editor for the Chicago tribune. He was a top court reporter in this country and involved in cracking some important cases, very much like the things we see on courtroom drama shows today like Law and Order. Later in life, after being a typical skeptic and unbeliever, he finally came to a faith in Jesus Christ. Being a detective-like reporter, however, he was not satisfied with faith on purely personal basis—because it made him feel good or better or so forth. He set out to apply what he had learned about reliable evidence in a court of law to the question of Christian faith. In effect, he put Christ on Trial to see if he could stand up to the claims that Christians make about Him. He collected the main objections people had and also considered the main types of evidence that are acceptable in a court of law. He interviewed experts in the field to give their professional opinions on the matter. He investigated the documents and the counter arguments. The product of this work was the best-selling book, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. In this class we will also be putting Christ on trial and examining the evidence, drawing heavily on this book and others. In the end, each of you should be able to make a rational and informed decision about whether or not you will believe in Christ.

Questions, Questions!

Annunciation to Zacharias (Luke 1:5-25)

⁵There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elizabeth.

⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

⁷But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

⁸So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division,

⁹according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

¹⁰And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense.

¹¹Then an **angel of the Lord appeared to him**, standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

¹²And **when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.**

¹³But the angel said to him, **“Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.**

¹⁴“And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.

¹⁵“For **he will be great** in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.

¹⁶“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.

¹⁷“He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

¹⁸And Zacharias said to the angel, **“How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.”**

¹⁹And the angel answered and said to him, **“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.**

²⁰“**But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time.”**

²¹And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he lingered so long in the temple.

²²But **when he came out, he could not speak** to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.

²³And so it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house.

Annunciation to the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

²⁶Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,

²⁷to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name *was* Mary.

²⁸And having come in, **the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”**

²⁹But when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.

³⁰Then the angel said to her, **“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS.**

³²“**He will be great**, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.

³³“And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

³⁴Then Mary said to the angel, **“How can this be, since I do not know a man?”**

³⁵And the angel answered and said to her, **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.**

³⁶“Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren.

³⁷“For with God nothing will be impossible.”

³⁸Then Mary said, **“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”** And the angel departed from her.

Session II: The Gospel and the Evidence

Objectives:

- List the four gospels
- Identify the gospels as eye-witness testimonies and enter them into evidence
- Apply typical legal standards of eyewitness testimony to the gospel authors
- Decide whether these gospels can be counted as trustworthy evidence

Hear ye! Hear Ye! The 1st Vatra Court of Grass Lake Michigan is now called to session. Camp Vatra Seniors serving as Judges and Jury. First on the docket, the state of unbelief vs. Jesus called Christ of Nazareth in Galilee.

Your honors, let it be known that this person, Jesus Christ, has been accused of being unreal, not God but a myth, a legend, a superstition, and a victim of fanatical followers. This court has been called to decide whether He is guilty of this fraud or whether He is innocent and worthy of belief!

The prosecution, headed by the Devil's advocate, will attempt to show that Jesus is the victim of a fraud and was nothing more than a traveling preacher who was deified by his followers centuries later. There is no credible evidence that Jesus ever intended to be worshipped this way, or that he rose from the dead, or any other such nonsense.

The defense, led by the Orthodox Church, will hold that the claims for Jesus Christ as the risen son of God can be substantiated and that the evidence will show conclusively that Christ is the incarnate Son of God, worthy of all glory, honor, and worship.

Very well, what preliminary evidence do we have for this person Jesus Christ, and the claims made about Him?

What we know is mainly been given to us in the four Gospels of the New Testament.

- Who were the four writers of the gospels? How do we know?
- What type of document is a gospel, what is its purpose?
- On what basis was each gospel writer able to say the things they did? What sources did they have?
- How does a gospel stand up as a form of eyewitness testimony?

These questions are important because many later scholars have argued about who really wrote the bible and if they really had the credentials to do so. The most important aspect for us to realize is that the gospels "are based either on direct or indirect eyewitness testimony" (Strobel, p. 25) of the Resurrected Christ. All four were mentioned by St. Irenaeus as authoritative c. 165.

- **Matthew:** also known as Levi, he was one of the 12 disciples closest to Christ. His intimate knowledge of Jewish tradition informs his gospel with authenticity.
- **Mark:** also known as John Mark, he was a follower of Peter, who was his main source, and may have been part of the larger circle of followers of Christ (he was younger). His gospel was written earliest of the four and may have been used as source material for

later evangelists. A document from 125 AD testifies to the authenticity of Mark as preserving faithfully Peter's testimony.

- **Luke:** known as Paul's beloved physician, he traveled with Paul and also knew intimate details about the life of Christ and His Mother. He was also a direct witness of the Resurrection with Cleopas on the road to Emmaus.
- **John:** also known as the disciple whom Jesus loved, he was the youngest of the twelve disciples and lived the longest. He may have had an editor or a scribe taking dictation to help him in his gospel, but it was his material.

Why do the gospels only focus on the three or so years of Christ's earthly ministry and say very little about his first 33 years? (Recommended)

1. **Literary:** in ancient times, biographies were written to describe the active life of the person, when they made their impact. There were not theories of personal formation rooted in psychology that we find today. Basically, those years were not considered that significant to history.
2. **Theological:** The gospels give the most attention in their later chapters to the short period of time leading up to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. These, for the Christian are the most relevant because these are the basis of our salvation.

When were these gospels written? Were they only written after so much time had passed that legend and myth had developed around Jesus? (Recommended Question)

- Most scholarly dating puts Mark in the 70's, Matthew and Luke in the 80's, and John in the 90's. This is all within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses or shortly after their martyrdoms, and within 50 or so years of the life of Christ.
- It is actually like that these materials were present in some written form even before these dates for several reasons. The book of Acts written by Luke ends abruptly with Paul in prison. We know that he was killed in Rome around AD 62. If the book was written after that fact, why wasn't it included? If Acts, the sequel to Luke, was written before AD 62, then so must have been Luke, Mark and Matthew. That means the gospels were possibly written as early as the 50's. For ancient history, that's as close as you'll find!
- Compare our history of Alexander the Great. His biography was written nearly 400 years after his death, yet historians still consider the biography trustworthy.
- Paul's epistles were written even earlier and they support the basic facts of the gospels. Consider 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8: ³*For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,* ⁴*and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,* ⁵*and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.* ⁶*After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.* ⁷*After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.* ⁸*Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.* This corroborates much of the earliest gospels main events and was written around AD 55—but the time at which Paul “received” this early creed would have been as early as AD 35!

What is the gospel of Q? Optional question

- The Gospel of Q is a hypothetical body of sayings or teachings attributed to Christ which are found in Matthew and Luke but not so much in Mark. Some scholars have theorized that Matthew and Luke constructed their gospel out of Mark's basic outline and then added the Q sayings to fill out the teaching aspect. It is not really another gospel per se, but a set of source materials and oral traditions that would have naturally existed at the time.
- The Q materials do not contradict the Mark materials, or change the picture of Christ. They are in harmony.
- It only makes sense that the other evangelists would check their story line against Mark's gospel, considered by them as faithful to Peter's witness. Peter was the leader and one of the most intimate disciples to Christ.

