



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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The Case for Christ, Part 1: “Can We Trust the Bible Evidence?” **The Lord’s Supper** **“Souper Bowl of Caring” Offering**

What day is it today? It’s “Souper Bowl Sunday”, when we collect money for hunger-fighting programs. Our team—the “Extreme (youth) Team”--will be in the Lobby as you leave to collect a dollar, or spare change, or more for this cause.

Oh, yes—there’s also a football game today, isn’t there? I’m sorry to say that I’ll probably miss it, for we’re going over to Sharon’s mother’s place in Napa, to wish her happy birthday, but it should be a great game. And there are truly millions of fans in this country who have been targeting this game. Grocery stores have been marketing foods and recipes for “the big day”, when people will often gather in groups to watch the game together. Some people can’t wait! Here’s a video one church sent in, as they were planning their Super Bowl Party back east last year. Let’s watch! . . . [video cue]

But wait—there’s more! This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the church season of Lent. Lent is that 40 day devotional period when we set our hearts on Jesus and the climax of his ministry: the cross, the grave, the skies! In this year’s Lent, we’re going to devote ourselves to the Apostles’ teaching, as Acts 2 says the early church did. Our game is not this afternoon; our game starts now.

Of course, there’s a lot of time and distance between what the Bible covers, and our own lives today. Certainly, those around us who are not believers feel that distance even more acutely. So before we can even begin to engage many of today’s people in a Bible study, we have to examine the credibility of Christ ourselves. We’re going to do that by using Lee Strobel’s book, *The Case for Christ*. I hope you will join us in our Lenten study. Buy a copy for five dollars, and get a study guide. Read the few pages assigned to each day between now and Easter (or, Resurrection Day). Then come on Sunday to worship, when I’ll kick off the reading for the week to come with a message that sets it up for us. And as a bonus, our Life Groups and Bible Studies are changing their agendas so we can discuss Strobel’s book in a group setting, which will definitely help us get more out of this effort. This is the shape of our all-church study together during Lent.

Today, I want to share with you “Why we would do this.” What do we hope will happen because of the time and energy and money we’re investing? This study is all about the evidence—several different kinds of evidence—that leads to a confident case for Christ Jesus being Who he said he was. And is. But, so what?

Well, for people here who may already know Jesus is who he said, there are three things I hope God will give us as blessings.

First, I hope a grasp of “the case for Christ” will give us much more joy in our faith. And even though this study is highly “head-oriented”--logic driven, and focused on hard-headed

evidence—I hope that our decision to trust in Jesus will descend from our heads into our hearts. If our trust in Jesus moves into our hearts, I expect God will give us a new sense of wonder, and a desire to approach and connect more intimately with God, be filled with God’s Spirit, and exude joy. How good would that be??!

The Bible verse I am grabbing onto for this first hope is Romans 15:13—“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (NIV)

Second, I hope a grasp of “the case for Christ” will give us more confidence about our faith, that there indeed is something to it, that there are reasons to believe the Bible beyond that others told us to believe it was true. We can sift the evidence for ourselves, as we walk with Strobel in these weeks. We can hone our own questions in our discussion groups. And as our confidence in our faith grows, then we need not be the least bit anxious or ashamed to say to anyone that we have decided to follow Jesus. As Paul wrote at the start of his great letter to the Christians at Rome, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.” (Romans 1:16, NIV) We can keep cool even when people do not show interest or want to argue with us, or shy away. Our confidence is not in them or their response to what we say. Our confidence is in Christ and his incredible love available for all people—even for the one who just now wants to walk away. That Romans 1 verse is a keeper, to help us remember this second hope we have as we engage in a study of “the case for Christ”.

Here’s a third hope I have for us: that as we become more joyful (hope #1) and more confident (hope #2), we might even talk about this with someone we know who is not a believer, because this study will have gripped us as we have gripped the case for Christ. To me, this is being obedient to Peter’s word to his flock: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Peter 3:15, NIV)

Now, by bringing up the new assurance you’d have for sharing your faith, am I making you nervous? It reminds me of a story Billy Graham once told. There was a woman who had recently experienced a death in her family and sensed a strong urgency to share her faith with at least one other person. The candidate for her renewed evangelistic zeal was a repairman servicing her furnace. Upon completing his work, she backed him against the wall and asked, “If that furnace had blown up in your face and you had died, would you know for certain where you would spend eternity?” The guy was so startled by the inquiry he forgot to leave her a bill. *So many people worry about personal discomfort that witnessing may cause. Here’s a lady who shared her faith, and a got her furnace fixed for free!* (Facing Death and the Life After, Billy Graham, 1987, p. 215)

What changed my mind about that years ago was experiences I had with people really wanting to hear about God. But I still wonder when to speak and when to only listen.

A guy who prayed this prayer every morning, “Lord, if you want me to witness to someone today, please give me a sign to show me who it is.” One day he found himself on a bus when a big, burly man sat next to him. The bus was nearly empty but this guy sat next to our praying friend. The timid Christian anxiously waited for his stop so he could exit the bus. But before he could get very too nervous about the man next to him, the big guy burst into tears and began to weep. He then cried out with a loud voice, “I need to be saved. I’m a lost sinner and I

need the Lord. Won't somebody tell me how to be saved?" He turned to the Christian and pleaded, "Can you show me how to be saved?" The believer immediately bowed his head and prayed, "Lord, is this a sign?" (Norman Cates in Deacon, January-March 1995, p.34)

It probably won't be that obvious, but just pay attention to what's going on around you, and pay attention to God's voice. You will feel that gentle nudge, and as we study together, you will actually have something to say!

