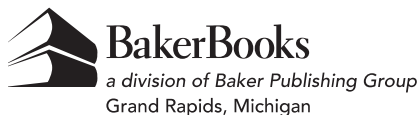


7 TRUTHS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

DISCOVERING CHRISTIANITY'S MOST
DANGEROUS IDEAS



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Introduction

Historic Christianity's Dangerous Ideas

Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.

C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

This line from my favorite book in C. S. Lewis's remarkable children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, makes it clear that Aslan, the Christ figure in the story, is not a tame lion. But his being dangerous does not rule out his profound benevolence.

Like Lewis's ferocious feline, ideas, including those of formal belief systems, can also be dangerous. And if Christianity encompasses ideas that are not safe, then is it not, therefore, a risky and even hazardous religion?

One of my longtime colleagues and friends, an atheist, agrees that historic Christianity includes *dangerous ideas*. From his atheistic point of view, however, the Christian faith affirms irrational and superstitious ideas that are not just unsafe but harmful. He believes these ideas are injurious both for those who believe them as well as for those who are affected by them. In fact, the emergence of the New Atheism movement was fueled by the conviction that religion is not merely *false* but indeed *harmful*.

In philosophy, theology, and science, provocative ideas that challenge the reigning paradigm reflect a radical shift in perspective. These ideas can have major implications for how people view reality, truth, rationality, goodness, value, and beauty, and they can sometimes contravene what many people believe. Not only do such revolutionary ideas threaten accepted beliefs, but they also contain explosive world- and life-view implications for all humanity.

Historic Christianity embodies numerous beliefs that are theologically and philosophically volatile (in the best sense of the term). The Christian faith contains powerful truth-claims that have transformed the church and turned the world upside down. Christianity's initial dangerous ideas started with twelve men (Jesus's apostles) and within three hundred years came to dominate the ancient Roman world. And for more than a thousand years after that, the historic faith dominated all aspects of Western civilization.

In the last couple of centuries, however, the world has been exposed to ideas that were dangerous in their own right. In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and Friedrich Nietzsche's "God is dead" proclamation challenged everything Christian society held dear. These profound and unsettling naturalistic perspectives have propelled the secularization of today's educational institutions of the Western world. Accordingly, the public square in the West also increasingly reflects such beliefs and values.

The late twentieth century also saw the rise in the West of a new radical pluralistic and inclusivistic perspective. Postmodern thinking—in reaction to both traditional religion and secularism—reflects a mixture of relativism, subjectivism, and pluralism. Thus today's marketplace of ideas is a smorgasbord of skeptical, secular, and religious viewpoints.¹ But traditional religion now competes with religious inclusivism and pluralism.

The historic Christian truth-claims presented in this book can, then, be viewed as having a renewed sense of danger. The reason is that much of society today knows so little about the specific beliefs of classical Christianity. Therefore, many people are unaware of historic Christianity's unique perspective on God, Christ, the world, humankind, values, death, and suffering. The advance and entrenchment of secularism over the last couple hundred years make these Christian ideas fresh and explosive. Not safe, but good.

This book is divided into seven sections that address seven of historic Christianity's dangerous ideas. Each section is composed of two chapters that set forth why historic Christian truth-claims are both dangerous and good. The following summary gives you a brief foretaste of how these revolutionary ideas are framed, explained, and defended. This book is intended as an apologetic for the Christian faith's central beliefs and values.

Section 1 (chapters 1–2) starts with the secular perspective on the extreme brevity of human life and on our final end: death. In powerful contrast, arguably Christianity's *most dangerous idea*—Jesus's bodily resurrection—is presented in some detail and defended. Historic Christianity makes the startling claim that one man died a public death but did not remain dead.

Section 2 (chapters 3–4) begins with the controversy of religious pluralism: numerous and contradictory religions claim to speak for God. But historic Christianity's *most distinctive dangerous idea*—the incarnation (Jesus as God in human flesh)—is explained and shown to best account for the facts of Jesus's life. The Christian message is that God came to Earth to seek and save lost sinners.