What are the Synoptic Gospels? How do they relate to John? Optional Question

- The Synoptic Gospels are Matthew, Mark, and Luke, because they all follow the basic pattern and very similar. John does not use the same structure and often relates entirely different material. Some scholars have argued over whether this means they contradict one another. They do not. Ideas that are explicit in John, such as the divinity of Jesus Christ, can also be found in the other Gospels.
- One way to think about the differing structures is to compare them like any other form of literature. It is as if the Synoptics were poetry written in Iambic Pentameter, while John is written in the form of a Haiku. Both are poetry, but both sound and look very different.

The Gospels are the main source of evidence we have about the person of Jesus Christ. In order for them to be reliable they must be first of all authentic and trustworthy as the actual original source materials. This is why so much attention is paid to claims that the gospels are not what Christians claim them to be. However, the burden of proof is on those who would deny them, as we shall see.

Deliberations:

- How have your opinions been influenced by people who have shared eyewitness accounts?
- What are some ways that you test the reliability of whether someone is being honest or accurate?
- How do you think the gospels would stand up to those tests?

We shall now recess to consider these facts. Tomorrow we shall call to the witness stand these so-called evangelists and see whether their eye-witness testimony stands up to scrutiny. The court is dismissed until ** o'clock.

Optional Activity: Stage a Crime, call a witness

In this activity, some time outside of class, stage a "crime" that students will hear about. Select a few people to act as "eyewitnesses." Some should be accurate and some should be false. Then test each of their credibility using the tests of evidence described below. Show where and how eyewitnesses are not reliable, where they are accurate.

Session III: The Evangelists on the Witness Stand

Review: Who are the four evangelists? What is their basis of authority for being eyewitnesses?

Opening Question: Have you ever felt the need to test someone's word to see if what they were saying could be trusted or not? How did you? What did you conclude?

We now call the 1st Vatra Court of Grass Lake back into session.

Prosecution: **Your honors, even if these evangelists were at the right time and the right place to testify about Jesus of Nazareth, we cannot accept their testimony as valid because they were religious believers with a personal agenda of their own. Nothing they say should be taken as evidence. We move to strike their testimony from the record!**

Defense: **Objection! Your honors, let us put these evangelists on the witness stand and see if their ability to testify accurately is really in question. In any court of law we are allowed to examine and cross-examine witnesses to test their reliability. Should we not do the same?**

Activity: Testing the Evidence worksheet

There are 8 basic tests used in courts of law that help determine whether an eyewitness can be relied on or not. (see worksheet). **They are as follows:**

1. Intention test: does the eyewitness intend to accurately report what they saw and preserve history? (Read Luke 1:1-4, John 20:31)
2. Ability test: Would they have been capable of preserving that information intact? Wouldn't the information get garbled like when playing the game telephone? We have to remember that they lived in a culture where oral tradition was the main way of communicating. People had actually better memories than they do today because of this. The variability between the gospels is about the same one would find in an oral tradition.
3. Character Test: Were these evangelists trustworthy as people in general, or were they known con men and crooks? None of them were necessarily pillars of their community, but the religion that they accepted and then preached required them to have great integrity, even to the point of dying for their faith.
4. Consistency Test: Don't the gospels contradict each other by giving so many different details? Details may differ because each eyewitness in real life will differ on the things they notice and the way they express them. If they are too closely alike that is when we should distrust them because they begin to sound rehearsed. On the main points, the gospels are significantly consistent with each other. Most, perhaps all, of the apparent contradictions if taken in context and with the full information are easily harmonized.
5. Bias test: But surely, the evangelists were biased towards Christ, and this colored their perceptions? Certainly, this is possible. At the same time, they may have felt charged with being as accurate as possible in their reporting because they knew they would be held accountable for every word. (See Revelation 22:18-19)
6. The Cover-up test: Didn't the disciples love for Jesus lead them to white-wash details that might have been scandalous or difficult for people to accept? Ironically, the type of

white-washing we find in biased observers is not found in the gospels. The evangelists are actually not afraid of reporting Christ's harder sayings and unusual behavior, even those things that seem to contradict their teaching about His divinity. In fact, they seem biased towards being as accurate as possible because clearly, they feel charged with preserving Jesus' message without change. They are also willing to represent their own failings and cowardice at the time of Jesus' trial and death, and their unbelief at His Resurrection. Where is the cover-up?

7. Corroboration test: Can the people and places mentioned in the gospels be verified independently? History and archaeology have actually confirmed many of the geographic and historical details described in the gospel in recent years, often overturning previous ideas that the gospels were full of unhistorical fictions.
8. The Adverse witness test: Are there any other witnesses contradicting the writers of the gospels at that time? Any one saying that they misreported or misrepresented the facts? No one has come forward to tell the history better. In fact, the opponents of Christianity have often confirmed many of the details of the gospels. For instance, the Jews admitted that Jesus worked miracles, but they considered him a sorcerer or misled Rabbi. They also admitted that there was no body, but explained it as grave robbery. If these things did not take place (the miracles, the empty tomb), then these would have been great opportunities to set the story straight. But they didn't.

Using the worksheet, each group should be given 1 or 2 tests to apply to the sample passages. These are not always straightforward, and groups may need a little help. Basically, they should chew on this food for thought, and hopefully see that one should not rush to judgment about the gospels or trust the first person they hear on a subject.

As we can see, there are many tests which can be applied to determine whether the four evangelists are trustworthy witnesses to the events of the life of Jesus. Some tests are passed more easily than others, some tests are more significant than others. In any case, the reliability of a witness can often make or break a case. If a witness can be shown conclusively to have willingly lied—that is, perjured him or herself—that can often turn the jury's opinion. But if the witness stands up to scrutiny, that can also be very powerful. Each of us should be able to know why we believe the Gospels. It is not enough to merely say, "It's the Bible. It's God's word." If it is those things, it will stand up to honest and unbiased scrutiny.

At this time, we will recess. Tomorrow we will consider whether or not the documents of the gospels as we have them today have been reliably preserved for the nearly 2000 years of their history. Even if the evangelists were trustworthy, we cannot be sure yet whether or not those who copied their testimonies were equally so.

Deliberations: (from worksheet)

- Which of these eight tests do you consider most conclusive or significant?
- How have these tests affected your confidence in the reliability of the gospels?
- When more than one person gives you an eyewitness testimony, do you doubt their credibility or do you reconcile the differences between them? How?

Testing the Eyewitnesses

Each group will be assigned 2 of these tests. Look at the passages recommended and determine if the gospels can pass this test or reliability. Be ready to answer as a group why or why not?

