

# I'm a Christian because...

## I'm rational

Have you ever heard someone talk about making a “leap of faith”? The phrase is sometimes taken to mean that logical and intelligent religious belief is impossible, and that faith is what we must rely upon in the absence of supporting fact. A friend of mine once expressed this opinion by saying: “Reason allows us to learn many things about the world, but it tells us nothing...about the existence of God, which is why we need faith if we are to believe.” It’s a radical misconception that faith is a numinous quality that allows us to believe the improbable, or that reason has no part in faith. Christian faith is not unsubstantiated belief founded on thin air, and God does not prize blind belief in unsupported claims. Faith, when based upon reasonable beliefs, is rational.

**There is concrete evidence for Christianity:** The crucial claims of Christianity are claims for which there is concrete and objective evidence. This is because the crucial claims of Christianity are *historical* claims: claims about the person of Jesus Christ, his divine nature, and the events surrounding his life, death, and resurrection. The plausibility of the evidence in support of these historical claims has overwhelmed many intelligent atheists and agnostics. Lee Strobel, for instance, was an atheistic journalist for *The Chicago Tribune* who set out to disprove Christianity to his wife, but instead found his scepticism overcome by the evidence in favour of its historical claims. CS Lewis is another example of an ex-atheist who describes his conversion as a search for truth, and a gradual facing up to the facts. Some of your peers at Princeton (myself included) have had a similar reaction to the evidence in support of the crucial claims of Christianity: we have believed there is strong evidence for Christianity. What is some of this evidence?

**The historical reliability of the existing accounts of Jesus’ life:** Many people are sceptical about the report the Bible gives of the events surrounding the life of Jesus; they regard them as inaccurate or mythological or intentionally distorted – but certainly unreliable. However, if we assess the four gospel accounts of Jesus’ life – the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament – from a textual critic’s perspective, comparing them to classical texts from antiquity universally accepted as authentic, they prove to be more certainly reliable than the non-biblical texts. There exist 34 complete manuscripts of the New Testament dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and Codex Sinaiticus is dated to approximately AD 340.<sup>1</sup> The earliest known surviving copy of any part of the New Testament is the John Rylands papyri, which contains pieces of John 18 and is dated at approximately AD 120.<sup>2</sup> Compare this with the 10 existing copies of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*, or eight copies of Herodotus’ *History*, all dated at *over a millennium* later than the original.<sup>3</sup>

We also know that the authors of the gospels, some of whom were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry on earth, were concerned with recording fact. Luke, who was a companion of the apostle Paul, expresses a concern for historicity at the outset of his own account: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” (Luke 1:1-4) And Paul, a leader in the early church, is also deeply concerned with fact. In his letter to the believers in Corinth in the 50s AD, he writes: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” (1 Cor 15:13-14).

**What’s faith for?** If the claims of the Christian faith are reasonable because the facts they are rooted in are reliable, what is this mysterious thing *faith*, and why is it a necessary characteristic of the authentic Christian? Faith goes beyond reasonable intellectual assent in the same way that believing that Christianity is true goes beyond the belief that there is *evidence* that Christianity is true. Faith is used to refer not merely to an intellectual agreement about Jesus’ divine identity, but to the quality of belief or trust in him that is able to produce *action*. It is possible to know, and even assent to, everything that a single person can possibly know about Christianity, and to not be a Christian. Faith is based on reasonable belief, but faith is not *identical to* reasonable belief. Faith is more than mere agreement – and this is why it is often called a “leap.”

The difference between intellectual belief and faith is the difference between intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge. Jonathan Edwards, American theologian, pastor, and (briefly) president of Princeton University, in his sermon “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” describes it this way:

There is a difference between believing that God is holy and gracious, and having a new sense on the heart of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. The difference between believing that God is gracious and tasting that God is gracious is as different as having a rational belief that honey is sweet and having the actual sense of its sweetness.

In the gospels, when Jesus rebukes people for having little faith, or heals people because of their faith, he is encouraging them to make the conscious decision to trust in him, based on their knowledge of him. Acting in obedience to Jesus – acting in faith – is often opposite to what we want to do, but is something that we are able to choose consciously and willingly, in light of what rational knowledge we already have of him, and in order to see if we might actually experience him to be trustworthy. If we are unwilling to act on our rational belief that honey is sweet, and taste the honey, we will *never know* through personal experience honey’s sweetness.

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

Be reasonable. Take the leap. Judge for yourself the credibility of Jesus’ words and teaching. He promises you will find answers.

## Julia Neufeld ‘10

For more information on the historical case for Jesus, see *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel. Or, to learn more ways Christianity is reasonable, try *Mere Christianity*, by CS Lewis.

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Geisler and William Nix. A General Introduction to the Bible

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Metzger. The Text of the New Testament