Section 3 (chapters 5–6) shows how modern cosmology confirms an astonishing truth: the cosmos is fine-tuned and had a beginning. Amazingly, historic Christianity’s *most far-reaching dangerous idea*—creation *ex nihilo*—comports with cutting-edge science. In fact, the dynamic enterprise of science itself was born and flourished within the context of the Christian worldview.

Section 4 (chapters 7–8) introduces the subject of atheism and shows how this philosophy seeks to explain reality without reference to God. Historic Christianity, on the other hand, affirms that the best arguments from virtually any aspect of life and the world clearly point to the existence of the God of Christian theism. God, then, as the best explanation for reality, constitutes the Christian faith’s *most comprehensive dangerous idea*.

Section 5 (chapters 9–10) opens with the almost universal religious human belief: God will accept people based on their inherent goodness and their good works. In sharp contrast, historic Christianity’s gospel message reveals the *most hopeful of dangerous ideas*: that salvation comes solely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Christianity stands alone as the universal religion of grace.

Section 6 (chapters 11–12) explains how, in rejecting God, secularism has also lost the value and dignity of human beings. In other words, if humans evolved by purely naturalistic means, they are not different in kind from the animals. But historic Christianity’s *most humanitarian of dangerous ideas*—the *imago Dei* (humankind made in the image of God)—lays the foundation for the sanctity of human life. Christianity affirms humans as the distinctive crown of God’s creation.

Section 7 (chapters 13–14) explores the problem of evil, pain, and suffering. In contrast to secularism, historic Christianity’s *most comforting dangerous idea* is that God has a good reason for the evil and suffering that he allows. Furthermore, God has defeated evil in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and will eliminate suffering in his future eternal kingdom. Thus the Christian faith has the best and most hopeful explanation concerning evil and suffering.

If as a Christian you find that these dangerous ideas don’t rock your worldview, then maybe your faith has become far too safe. And if you’re not a Christian, then welcome to Christianity’s dangerous, but good, ideas. For those who are courageous enough to seek deeper understanding, the historic Christian faith has many more incredibly explosive truths to reveal.

Soli Deo Gloria,
Kenneth Richard Samples
Advent 2011

1



Easter Hope

For the religious believer [theist], the last word lies not with death but with God.

John Polkinghorne, “God and Physics”

Most people feel uncomfortable talking about their own mortality. Research in the field of thanatology (the study of death and dying) indicates that some individuals even believe if they don’t think about death, it may not happen to them.¹ But, as Walter Martin, original host of *The Bible Answer Man*, often said, “The real death rate is one per person.”²

A dangerous thinking in its own right, this denial of one’s mortality constitutes a serious departure from reality. Given that for the last couple of centuries secularism has gained influence within the Western world (especially in the universities), let’s explore how that worldview conceptualizes death.

Welcome to the Worldview of Naturalism: Life’s One-Way Ticket

Assume the reductionistic worldview of naturalism for a moment. This is the secular view that the material, physical cosmos is the sole reality. Therefore, the infinite, eternal, tripersonal, spiritual God of Christian theism does not exist. In fact, there simply are no spiritual realities such as gods, angels, or immaterial human souls. And no supernatural realm such as heaven exists.

Life—a fortunate accident—emerged on Earth somehow through the purely natural forces of physics and chemistry.³ Humankind evolved from the lower primates and now stands atop the amazing evolutionary ladder. Now the one referred to as the *naked ape* or *Homo sapiens sapiens* recognizes his chance origin and must contemplate his personal destiny. From a naturalistic perspective, human beings, unlike the impersonal cosmos itself, possess an evolved consciousness and are able to ask the *why* questions. (Strangely enough, the impersonal and nonrational forces of naturalistic evolution have produced a creature that is both *personal* and *rational* and thus capable of reflection.)⁴

As they reflect, humans realize both the fragility and brevity of life—the unequivocal existential dilemma. The grave is the final end of each person’s collective life, existence, and consciousness. After death a person will never think again. Never experience again. Never love again. Only oblivion awaits. And nothing more.