1. **Intention test:** does the eyewitness intend to accurately report what they saw and preserve history? (Read Luke 1:1-4, John 20:31 and 21:24-25)
2. **Ability test:** Would they have been capable of preserving that information intact? Wouldn't the information get garbled like when playing the game telephone?
3. **Character Test:** Were these evangelists trustworthy as people in general, or were they known con men and crooks? (Consider Philippians 1)
4. **Consistency Test:** Don't the gospels contradict each other by giving so many different details? (Compare Matthew 8:28 with Mark 5:1-5—are there two men or one? Is this a significant contradiction? Can it be explained rationally?)
5. **Bias test:** But surely, the evangelists were biased towards Christ, and this colored their perceptions? (Consider Luke 1:1-4 again, Luke 9:26, and Revelation 22:18-19, how would bias affect them?)
6. **The Cover-up test:** Didn't the disciples love for Jesus lead them to white-wash details that might have been scandalous or difficult for people to accept? (John 6:60-68)
7. **Corroboration test:** Can the people and places mentioned in the gospels be verified independently? (Consider Luke 3:1—is this something we should be able to verify?)
8. **The Adverse witness test:** Are there any other witnesses contradicting the writers of the gospels at that time? Any one saying that they misreported or misrepresented the facts? (Consider Matthew 12:23-27 and the Pharisees as an example of adverse witnesses)

Deliberations:

- a. Which of these eight tests do you consider most conclusive or significant?
- b. How have these tests affected your confidence in the reliability of the gospels?
- c. When more than one person gives you an eyewitness testimony, do you doubt their credibility or do you reconcile the differences between them? How?

Session IV: The Documentary Evidence

Review: How can we determine whether or not the evangelists are trustworthy witnesses? Do their testimonies stand up to scrutiny?

Opening Question: Did you ever copy somebody else's work? Why? What were you most concerned about when copying it?

Hear Ye! Hear Ye! The 1st Vatra Court of Grass Lake is now called to session.

Prosecution: Your honors, yesterday we heard very persuasive arguments as to the trustworthiness of the evangelists. The defense suggests we could call them to the witness stand and that their testimony would be reliable. But the truth is they are now all dead, and all we have is the gospels, which have been copied over and over by other, unknown groups and individuals for hundreds of years. All of whom had their own biases and agendas as well. Therefore we hold that the gospels cannot be accepted by this court as equal to a legally acceptable deposition of a witness, but only as corrupted and altered legend.

Defense: Your honors, the defense will agree with the prosecution that the gospels have been copied for centuries and that this is how we have them today. In fact, they have been copied so many times and in so many languages that we actually have more evidence of the original gospels than of any other texts from the ancient world.

Questions for thought:

- How can we be sure the gospel documents we have today are true to their originals, which have been lost?
- What kind of tests or standards do you think we can apply to determine their authenticity?
- How can we be sure that over history, the Church hasn't altered the texts in order to support its own ideas and position? (Which is an accusation leveled upon it by Jehovah's Witnesses, who have come up with their own translation and version of the Bible)
- Why is this such an important issue? What would it mean to Christian faith if the gospels cannot be trusted?

Here are some standards for determining the trustworthiness of an ancient document:

1. Multiple copies: the more copies you have, the more you can compare and look for discrepancies.
2. Multiple languages: if copies exist in different languages, this provides more opportunities to find consistencies and discrepancies.
3. Supporting materials: are there documents outside the gospels that support the current form and can be used to check the copies? Are there fragments? Citations by other writers? Liturgical selections?
4. Time elapsed: how much time has elapsed between the writing of the original and the earliest surviving copies?

Compare the Gospel with other Ancient Documents:

There are many books from ancient times that scholars consider reliable and do not doubt as authentic to the originals, even though our current forms are based on copied manuscripts.

For example:

1. **Tacitus**, the Roman Historian, wrote his *Annals of Imperial Rome* somewhere around 116 AD. There were 16 volumes of his history. Books 1-6 exist today in only one manuscript, from about 850 AD. Books 7-10 are lost. Books 11-16 are in another manuscript from the eleventh century. This book is considered authentic based on this little evidence.
2. **Josephus**, a 1st century Jewish historian, has more evidence. There are 9 Greek manuscripts from copies written in the 10th-12th centuries. There is Latin translation from the 4th cent. And a Russian translation from the 12th cent.
3. **Homer** wrote the *Iliad* around 800 BC, and fewer than 650 manuscripts survive today, the earliest of which come from the 2nd cent. AD. That's a gap of 1000 years. Not including the New Testament, that is the most number of manuscripts for any ancient document.
 - **How many manuscripts do you think we have of the New Testament?**
 - **How early do you think they go back?**
 - **How many do you think are sufficient to consider the NT as reliably preserved?**
4. **The New Testament**, by comparison, has over 5000 catalogued Greek manuscripts, some fragments of which come clearly from the beginning of the 2nd century. That's a gap of less than 50 years, and the amount of materials is completely overwhelming compared to any other ancient document.

The New Testament: Unlike any other text in the history of texts!

Not only do we have thousands of manuscripts and fragments of Greek manuscripts

- Over 300 complete Greek New testaments from 300-800 AD, along with fragments
- Nearly 3,000 Greek Manuscripts from 800 AD onward
- Greek Church lectionaries that contain the NT as read in Church (about 2400 of these)

But also thousands in many different languages

- Latin (known as the Vulgate) (8,000-10,000)
- Syriac, Coptic, and also secondary languages such as Armenian, Gothic, Georgian, Slavic, and Ethiopian from early centuries (another 8000).

There are about 24,000 total manuscripts in existence today.

Having this many resources is it very easy for scholars to track where and when and how changes might have occurred in copying. These manuscripts serve to check each other and show the slight variations that have occurred.

What is quite astonishing is that scholars can say that with confidence that the New Testament in the form we have received is 99.5% pure to its original. The 0.5% in variations is so minor that it does not affect any major doctrines of faith.

- What about other “gospels,” other books that were written at the time but were not included by the Church in the New Testament canon?
- Did the Church use its power to push out those books it didn’t like and in this way distort the original message?

The determination of the NT Canon came about quite naturally in the life of the Church. There were basically four criteria:

1. **Apostolic:** does the writing have apostolic authority. That is, was it written by one of the apostles, who were eyewitnesses, or close followers of them (such as Mark, Luke)?
2. **Conformity:** does the writing adhere to the rule of faith established by the apostles, would it be considered part of the everyday Christian faith?
3. **Continuous acceptance:** was the writing used continually by the Church at large and have a place in its life and worship?
4. **Relevance:** while there were many writings that were considered true and accurate, not all books were equally significant to the core Christian faith. For example, the Proto-Gospel of James that tells us about the birth of the Virgin Mary is not rejected by the Church but is not really central enough to be included among the Gospels.

Several books and epistles of the NT were not accepted immediately by the whole Church but eventually were accepted by these criteria, such as Hebrews and Revelation. The books called “gospels” that have surfaced in later years are often of a much different character and foreign to the writings of the apostles. They have tell tale signs that they were written by and for specific groups at later dates, such as the Gnostics. Many of them were rejected outright as heretical. When the Church established the canon of the NT in the councils of the 4th century, they were really acknowledging something that was already complete, not deciding it anew.