Now, let's join with Lee Strobel as he opens his book, and we will be reading the Introduction, and chapters 1 and 2 this week.

Strobel's "Introduction" is important. There he tells a story of his early work as a crime reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, and how he was shocked to discover the evidence in a trial he was covering would be interpreted to support two totally different theories of the crime. Like most of the other people involved, Lee had early on become convinced that the defendant was guilty; the man even confessed, at the end. But then Strobel got a call from a trusted informant from that same crime-ridden part of town. This informant's insight was relayed to the prosecutor, and that opened up the whole case again, a case which Strobel--and the prosecutor and the jury--had seen as open-and-shut, and the verdict was reversed! Lee compares that to the way a lot of people have prejudged Jesus.

Do you know people like that? They *think* they know who Jesus was; and still more people today don't know and don't care. So Strobel's story is on target for today's people.

Most of us, however, have a different problem. We have been around the church so long that we just accept that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, who did miracles and changed the world through men who gave their all (as he had done). It rarely occurs to us—here in our holy huddle—that a large part of the world's people, starting in our own neighborhoods, have rejected Jesus (or the version of Jesus they have heard about). People today raise suspicious questions that would not have widely occurred to earlier generations.

Strobel himself employs many of these common objections as he interviews experts on various aspects of the biographies of Jesus. "Wasn't this stuff made up?" "Didn't these stories about Jesus and his words get passed down by word of mouth? And since we've all played "telephone" where you whisper a story around a circle, to see how distorted it ends up, doesn't that show these oral transmissions can't be trusted?" "Don't the gospels have a theological agenda? And since they do, that means they are not accurate records of what really happened, right?"

As we read Strobel's interview with Dr. Craig Blomberg, we watch as Blomberg answers these and many other attacks on the gospels with evidence from the Bible text, and by teaching us to pay attention to the different culture and customs of the New Testament era. Bottom line—yes, these records can be trusted.

For a lot of people today, this is a crucial point. We live in a culture that dismisses truth, and that claims everyone has their own truth. "This is true for you, that is true for me." Many people can't examine evidence and refuse to come to a reasonable conclusion because of this bias. So for us to engage people who are such relativists, we need to undermine this squishy notion of truth as just one more prejudice.

I like to do that by examining “how we know what we know”. Here’s a quote from Stobel’s introduction: (p. 18) “If you were selected for a jury in a real trial, you would be asked to affirm up front that you had not formed any preconceptions about the case. . . . Ultimately, it’s the responsibility of the jury to reach a verdict. That doesn’t mean they have one-hundred-percent certainty, because we cannot have absolute proof of anything in life. In a trial, the jurors are asked to weigh the evidence and come up with the best possible conclusion. [endquote]

When you think about it, truth is really based on probabilities, not certainties. The more evidence that points to the same conclusion, the greater probability that we have found something that is true. Then, the more we question our conclusion by challenging it with other explanations of the evidence—and our conclusion still stands as the simplest, most comprehensive account of the evidence--the more we can trust our conclusion is sound. Our level of trust, our estimate of the probabilities, goes up.

Even science--a lot of 20th Century physics--has demonstrated that while we can never be 100% certain of anything—often because our little brains can’t think in big enough terms—we can approach a high degree of probability, and work with that even if we cannot be 100% certain. Most of the time we all operate “as if” we had 100% certainty; we conveniently forget that we often have much less. In fact, full 100% certainty is not necessary for any part of life. So why would we permit someone to require that the Bible have 100% certainty when nothing else in their lives or ours does? Truth and trust is based on probabilities—sometimes because our language isn’t big enough, and our brains aren’t powerful enough to entertain sufficient complexity to reach 100% certainty. And we’ve decided, that’s OK.

This is how we can respond to the relativists who maintain “there is nothing close to absolute truth”.

Well, here we go. We’re on the path together. We’re looking at the evidence with Lee Strobell, as he—a former confirmed atheist—lays out the case for Christ. To steal the title from a book by Paul Little of some years ago, because of this study we start today, we will know much more of why we believe.

But as I said, I want more. I have at least three hopes of what we will get from our time together during Lent, as we stick close to Jesus in his passion, and his victory over death. I hope we will find more joy in our faith, because we have a solid rock on which we stand, in a world that looks pretty shaky. I hope we will find more confidence and less anxiety, when people challenge what we believe. And I hope we might even become eager, when the right time comes, to give people a window into our life with God, day by day. For in the end, it’s not what we believe, it’s Whom we know, to Whom we listen and Whom we obey, it’s Whom we follow as Lord.

[Intro to Communion:]

It was this same Lord who gave us a way to connect with him intimately. We call it “The Lord’s Supper.” At this Table, as God’s Spirit opens our eyes, we see Jesus as our host. At this

Table, as God's Spirit opens our ears, we hear his voice. At this Table, as God's Spirit makes our senses alive, we touch, we smell, we taste these gifts of God that connect us with the best gift God ever gave the world—Himself, because of his love for us.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on February 3, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]