The Naturalist’s Existential Predicament

The naturalist faces a fourfold existential predicament:

1. I will die.
2. I will die soon.
3. I will die alone.
4. I will remain dead forever.

Some might characterize the human condition as being stalked by death. Death is a constant companion. It’s not a matter of *if* but only *when*. Each new day is fortuitous but also ominous. It’s one day closer to that which is even more certain than taxes: the *final end*.

Humans may be called *cosmic orphans*. They are doomed to die, yet they have the inherent capacity to ask the big, existential questions. This melancholy naturalistic scenario leads some to angst and despair. Others feel a sense of urgency to live every moment to the hilt before relinquishing the precious life force within them. Yet even if convinced of a secular view toward life, most people seem unable or unwilling to seriously consider this bleak eventuality. Fear, or in some cases inner terror, keeps people from seriously contemplating death and all that it entails.

Some people succumb to the irrational state wherein they subconsciously entertain the idea that they can successfully avoid death. Philosopher Stephen T. Davis notes, “Human beings are the only animals who know that they must die, and thus the only animals who try to hide from themselves the fact that they must die.”⁵

Death: Knocking at My Back Door

Given such a stark naturalistic fate, the temptation to deny the reality of death runs strong. Yet without faith in God, this amounts to little more than irrational escapism. But it's not only the naturalist who dodges even the mention of the word *death*. What is it about death that frightens people so much? Davis offers six reasons for humankind's fear of death:

1. Death is inevitable.
2. Death is mysterious.
3. Death must be faced alone.
4. Death separates us from our loved ones.
5. Death puts an end to our hopes and aims.
6. Death ends in oblivion.⁶

Everyone has some natural fear of the unknown, including death. But Davis's six reasons are amplified when one adopts a naturalistic worldview. Why? Because from a naturalistic perspective this life is everything! And this unexpected and accidental life is inevitably slipping away; it can't be held on to. And it will never return again.

It gets worse. The big picture reveals a devastating outcome for all life and the energy and configuration of the cosmos itself. The inevitable outcomes according to the naturalistic worldview include the following:

- The individual dies.
- Humanity collectively goes extinct.
- All life on Earth goes extinct.
- Earth, its solar system, and the Milky Way galaxy literally come apart as humankind's once-hospitable location in the universe disperses.
- Finally, the entire grand cosmos itself inevitably grows lifeless and cold due to a universal heat death. The physics law of entropy will have the last say on the matter.

Thus the fate of each individual, humanity as a whole, and the universe will inevitably be the same regardless of what any person thinks, says, or does. The outcome of the naturalistic view is utter hopelessness. Ironically, many naturalists have failed to reflect sufficiently on their worldview perspective and blind themselves to this desperate predicament.

Danger Ahead

Yet it is at this very point of naturalism's projection of ultimate gloom and doom for humanity that historic Christianity's most dangerous idea comes to

bear. Its *dangerous proclamation* is that, though Jesus Christ was condemned by Pontius Pilate and publicly executed through crucifixion, he nevertheless rose bodily from the dead three days later on the first Easter morning.

The absolutely astounding claim of primitive Christianity is that one man in history died but didn't stay dead! In light of human experience and uniform human testimony, this declaration of a literal bodily resurrection from the dead is an utterly incredible claim. If true, there is no more important message for humankind to hear and heed. The resurrection of Jesus Christ would be the ultimate of all dangerous ideas!

Historic Christianity's Most Dangerous Idea: The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

From a historic Christian perspective, both the nature and truth of Christianity uniquely rest on Jesus Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead.⁷ The claim that Jesus Christ was raised to life three days after he was executed resides at the heart of the Christian gospel (doctrine) and is Christianity's central supporting fact (apologetics). According to the apostle Paul, historic Christianity's greatest advocate, the truth of Christianity stands or falls on Christ's resurrection. In his own words, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. . . . If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:14, 17).

Because the truth-claims of Christianity hinge so closely on the resurrection, the New Testament accounts of Christ's resurrection warrant careful analysis and reflection. Not only do the New Testament writers report the resurrection as a factual event, but they also place it within a theological context and explain its overall significance in God's historical redemptive plan.