In Closing, if the gospels are not trustworthy documents, then we must apply the same standard to all ancient documents. We hope to show the court that if this is true then we can today know just about nothing about anything that happened before the printing press made it possible to create relatively uniform copies. Rather, the gospels stand up to this criticism above and beyond any other ancient document. They are “marvelously correct” in comparison to any other known document from antiquity.

Deliberations:

- How does the evidence for the reliability of the New Testament documents affect your opinion of what we can know about Jesus?
- Do you think the standards that we apply to these documents is fair and accurate?
- Why do you think it might be important that the bible documents we have are true to the originals?

This court is now called into recess. Tomorrow we shall meet to consider whether or not this biblical evidence stands alone or if it can be corroborated by other sources.

Unlike Any Other Ancient Document!

There are many books from ancient times that scholars consider reliable and do not doubt as authentic to the originals, even though our current forms are based on copied manuscripts.

For example:

1. **Tacitus**, the Roman Historian,
 - wrote his *Annals of Imperial Rome* somewhere around 116 AD.
 - There were 16 volumes of his history.
 - Books 1-6 exist today in only one manuscript, from about 850 AD.
 - Books 7-10 are lost.
 - Books 11-16 are in another manuscript from the eleventh century.
 - This book is considered authentic based on this evidence.
2. **Josephus**, a 1st century Jewish historian, has more evidence.
 - Wrote *The Jewish War* around the end of the 1st century
 - There are 9 Greek manuscripts from copies written in the 10th-12th centuries.
 - There is one Latin translation from the 4th cent. (original written in Greek)
 - And a Russian translation from the 12th cent.
3. **Homer**, ancient Greek
 - wrote the *Iliad* around 800 BC
 - Fewer than 650 manuscripts survive today,
 - The earliest come from the 2nd cent. AD.
 - That's a gap of 1000 years.
 - Not including the New Testament, that is the most number of manuscripts for any ancient document.

Now Compare:

4. **The New Testament**, various authors
 - Has over _____ catalogued Greek manuscripts,
 - Some fragments can be dated from the beginning of the _____ century.
 - That's a gap of _____ years.
 - Over _____ complete Greek New testaments from _____ AD, along with fragments
 - Nearly _____ Greek Manuscripts from _____ AD onward
 - Greek Church lectionaries that contain the NT as read in Church (about _____ of these)
 - Latin (known as the Vulgate) (_____)
 - Syriac, Coptic, and also secondary languages such as Armenian, Gothic, Georgian, Slavic, and Ethiopian from early centuries (_____).
 - There are about _____ total NT manuscripts in existence today.

Deliberations:

- How does the evidence for the reliability of the New Testament documents affect your opinion of what we can know about Jesus?
- Do you think the standards that we apply to these documents is fair and accurate?
- Why do you think it might be important that the bible documents we have are true to the originals?

Session V: Corroborating Evidence

Review: How many manuscripts of the NT do we have available? How pure is the NT to its original form? Why is that important?

Opening question: Has there ever been a time in your life when you did not believe someone until they could offer some outside evidence to support or “corroborate” what they said?

Bailiff: Hear Ye! Hear Ye! The 1st Vatra Court of Grass Lake is now called to session.

Prosecution: Your honors, it may be well and fine that the Bible is considered true to the original eyewitness testimonies and teachings of the apostles. But we cannot believe in Jesus just because, as the song goes, “The Bible tells me so.” There is no credible evidence outside the Bible to corroborate the life of Jesus. For example, the defense compared the New Testament to the writings of Josephus and Tacitus, two other ancient authors. Yet we find no mention of Jesus in these important secular historians. The Bible is a book of faith and cannot be scientifically proven. Therefore we must deny its use in these proceedings!

Defense: Your honors, the defense will agree with the prosecution that we should look only to the Bible without checking it for overall reliability. There should be evidence outside the bible that Jesus lived and was considered special by the people of the day, whether or not they believed in Him. In fact, the prosecution is mistaken. There are actually evidence in both Josephus and Tacitus! Therefore we hold that science, archaeology, and objective history will bear the evidence for the Bible, not against it.

- Josephus in fact, mentions in his work *Antiquities* that “James, the brother of Jesus, who is called Christ” was put to death by the high priest Ananias and the Sanhedrin. No scholar has been able to disprove this passage as anything other than original. He also in a later passage went on to describe basic details about the life, and though scholars feel that there have been some pro-Christian additions made to it, it seems clear that he did at least write about Jesus, and that he established a significant following.
- Tacitus stated in 115 AD the Roman Emperor Nero persecuted the Christians as scapegoats for the fire that devastated Rome in AD 64. He mentions that the Christians got their origin from Christ who was executed by Pontius Pilate, and that they practiced a most mischievous superstition: the belief in His Resurrection. This confirms from an unsympathetic source some basic info about the earliest Church—that it had spread on the basis of the Resurrection
- Pliny the Younger, in 111 AD was a Roman provincial governor. He wrote to Emperor Trajan (Traian—remembered in Romania for having conquered the Dacians) who corroborated the beliefs of the early Christians (“chanting to Christ as if to God”), whom he persecuted and tortured.
- Thallus and Phlegon were two ancient authors who made references to the day the world went dark and the sun was hidden at noon and the earth quaked, dated at 33 AD and

explained as a cosmic event. Thallus tried to explain it as an eclipse. Significantly, these are completely unrelated to the gospel or any talk of Christianity, so they are good corroboration of the events in themselves.

Compare the historical information about Jesus to other leaders in World Religions:

- **Zoroaster:** some information from 1000 BC but most Zoroastrian scripture was not written until 3rd century AD. The most popular biography of Zoroaster was written around 1278 AD.
- **Buddha:** The Buddha lived in the 6th cent. BC but the Buddhist scriptures and first biography of Buddha were not put into writing until after Christ.
- **Mohammad:** lived from AD 570-632, and his sayings are preserved in the Koran, but his biography was not written until 767.

Corroboration from within the Christian faith:

- **St. Paul's Epistles** confirm much of what is said and believed about Christ in the Gospels, and were written before them. It shows a well established belief in and worship of Jesus as the Son of God in the early Church.
- **The Apostolic Fathers:** early Christian writers and saints who provide important information about the first beliefs and teachings about Jesus Christ. For example, St. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred before 117 AD; St. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, Epistles of Barnabus, the colleague of Paul; Clement of Rome, one of the earliest bishops there.

Pass out the worksheet on Archaeological evidence. Discuss the following questions:

- Do you ever watch shows like CSI or Crossing Jordan in which the main characters use scientific methods of gathering evidence that can solve crimes?
- Why do you think this type of evidence is so important?
- Do you think the Gospels can be subjected to the same kind of evidence gathering?
- What kind of evidence might we be able to use in this approach? (inscriptions, coins, ruins, etc.)