Let's first summarize the Christian story of Jesus's resurrection; then we'll examine the evidence that supports it and respond to naturalistic alternatives and objections. Later we will return to the amazing implications that the resurrection of Jesus Christ holds for humanity in light of our deadly dilemma.

The New Testament Resurrection Scenario

The four New Testament Gospels and various New Testament Epistles reveal the following historic Christian narrative concerning Jesus Christ's death and resurrection⁸ (see Matt. 26:47–28:20; Mark 14:43–16:8; Luke 22:47–24:53; John 18:1–21:25; Acts 9:1–19; 1 Cor. 15:1–58).

Jesus of Nazareth was arrested and tried for blasphemy by the Jewish religious leaders (chief priests and elders). He was subsequently found guilty before the Sanhedrin and taken to the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, for execution. At the instigation of some of the Jewish religious leaders, Pilate

condemned Jesus to death as an insurrectionist. He was beaten and crucified at the hands of Roman soldiers.

Jesus's lifeless body was taken down from the cross, covered with a burial cloth, and placed in the newly cut tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (a wealthy and prominent member of the Sanhedrin). A large boulder was placed at the entrance of the tomb, and guards were stationed there to ensure that Jesus's body was not stolen.

At dawn three days later (Sunday morning, the first day of the week) there was a violent earthquake at the tomb. An angel of the Lord appeared and rolled away the stone. The guards were terrified to the point of paralysis at the sight of the angel. Some women followers of Jesus subsequently arrived at the tomb and discovered it empty. The women encountered the angel who informed them that Jesus was not in the tomb because he had risen from the dead. Having heard about the women's encounter at the burial site, some of Jesus's disciples went to the tomb later that morning and also found it empty.

Following the empty tomb event, the risen Christ appeared to specific individuals and groups, starting on that original Easter and extending over a forty-day period. According to the New Testament Gospels and Epistles, the resurrected Jesus appeared to individuals, small groups, large assemblies, friends and enemies, believers and nonbelievers, women and men, in public and in private, and at different times and locations.

Jesus's Resurrection Appearances

The New Testament specifically mentions twelve different resurrection appearances:

1. to Mary Magdalene (John 20:10–18)
2. to Mary and the other women (Matt. 28:1–10)
3. to Peter (Luke 24:33–34; 1 Cor. 15:4–5)
4. to two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35)
5. to ten apostles (Luke 24:36–49)
6. to eleven apostles (John 20:24–31)
7. to seven apostles (John 21)
8. to all of the apostles (Matt. 28:16–20)
9. to five hundred disciples (1 Cor. 15:6)
10. to James (1 Cor. 15:7)
11. to all the apostles again (Acts 1:4–8)
12. to Paul, somewhat later (Acts 9:1–9; 1 Cor. 15:8)

The distinct characteristics of Jesus's resurrection body can also be cataloged:

- His resurrection body still bore the marks of the cross in his hands, feet, and side (John 20:19–20).
- His body could be seen, touched, and handled (Matt. 28:9).
- It was a body of flesh and bone, and he invited people to handle and examine it (Luke 24:37–40; John 20:20, 27).
- Jesus even ate and drank with his disciples after his resurrection (Luke 24:41–43; Acts 10:41).

Jesus's resurrection body was certainly material and physical in nature (being the same body that had been crucified), yet it had been transformed into a glorious, immortal, and imperishable body. It was clearly capable of things that ordinary mortal bodies are not; for example, it could appear and disappear in a closed room; it could ascend heavenward; and it was free from the constraint of gravity. Therefore, there was both continuity and discontinuity between Jesus's pre- and post-resurrection body.

What Specific Evidence Supports the Resurrection of Jesus Christ?