The first thing we need to consider is what archaeology can and cannot verify. For instance, it can verify certain details, but it cannot verify what people said or thought. It can verify whether a place that is described actually existed or if certain practices or technologies were in use. It should also be able to verify if certain historical figures really existed, such as Pontius Pilate.

Previously, scholars held that if an author made mistakes about basic historical facts and figures, then their whole story could not be trusted. Some pointed to certain examples in the Gospels as proof that they were unreliable. However, improved and advanced scientific research has shown that in all those cases the gospel writer was correct about his present, and that we, with our limited knowledge of the past, were wrong. For instance, some believed that John was wrong because the Pool of Bethesda with its five porches (John 5:1-115) had not been found. However, it has been uncovered since then, and it matched the description.

I. The Archaeological Evidence:

Examples of historically or archaeologically verified details that once were doubted:

- John 5:1-15 Pool of Bethesda
- John 9:7: Pool of Siloam
- John 4:14: Jacob's Well
- John 19:13: The Pavement near the Jaffa gate
- Luke 3:1: Lysanias as Tetrarch of Abilene
- Acts 17:6: City officials called "Politarchs"

Three Long-standing Puzzles of the Gospels

1. **The Roman Census:** (Luke 2:1-5.) Many scholars believed this did not happen until archaeology bore it out. The Practice was confirmed independently in a piece of Egyptian parchment in AD 104. The names of the rulers (Herod) have been disputed. This has also been confirmed by examination of coins, printed with the rulers' names from that time.
2. **Nazareth:** (Luke 1:26, 2:4) Did it actually exist at the time of Christ? Some have doubted. Tombs excavated at the site and dated to the first century, as well as records of priestly assignments, confirm its existence as a Jewish settlement at the time.
3. **Slaughter of the Innocents:** (Matthew 2:16-18) How could such a tragedy go unnoticed by other sources? It's a question of scale. Bethlehem would have been a small village, with relatively few children, and the slaughter of its children by a bloodthirsty ruler such as Herod would not be surprising or really noticed in those days. He killed members of his own family!

II. Rebuttal Evidence: The Jesus Seminar and the Search for the "Historical Jesus"

What are the criteria that the Jesus Seminar applies to Christ and the Gospels?

1. *If what he says looks like something a later rabbi or Christian father would say, he must not have said it.*
2. *If only one Gospel says it must not be Christ's because we would never just take a single person's word for it. And since Matthew and Luke drew on Mark they can't be trusted anyway.*
3. *If there is a parallel example in another tradition or culture, then Christians must have copied it and fit Christ into that mold.*

To the Jesus Seminar and similar critics we must apply the same standards as to the Gospels:

- *Are they biased, do they have an ulterior motive?*
- *Does their method create its own results, like loaded dice?*
- *Does their method reflect reality; can it be proved or disproved?*

Deliberations:

- Ancient sources, both pro- and anti- Christian say that early Christians clung to their beliefs rather than disavow them in the face of torture and even death. Why do you think they had such strongly held convictions?
- Does the archaeological evidence for the Gospels make you more or less confident in their accuracy? Does archaeology help provide plausible explanations for these puzzles?

Experts Say! But Do They Agree? The Rebuttal Evidence

Opening Question: When was the last time you turned on the news and the top story was something like: “Today, the sun rose, and the planet is still rotating?” Why not? What makes news, news? Do you trust the news without question? (News is by definition, *New* information. It is not necessarily correct or true.)

Prosecution: We have relied on information that is provided to us by scholars and academics in the field of New Testament studies and Ancient History. But what about scholars who have decidedly contrary opinion about Christ? Shouldn't they be heard as well?

There is a small group of scholars generally known as “The Jesus Seminar” who have recently received a lot of attention. This is because they have come forward and claimed, contrary to the vast majority of scholars in the field, that the Jesus of history is very different than the Jesus of faith, and that only very little of the information in the Gospels can be trusted, in fact only 2% could be directly attributed to Christ based on their theory. This of course has caused a stir and some controversy, and drawn a lot of attention to them. The danger is that when such media-popular people get such attention, uneducated readers think they represent the mainstream. But are they correct?

What are the criteria that the Jesus Seminar applies to Christ and the Gospels?

1. *If what he says looks like something a later rabbi or Christian father would say, he must not have said it.* Whereas normally we would think that if a later person said something Christian the must have learned it from Christ, not the other way around!
2. *If only one Gospel says it must not be Christ's because we would never just take a single person's word for it. And since Matthew and Luke drew on Mark they can't be trusted anyway.* Besides what we have already said about corroboration and the variability in oral tradition, this twists a useful principle in the wrong direction. What should normally support the evidence is ruled against it and against common sense.
3. *If there is a parallel example in another tradition or culture, then Christians must have copied it and fit Christ into that mold.* Examples: Baptism, the Cross, etc. This is faulty logic. Just because a similarity can be drawn between two ideas, practices, etc., it does not at all follow that the one caused the other. Very often this requires a stretch of logic and a denial of the contexts of those ideas.

We must apply the same standards of evidence:

- *Are they biased, do they have an agenda?* Yes, sometimes very explicitly they wish to recreate Jesus in an image they prefer, and “rescue” him from “fundamentalists” and “evangelicals.” They wish to represent Jesus as anything *but* the Son of God.
- *Does their method create its own results?* Yes, They determine what evidence they will accept based on conclusions they have already decided. This is assuming what you have yet to prove, and is a logical fallacy.
- *Does their method reflect reality?* No. They say that unless two or more people say it in the gospels, then it can't be trusted. This precludes any reasonable or realistic variability in accounts. Their method is based on self-established rules that do not reflect common sense reality.

Session VI: Jesus on the Witness Stand

Review: What is corroborating evidence? What kinds of corroborating evidence do we have for the Gospels? How can we respond to those scholars who reject or rebut the evidence Christians have for their faith?

Opening Question: Did you ever have your words twisted and misinterpreted by somebody else? What did they do it? What happened?

All rise. The 1st Vatra Court of Grass Lake is now in session.

Prosecution: **Your honors, regardless of what you may have heard about the Biblical evidence and their documents, the truth is that Jesus of Nazareth never claimed to be God. He has been deified by well-meaning but overzealous followers who have distorted his original teachings. He never meant for them to worship him. Even the Gospels bear this out.**

Defense: **Your honors, it is true that we must take into consideration what Jesus said about Himself, how he related to others, and what claims he made. But the Gospels will bear out that He in fact did claim to be the Son of God, equal to God the Father.**

Wasn't Jesus just an exceptional teacher, who did not intend on being confused with God?

Perhaps most significantly was the way Jesus taught. He often used the phrase, "Amen I say to you," before beginning, testifying ahead of time to the truthfulness of what he was about to say. This was unprecedented and outrageous to many of the scribes and Pharisees. He was exceptional because He claimed the authority of God for Himself.

What about the Son of Man? Does His use of this phrase to describe Himself in human terms deny His divinity?

The Son of Man is also a title in reference to the prophecy of Daniel, chapter 7:

¹³ "I was watching in the night visions,
And behold, *One* like the Son of Man,
Coming with the clouds of heaven!
He came to the Ancient of Days,
And they brought Him near before Him.

¹⁴ Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,
That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.
His dominion *is* an everlasting dominion,
Which shall not pass away,
And His kingdom *the one*
Which shall not be destroyed.

It is actually a bold proclamation that He is identifying Himself with the prophesied Messiah! Notice that when he uses the phrase Son of Man it is "The Son of Man." Not "a son of man." There is something prophetic in His every word.

Activity: Examine the Evidence

Take the following worksheet and divide into Groups. Each group should take 1 of the selections and determine what identity Jesus is claiming for Himself.

Also consider the following passages:

Matthew 16: ¹³When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” ¹⁴So they said, “Some *say* John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

John 1: ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ⁴In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Philippians 2: ⁵Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. ⁹Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Based on the evidence of the NT writers, discuss the following questions:

- Did Jesus identify Himself as the Messiah (or Christ), the Son of God, who came into the world to save sinners?
- How did His preaching, teaching, and behavior reflect His self-identity?
- Was He sure about who He was or did he suffer from some sort of identity crisis?

An Identity Crisis?

What is Jesus saying about Himself in each of these Gospel selections?

1. Matthew 21: ²³Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?” ²⁴But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: ²⁵“The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?” And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶“But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.” And He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

2. Matthew 7: ²⁸And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, ²⁹for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Luke 11: ²⁰“But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

John 4: ²⁵The woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes, He will tell us all things.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am *He*.”

3. John 5: ¹⁶For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷But Jesus answered them, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” ¹⁸Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

4. John 14: ⁷“If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him.” ⁸Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰“Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own *authority*; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. ¹¹“Believe Me that I *am* in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.

Deliberations:

- Why do you think He might have been evasive at times and not been straight forward about His identity?
- Jesus taught His disciples to use the term “Abba” and “Father” when praying to God. What does this say about His relationship to God the Father?
- Is that type of relationship attractive to you? Why or why not?

Session VII: Jesus on the Witness Stand Part II

Review: Last time we discussed what Jesus said and presumably thought about Himself. Did He speak of Himself as the Messiah, the Son of God, equal to the Father? Why do you think some people think he did not?

Opening Question: Have you ever believed something for which you knew other people would think you crazy? What was it? What happened?

All rise, the 1st Vatra Court of Grass Lake is now in session.

Prosecution: **If it is indeed the Truth that Jesus of Nazareth actually believed himself to be the only-begotten Son of this hypothetical God the Father, is this not now surely the strongest evidence against him? Is this not a sure sign of mental illness in the extreme? Megalomania? Delusions of Grandeur? Complete disassociation from reality?**

Defense: **Your honors, the question as to whether Jesus Christ was insane, either clinically or legally, is a valid one. It can be answered in the same manner one would answer this question in any court of law or hospital. Did Jesus exhibit any signs of mental illness associated with His identity claims? Based on all that we know of His behavior, can we consider Him insane? We hold that the evidence will show that the answer to both questions is No!**

- Based on your common sense notions of mental health, what would you consider to be sure signs of a mental illness? (Emotional extremes, illogical thinking, speaking to beings that are not there, going into fits, withdrawal from human life, believing you are someone you are not)
- Did you see the movie, “A Beautiful Mind?” In this movie we see very clearly the effects of paranoid schizophrenia on a person. Do the Gospels suggest Jesus had any of these symptoms? (He spoke eloquently, forcibly, and with clarity of thought; His emotions were as healthy as could be, and stable; He could function in society and had rational things to say about it; He spoke to God in prayer and sometimes God answered back—and everyone could hear it!)

Consider the public opinion of the people in Jesus’ time:

- **John 10:** ¹⁹Therefore there was a division again among the Jews because of these sayings. ²⁰And many of them said, “He has a demon and is mad. Why do you listen to Him?” ²¹Others said, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”
- **John 14:** Jesus said, ¹¹“Believe Me that I *am* in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.”

The difference between a delusional person and the real person is that the real person can back up their claims with real evidence and support. For Christ that evidence was the miracles He performed. His arguments were cohesive and rational.

Exhibit for the Prosecution: Jesus did not fit the God Profile!

Prosecution: **Even if Jesus appears to be a paragon of mental stability, He still just a man, not God. He was not really Omnipotent, Omniscient, or eternal. This is shown by the Gospels themselves. Consider the following passages:**

He is not Omnipotent or all powerful:

- **Mark 7:**²⁴ From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know *it*, but He could not be hidden.
- **Matthew 13:**⁵⁸ Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

He is not all Good

- **Mark 10:**¹⁷ Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”¹⁸ So Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God.

He is not Omniscient, or all knowing:

- **Mark 13:**³² “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.
- **John 14:** If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I.

He is not eternal, but created:

- **Colossians 1:**¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Each group should take one of these passages and look it up for its original context.

- Does the passage seem to suggest what the Prosecution is saying?
- Does the passage suggest something different. How so?
- How do you think the passage might be explained without denying the divine nature of Christ?

Report your findings back to the court and discuss further.

Here is some commentary on each passage for discussion.

- In Mark 7:24 Jesus' power is not in question, but rather the ability of others to hide him. It is through the people's inability to hide Him that Jesus is able to work an even greater miracle, healing the daughter of the Canaanite Woman (Mark 7:25-30)
- In Matthew 13 we have an example of Jesus limiting Himself in His power. Because the people do not believe in Him he did not *do* many works. It does not say he *could not do* many works, but really that He *would not*.
- In Mark 10 Jesus is not denying that He is God. Rather He is asking the person if he really knows what he is saying when he calls Jesus the Good Teacher. Is he just brown-nosing or does he really believe that Jesus is all knowing and all good?—by this Jesus tests the man's faith.
- In Mark 13 we again see Him humbling Himself in His Humanity. This is part of the mystery of the Incarnation, that God emptied Himself to become human. This "emptying" involves the self-limiting of His powers for the sake of His mission. If He uses all His powers He runs the risk of limiting our human freedom to respond to Him. He cares more about that than His own power. If He let Himself tell them when the end of the world would be, it would take a lot of motivation out of people to be vigilant. In addition, the very nature of the "end of time" defies human reason, and may not be explicable in human terms. Nonetheless, this is perhaps the most difficult of passages.
- In John 14, by saying that the Father is greater this does not imply that that makes Him less God. If I say my father is greater than I it does not make me less a human being or member of the family but it is a sign of due respect and honor. In fact, what is so great is that Jesus is about to return to His Father in heaven, taking His humanity with Him so that all humanity might be united to God in heaven through Him, which is a greater life.
- In Colossians 1, if we read the complete text, we find that firstborn over all creation does not mean Jesus is created but the creator: ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

After each group reports back to the court, and the passages are discussed, allows the defense to enter into evidence its own selection of verses.

Defense: Your honors, with all due respect, these verses are taken out of context and do not at all deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, even though there are those who have historically taught this.