The basic reason people reject the idea of resurrection is that they intuitively know dead people stay dead. Therefore, given the extraordinary statements made in the New Testament concerning Jesus's unique bodily resurrection, powerful evidence must be marshaled to defend this claim. Christian apologists through the centuries have appealed to seven credible strands of historical evidence as support for the factuality of the resurrection of Jesus.⁹

1. *Jesus's Empty Tomb*

One of the best-supported facts surrounding Jesus's resurrection is that after his death he was buried in a tomb that three days later was discovered empty. Most New Testament scholars, even most critical scholars (those who doubt the truth of Jesus's resurrection), agree that solid historical facts stand behind the claim in the Gospels that Jesus's tomb was empty on that original Easter morning.¹⁰

Several sound reasons exist for believing that the story in the Gospels of Jesus's burial is historical in nature and not a legendary invention:

1. *The burial accounts originated early on.* They became part of a primitive creedal statement that formed long before any of the New Testament books were written (more on this creedal statement later).
2. *The accounts of Jesus's burial also come from multiple independent sources.* They also remain clear and straightforward, without signs of embellishment, exaggeration, or excessive theological or apologetic adornment.

3. *Historians have no good reason to doubt the existence of any of the key people mentioned in the burial scenario.* Prominent among these is Joseph of Arimathea. If a pious fiction had been hatched, it would hardly depict a member of the controversial Jewish Sanhedrin (the responsible agents in Jesus's arrest and trial) as serving the cause. Moreover, since these burial reports surfaced early, they could have been discredited for factual inaccuracy. Yet no alternative burial tradition about Jesus emerged.
4. *The Gospel accounts indicate that Jesus's women followers were actual witnesses of the crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb.* If the story were false, it is highly unlikely that such an important role would have been granted to women. In the first century, the testimony of women was considered far less reliable than that of men.

In summary, the details of the empty tomb story conform well to what is known historically. For example, far from myth or legend, the report of the empty tomb carries a very early date, even using the primitive expression "on the first day of the week" instead of the later theologically developed "on the third day." The vacated burial site also fits well with what is known of the times archaeologically (i.e., concerning burial customs, construction of tombs, timing of ceremonial events). And the empty tomb was never challenged, let alone refuted, by the contemporary enemies and critics of Christianity.

Just how important is the evidence for the empty tomb? Well, if the Jews or Romans had produced the body of Jesus, Christianity would have been immediately falsified. They could have exhumed the body and put it on public display. Even a partially decomposed body of Jesus would have been enough to severely damage the apostolic message and the movement it launched. Furthermore, if Jesus's body had remained in the tomb, the Jewish and Roman authorities had the motive, means, and opportunity to publicly produce it. But this was never done, though there were plenty of people who desired to quash the primitive faith.

The disciples would not have proclaimed a bodily resurrection unless Jesus's tomb was indeed barren. For in ancient Judaism, the concept of resurrection was considered only bodily in nature, not a spiritual resurrection. Yet the apostles proclaimed Jesus's bodily resurrection just fifty days after his crucifixion in the very locale in which he had been executed and buried.

It should also be noted that the first alternative naturalistic explanation for the resurrection presupposed the truth of the vacated tomb. The Jewish authorities insisted that the tomb was empty because Jesus's disciples had come in the night and stolen the body (Matt. 28:13). There was no mention of the body of Jesus being in a different tomb, buried in a common grave, or eliminated in any other manner (such as devoured by dogs, which is the view set forth by controversial cofounder of the Jesus Seminar, John Dominic Crossan).¹¹

The preeminent evangelical Christian specialist on the resurrection, William Lane Craig, notes, “There is simply no plausible naturalistic explanation available today that accounts for the empty tomb of Jesus.”¹² For two thousand years Christians have argued that when the facts of the empty tomb are combined with Jesus’s postcrucifixion appearances, the only genuinely consistent explanation for this data is found in early Christianity’s proclamation that Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead.

2. Jesus’s Postmortem Appearances

According to the New Testament, numerous people (as many as five hundred) had intimate, empirical encounters with Jesus Christ after his death (postmortem). These appearances were attested by a variety of people, at different times and places, and under various circumstances. The witnesses of the resurrection claimed to have seen, heard, and touched the glorified Christ. The same person whom they had seen executed three days earlier was now alive and in their midst. He even manifested the physical marks of crucifixion. These in-time-and-space physical appearances, which were reported soon after the encounters, cannot reasonably be dismissed as mythical or purely psychological in nature.