Discuss and conclude with deliberations.

Defense's Rebuttal:

Defense: **There are also many passages that clearly point to Jesus as divine in origin and sharing all the powers of God, without having to take them out of context. Here are some in response to each of those points made:**

He is Omniscient, all knowing:

- **John 16** ²⁹His disciples said to Him, “See, now You are speaking plainly, and using no figure of speech! ³⁰“Now we are sure that You know all things, and have no need that anyone should question You. By this we believe that You came forth from God.”
- **John 13** ¹Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. ²And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s *son*, to betray Him, ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, ⁴rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.

He is Omnipresent, everywhere present:

- **Matthew 28:20** And lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.”
- **Matthew 18:20** ²⁰“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

He is Omnipotent, all powerful:

- **Matthew 28:18** “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”
- **Mark 2** ⁶And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, ⁷“Why does this *Man* speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, “**Why do you reason about these things in your hearts?** ⁹“**Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise, take up your bed and walk’?** ¹⁰“**But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins**”—He said to the paralytic, ¹¹“**I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.**” ¹²Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all...

He is eternal and uncreated:

- **John 1** ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God.
- **Hebrews 13:8** ⁸Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Deliberations:

- Read Philippians 2:5-8m which speak of Jesus’ emptying and humbling Himself to become Human. What might be some of the motivations for God to do this? Then read verses 9-11. What happens as a result of Jesus’ mission?
- Some verses at first look do seem to suggest that Christ was less than God. Do you think that these understood in a way that does not contradict the verses submitted by the Defense?
- What other teachings about God might make it hard to believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate?

The Fingerprint Evidence: Does Jesus match God's fingerprints in the Old Testament?

Prosecution: Even if Jesus meets the profile of an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God, he does not match the image of the Old Testament God but represents a departure from the Jewish tradition. They are, in a certain sense, two altogether different Gods! We find no evidence for a Christ or Messiah that is like Jesus.

Defense: Your honors, we can use the same principles as crime scene investigators to determine if what the prosecution is true. If Jesus claims to be the same God and Messiah as described in the Old Testament, He should have left the equivalent of "fingerprints" that would be able to identify Him later. The thing about fingerprints is that no two are exactly alike. A person's prints should remain the same and be able to be matched only to his own. There does exist in the Old Testament something parallel to fingerprint evidence: that is, prophecies!

- What are prophets and prophecies? What distinguishes a false prophet from a true one?
- How do you think the writings of the Prophets can serve as evidence for Christ?
- How many prophecies of the Old Testament do you think relate to the Messiah?

The Prophecies of the Old Testament provide some of the most amazing evidence for the claims of Jesus Christ.

Take for example Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 (pass out on sheet). Have groups read these and answer these questions:

- How many details do you find that describe Jesus Christ?
- How easy would it be for just anybody to fulfill those details?
- How convincing is prophetic evidence? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Prosecution: We object to this evidence on several grounds your honors:

1. **Coincidence:** Jesus may have fulfilled some of these prophecies, but it was only coincidental. (The Probability argument is so improbable as to be ridiculous)
2. **Altered Gospel:** Clearly the gospel writers fabricated details in order to fit their belief that Christ was the Messiah and make it appear so. (But remember that eyewitnesses of these events, both for and against Christ, lived at the time and could have refuted such lies. The Jewish authorities would have loved such an opportunity, but they never had one.)
3. **Intentional Fulfillment:** Jesus himself engineered things to appear as prophecy fulfillment. (This could be true of some, such as Palm Sunday, but how could Christ engineer His own place and time of birth, or the details of His death?)
4. **Context Argument:** The Prophets were not really speaking about a future Messiah and have been taken far out of context. (Prophecies can have meanings which are apparent at the time they are written yet also refer to future events, because of their nature. In just about every case the context does not negate the Messianic meaning but enhances it.)

Defense: Take a simple test. Write a list of 20 specific characteristics of a person, and give that list to another person. These might include physical descriptions, personal background, family histories, life experiences, and so forth that are very specific. See if they can identify that person easily with a little research and asking people. What would you imagine would happen if you had a list of 50 specific traits? 100? Over 100?

In the case of the Messiah, we have hundreds of references to over a hundred very specific traits that would need to be fulfilled. In each case these can be found fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, and nobody else in the entire history of humanity. Nobody!

The probability that Christ could have fulfilled these very specific requirements by chance, by intention, by falsification, or misinterpretation is negligible. It is even less likely than two completely different people leaving identical and matching fingerprints. The evidence points to one conclusion: Jesus of Nazareth is the predicted and prophesied Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

Isaiah 53: A Prophecy of the Messiah fulfilled written centuries before Christ

Who has believed our report?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant,
And as a root out of dry ground.

He has no form or comeliness;

And when we see Him,

There is no beauty that we should desire Him.

3 He is despised and rejected by men,

A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

And we hid, as it were, *our* faces from Him;

He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

4 Surely He has borne our griefs

And carried our sorrows;

Yet we esteemed Him stricken,

Smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But He *was* wounded for our transgressions,

He was bruised for our iniquities;

The chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him,

And by His stripes we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;

We have turned, every one, to his own way;

And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted,

Yet He opened not His mouth;

He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,

And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,

So He opened not His mouth.

8 He was taken from prison and from judgment,

And who will declare His generation?

For He was cut off from the land of the living;

For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.

9 And they made His grave with the wicked—

But with the rich at His death,

Because He had done no violence,

Nor *was any* deceit in His mouth.

10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him;

He has put *Him* to grief.

When You make His soul an offering for sin,

He shall see *His* seed, He shall prolong *His* days,

And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.

11 He shall see the labor of His soul, *and* be satisfied.

By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many,

For He shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great,

And He shall divide the spoil with the strong,

Because He poured out His soul unto death,

And He was numbered with the transgressors,

And He bore the sin of many,

And made intercession for the transgressors

Psalm 22:1-19

Prophecy of the Crucifixion

¹ **My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**

*Why are You so far from helping Me,
And from the words of My groaning?*

² O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear;
And in the night season, and am not silent.

³ But You *are* holy,
Enthroned in the praises of Israel.

⁴ Our fathers trusted in You;
They trusted, and You delivered them.

⁵ They cried to You, and were delivered;
They trusted in You, and were not ashamed.

⁶ But I *am* a worm, and no man;
A reproach of men, and despised by the people.

⁷ **All those who see Me ridicule Me;
They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,**

⁸ **“He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him;
Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!”**

⁹ But You *are* He who took Me out of the womb;
You made Me trust *while* on My mother’s breasts.

¹⁰ I was cast upon You from birth.
From My mother’s womb

You *have been* My God.

¹¹ Be not far from Me,
For trouble *is* near;

For *there is* none to help.

¹² Many bulls have surrounded Me;
Strong *bulls* of Bashan have encircled Me.

¹³ They gape at Me *with* their mouths,
Like a raging and roaring lion.