The resurrection appearances that the disciples claimed to witness are not like religious visions or hallucinatory phenomena. The encounters with the risen Christ involved the observers’ five senses—much different from strictly religious visions. And the resurrection appearances were part of the observers’ long-term memory, unlike hallucinations that are experienced and then fade from memory. Resurrection expert Gary Habermas says about this eyewitness testimony of Jesus’s resurrection, “Probably a majority of contemporary critical scholars are impressed by the evidence that first century Christians genuinely believed they had seen Jesus after his crucifixion.”¹³

In summary, specific characteristics of the postmortem appearances of Jesus include:

- He appeared to women and men.
- He appeared to friends and enemies.
- He appeared to individuals, small groups, and large groups.
- He was observed indoors and outdoors.
- He was encountered in the morning and evening.
- He was seen, heard, and touched.
- He ate and drank with the disciples.
- His appearances were physical and bodily.
- He appeared to some people a single time and to others multiple times.
- His encounters demonstrated natural and supernatural qualities.

3. *Short Time Frame between Actual Events and Eyewitness Claims*

Powerful evidence for the historical authenticity of Jesus's resurrection from the dead comes from eyewitness testimonies that were reported soon after the events transpired. The apostle Paul claims both that he saw the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:1–19; 22:6–16; 26:12–23) and that prior to his experience he received the firsthand testimony from others who were eyewitnesses to the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3).

In Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians, he employs a creedal statement about the resurrection that dates to the most primitive period of Christianity. This creedal statement is believed even by critical scholars to be part of the original Christian kerygma (the earliest preaching and teaching message of Christianity). This early statement of faith that Paul relays mentions by name two of Jesus's disciples who said they had seen the resurrected Christ. These two disciples are Peter (one of the original twelve apostles and principal spokesperson of early Christianity) and James (the brother of Jesus).

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (1 Cor. 15:3–7)

Paul's statement gives us a fourfold formula of the primitive Christian kerygma:

1. Christ died.
2. He was buried.
3. He was raised.
4. He appeared.

Three independent sources confirm this formula:

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. . . . Joseph [of Arimathea] bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. . . .

[The women] saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! . . . Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" (Mark, told to him by Peter, in Mark 15:37, 46; 16:5–7; see 15:37–16:7)

Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him,

they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. (Luke, in Acts 13:28–31)

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve. (Paul, in 1 Cor. 15:3–5)

Paul also mentions that within a couple of years of his own conversion (brought about by seeing the resurrected Christ), he journeyed to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and James. Most scholars agree it was during the meeting with these two early Christian leaders that he received this early creedal message and then later relayed it in his first Epistle to the Corinthians. Habermas explains the close time frame of these events:

The majority of critical scholars who address the issue think that Paul received his traditional material on the death and resurrection of Jesus from Peter and James the brother of Jesus while he was in Jerusalem approximately a half dozen years after the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁴

Given the short interval of time between the early eyewitness testimonies about Jesus's resurrection and the event itself, these accounts must be considered historically reliable. Furthermore, this time frame also places the original proclamation by the first apostles about Jesus's resurrection near to the time of Jesus's death and resurrection. This development has led even critical New Testament scholars to be amazed at the early and reliable testimony evident in Paul's writings. In fact, distinguished New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn states, "This tradition [of Jesus's resurrection and appearances], we can be entirely confident, was *formulated as tradition within months of Jesus's death.*"¹⁵

Six prominent witnesses to Jesus's resurrection are named in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8:

1. Peter
2. the Twelve
3. more than five hundred brothers and sisters
4. James
5. all the apostles
6. Paul

The testimony of the eyewitnesses also provides an estimated timeline for the resurrection and the events that followed:

AD 30: Jesus's crucifixion

AD 30–31: early creedal proclamation or report of Jesus's resurrection circulates

AD 31–33: Paul's conversion

AD 34–36: Paul's first visit with Peter and James in Jerusalem (where and when Paul receives the creedal report)

AD 48: Paul's second visit with Peter, James, and John in Jerusalem

AD 50: Paul visits the church in Corinth

AD 54–55: Paul writes his first Epistle to the Corinthians (which includes the creedal report found in 1 Cor. 15:3–8)

4. Extraordinary Transformation of the Apostles

The book of Acts describes a dramatic and enduring transformation of eleven men. These terrified, defeated cowards after Jesus's crucifixion (as revealed in the Gospels) soon became courageous preachers and, in some cases, martyrs. They grew bold enough to stand against hostile Jews and Romans even in the face of torture and death. Such radical and extensive change deserves an adequate explanation, for human character and conduct does not transform easily or often. Considering that the apostles fled and denied knowing Jesus after he was arrested, their courage in the face of persecution seems even more astounding. The apostles attributed the strength of their newfound character to their direct, personal encounter with the resurrected Christ. In Christ's resurrection, the apostles found their unshakable reason to live—and die.

According to the earliest testimony concerning the resurrection of Jesus, three of the people Jesus appeared to were either initially skeptical of the truth of the resurrection or were outright opposed to Jesus and his messianic claims. Those three were Thomas, James, and Paul, all of whom were predisposed to reject the truth of the resurrection. Since Paul's conversion will be addressed later, let's consider the extraordinary impact Jesus's resurrection had on Thomas and James.

DOUBTING THOMAS BECOMES BELIEVING THOMAS

While Thomas was one of the original twelve disciples, he was not among the first of Jesus's followers to see the risen Christ. Upon hearing the testimony from his fellow disciples concerning Jesus's bodily resurrection, he doubted its truth. The Gospel of John conveys Thomas's skepticism: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

Though a follower of Jesus, Thomas was highly skeptical and needed direct, empirical evidence of Jesus's actual bodily resurrection before he would believe the claim of his compatriots. Thomas demanded evidence of a concrete

nature. He demonstrated tough-mindedness when it came to claims of the miraculous even when the testimony came from his close friends and associates. Yet according to John's Gospel, Thomas soon had an encounter with the resurrected Jesus that more than satisfied his skepticism:

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:26–28)

Thomas went on to serve as an ardent disciple of Jesus Christ throughout his life. The transformation of Thomas from doubter to worshiper and servant is strong evidence in support of the truth of Jesus Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead.

While some critical scholars have attempted to dismiss John's report of Thomas's encounter with the resurrected Jesus as a mere invention, most readers hear in John's testimony the ring of historical truth. If a mythical story had been invented to support the resurrection, it is highly unlikely that it would claim that one of the original twelve disciples doubted Jesus's resurrection.

JAMES THE FAMILY SKEPTIC

The Gospels report that prior to the resurrection Jesus's brothers were highly critical of Jesus's messianic claims (see Mark 6:3–4; John 7:5). In fact, Jesus's family viewed him as suffering from mental delusion (Mark 3:21, 31–35). Yet the early creed that Paul had been given by the apostles (which included James) reported that Jesus had appeared to his brother James (1 Cor. 15:7). James then became one of the most important leaders of the early Christian church, even holding unique authority at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:12–21). Sources in church history report that James was later martyred for his belief in Jesus Christ.

What accounts for James's amazing transformation from (undoubtedly) being embarrassed by his brother's claims to becoming a distinguished leader in the early church and finally to suffering martyrdom? The resurrection seems to best account for this radical change in James's understanding and perspective. James saw his brother alive after his public execution, and that event changed everything. It was a *dangerous* idea, but a real one.

5. *The Greatest Conversion in History*

Saul of Tarsus was a distinguished, first-century Hebrew scholar of the Torah (the Law), a member of the Jewish party of the Pharisees, and a Roman citizen (Acts 21:37–22:3). Zealous in his devotion to God and in his desire to protect ancient Judaism from what he perceived as false and heretical

teaching, he became the principal antagonist of the primitive Christian church. Saul expressed his intense hatred toward Christians by having them arrested and instigating physical persecution and execution of believers, including Stephen (Acts 7:54–8:3; Gal. 1:13–14). Traveling on the road to Damascus to further persecute the church (ca. AD 31–33), Saul underwent a life-changing experience. According to his claim, Saul encountered (saw and spoke with) the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 9:1–30; 22:5–13). Following his dramatic conversion to the movement he once loathed, he used the Gentile name “Paul” and became the greatest protagonist of the newfound Christian faith.