¹⁴ **I am poured out like water,
And all My bones are out of joint;
My heart is like wax;
It has melted within Me.**

¹⁵ My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
And My tongue clings to My jaws;

You have brought Me to the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs have surrounded Me;
The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me.

They pierced My hands and My feet;

¹⁷ **I can count all My bones.**

They look *and* stare at Me.

¹⁸ **They divide My garments among them,
And for My clothing they cast lots...**

Compare this Psalm to

- Matthew 27:35, 42-46
- Mark 15:24-34
- John 19:31-37

Deliberations:

- Do you think prophetic writings should be considered as evidence for Christ?
- Why do you think some people might resist or reject this kind of evidence?
- How has studying prophecy affected your opinion on the matter?

Session VIII: The Resurrection: Hoax or History

Review: Yesterday we considered the possibility that Jesus did not rise from the dead because He did not really die from the Crucifixion. This is actually believed by millions of people in the world who follow the Islamic scripture, the Koran. What are some of the reasons it is unlikely that Christ survived the Crucifixion or that he rose from the dead without Supernatural aid as God?

1st Vatra Court is now in session!

The Resurrection is the center and the foundation of the Christian faith. It is so important that St. Paul said, "If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty." It is not surprising therefore that the main dispute in this court will rest on whether the Resurrection occurred or not.

The prosecution, will hold that if it cannot be shown that Jesus did not survive the Cross, then the reports of His Resurrection must have grown up around legends, hallucinations, and fanatical believers. It is not possible for someone to rise from the dead.

The defense will hold that Christ is risen from the dead, that this is a trustworthy historical fact and the only suitable explanation for all the events described in the gospel and which followed thereafter.

Consider now a very important passage from the 1st letter of Paul to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 15:3-11

3. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
4. and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures
5. and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve.
6. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.
7. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.
8. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

Notes:

3: I also received: paul received this from the apostles when he converted, around ad 35. the phrasing "according to the Scriptures" indicates the creedal nature of this tradition.

4. notice the similarity with the creed. This was likely used by early Christians as a statement of the faith.

5. Cephas is the Aramaic for Peter

6. 500 brethren most of whom are still alive, so you can check with them the truth of what Paul is saying!

7. james the brother of the Lord, who may have been skeptical

8. paul saw him after the ascension in the vision on the road to damascus

Possible Explanations for the Appearances of the "Resurrected Christ"

1. **Legendary:** These stories emerged as legends about Jesus among followers who wanted to believe He was something more than a simple teacher.
2. **Hallucinations:** The appearances were likely hallucinations experienced by emotional distraught followers who could not reconcile their teacher's death with the promises He made about rising from the dead.
3. **Wishful thinking:** They talked themselves into believing it was the risen Christ. After Jesus' death they looked back at the difficult days afterwards and convinced themselves that the encounters with the "angels" and the "gardener" and the "traveler" on the road to Emmaus were really Christ Himself.
4. **Something "else:"** The Disciples saw something and they sincerely believed that what they saw was the risen Christ but it was not. (That's impossible.) It was something else.

Possible reasons why these explanations don't work:

1. To become Legend, a story needs time, usually generations. Consider 1 Cor. 15:6. St. Paul is basically inviting his readers to check the facts for themselves with the hundreds of eyewitnesses. Also, this special list, already in the form of a "mini-creed" was *received* by Paul from the Disciples when he converted-- about 20 years before He wrote this letter. (converted c. 35 AD, wrote letter, c. 55 AD). Again, the Gospels can be trusted.
2. While a hallucination might explain an individual encounter with the risen Christ, there is no known clinical evidence for a psychologically-induced hallucination that is experienced by many people at once, either twelve or five hundred. Hallucinations are intensely individual events, and not shared. In fact that is how we commonly know whether we are hallucinating-- we ask someone else if they see the same thing we do!
3. Wishful thinking might explain the initial hopefulness and enthusiasm. However, the disciples were not easily convinced and Christ "upbraided them for their lack of faith." They came into the appearances not wishfully hoping to see Christ but disbelieving those who did. The classic example is St. Thomas who refused to believe on the grounds of wishful thinking but demanded evidence. Secondly, such wishfulness would hardly stand the test of time to the point of the disciples willing to risk and eventually give their lives for something they knew deep down inside to have been made up and not 100% certain.
4. Something else: I include this explanation because I have actually heard it used by someone who is otherwise normally rational and intelligent. It is an example of a simple rejection of the resurrection on philosophical grounds.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

3. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
4. and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures
5. and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve.
6. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.
7. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.
8. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

Session IX: Final Deliberations and the Jury's decision

Respected Ladies and Gentlemen of the Juries, you have now heard the evidence and the arguments for and against the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It is time for you to decide whether you will find Him guilty of misrepresentation, as the Prosecution has attempted to demonstrate, or not guilty, as the defense has tried to demonstrated. Is Jesus the Son of God, risen from the Dead? Or is he the subject, willingly or unwillingly, of a great hoax and sham? If He is a false God, you must find Him Guilty. If he is true God of true God, you must find Him innocent, Not Guilty.

In courts of Law where Juries must deliberate over the fate of the person who stands accused, they must be able to come to a unanimous decision. All jurors must agree on the verdict, based on the evidence that they have heard and seen.

In this court, you have really not been able to hear a completely unbiased trial. All evidence you have received has come through one person, your teacher, and while has tried to be faithful to both the prosecution and the defense, it is unlikely that you doubt which position he agrees with. Therefore, you may find it justifiably difficult to render a decision in this matter, until you find evidence outside this classroom to substantiate the evidence presented. Your teacher has made every effort to provide evidence that speaks for itself as well as arguments that stand on their own merits as sensible and coherent. It is the opinion of this court that you should indeed make every effort to continue your education in this area so that you will be able to make the most educated and dependable decision possible.

In the meantime, however, please make your final decision for the purposes of this court, using the following questions as guidelines in your deliberations:

1. At present, how convinced are you that the evidence supports the position of the prosecution? What about the defense?
2. What evidence do you consider most significant and influential in your decision? Why?
3. What evidence do you consider least significant and influential in your decision? Why?
4. What other questions would you like to have answered in order to feel more certain in rendering a decision? What kinds of evidence would you also like to consider?
5. How would you improve these court proceedings in future cases? Are there any jurors who would be willing to participate in such a trial as prosecutors or defenders, and not just jurors?
6. As you end deliberations, how does your jury find the defendant, Jesus of Nazareth, called Christ? Is He guilty or not guilty of misrepresentation, either voluntary or involuntary, in the Gospels and Bible that claim to represent the truth about Him?

Please remember to seek a unanimous position. This may mean you will have to debate and discuss amongst yourselves for some time, possibly even having to convince members of your jury who do not agree with you (whether for or against the defendant, Jesus). At the appointed time, your jury spokesperson must render the verdict to the court. A jury which cannot agree unanimously will be considered a mistrial. Lastly, the court thanks you for your attention and participation in these proceedings.