Besides Jesus Christ himself, the apostle Paul is clearly the second most important figure in the history of Christianity. Paul went on to become Christianity’s greatest missionary, theologian, and apologist as well as the inspired author of thirteen books of the New Testament.

What caused Paul’s conversion—arguably the greatest religious conversion in history? To understand the true magnitude of this conversion, let’s consider what may be the modern equivalent of Paul’s first-century conversion to Christianity.¹⁶ Imagine the British prime minister and statesman Winston Churchill becoming a Nazi. Or American president Ronald Reagan becoming a communist. Or Führer Adolf Hitler becoming a convert to Judaism. Whatever equivalent one chooses, Paul’s conversion to Christianity was such an absolutely astounding event.

According to Paul himself, the incredible transformation of one of Western civilization’s most influential religious leaders and thinkers was due to the appearance of the resurrected Christ. The conversion of the apostle Paul, not to mention his life and accomplishments, seems truly inexplicable apart from the fact of the resurrection.

Yet there are still many skeptics. Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) is considered one of the foremost critics of claims of miracles. Christian philosopher Stephen T. Davis summarizes one of Hume’s major objections to claims of the miraculous: “Hume’s main complaint is that no purported miracle that he knows about has been supported by the testimony of a sufficient number of people of unquestioned good sense, education, learning, and integrity.”¹⁷

Would the claims of the primitive Christian church expressed in Paul’s creedal statement in 1 Corinthians 15 about Jesus’s resurrection meet Hume’s standard? Consider these three points:

1. *The early church claimed that Jesus had appeared alive to more than five hundred people and to Paul.* Many of these people were alive and available to testify at the time Paul penned the first Epistle to the Corinthians. That seems a sufficient number of witnesses to validate a miraculous event.

2. *The skeptical converts to Christianity—namely Thomas, James, and Paul—seem to possess very strong intellectual, educational, and moral qualities that qualify them as credible witnesses.* All three men came to believe in the resurrection after initially doubting or rejecting it.
3. *A number of the major, early Christian leaders died as martyrs for their affirmation of Jesus Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead.* As A. J. Hoover explains,

When a man undergoes persecution, contempt, beatings, prison, and death for a message, he has a good motive for reviewing carefully the grounds of his convictions. It is extremely unlikely that the original disciples of Jesus would have persisted in affirming the truths they affirmed if Jesus hadn't actually risen.¹⁸

It was this reasoning that motivated the Christian thinker Blaise Pascal (1623–62) to state, “I only believe histories whose witnesses are ready to be put to death.”¹⁹

6. Emergence of the Historic Christian Church

What started this movement that within three hundred years dominated the entire Roman Empire and over the course of two millennia dominated Western civilization? Christianity in a very short time developed a distinct cultural and theological identity apart from that of traditional Judaism. According to the New Testament, this unique Christian faith came into being directly because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The extraordinary, historical emergence of the Christian church needs an adequate explanation. According to the New Testament, the apostles turned the world upside down with the truth of the resurrection, and the historic church emerged. This is why many have called the historic Christian church *the community of the resurrection*.

7. Emergence of Sunday as a Day of Worship

The Jews worshiped on the Sabbath, which is the seventh day of the week (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday). The early Christian church, however, gradually changed the day of their worship from the seventh to the first day of the week (see Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; “the Lord’s day,” Rev. 1:10). For the early Christian church, Sunday commemorated Jesus’s resurrection from the dead.

Reflection on Christ’s resurrection to immortal life transformed Christian worship, uniquely influencing the formulation of the sacraments of the early church (baptism and communion), and thus it distinguished the Christian faith in its theology and practice from traditional Judaism. Apart from the resurrection, no reason existed for early Christians (as a sect of Judaism) to

view Sunday (the first day of the week) as having any enduring theological or ceremonial significance. The resurrection of Jesus therefore set historic Christianity apart from the Judaism of its day. That same truth sets the faith apart from all other religions through the centuries.

Such a dangerous idea has been subjected to all manner of skeptical scrutiny. What are the counterexplanations and how do they fare? Do they pose a danger? We'll review them in the next chapter.