



# 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 3: “What Does Science Say?”*** **(Deacons Fund Offering)** **Romans 1:18-25**

One of the men I looked up to as a child was my 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher, Mr. Lang. He had all kinds of stuff in his classroom—which made his much more interesting than the other classrooms I visited each day of the school week. I was sure I was going to be a scientist, and for some reason, “chemist” flashed in front of my mind. OK, if I was going to be a chemist, I would need “chemistry stuff”. My folks had bought me a Gilbert Chemistry Lab—and not just a small one, the biggest Gilbert made—dozens of chemicals, a THICK manual with lots of experiments. But like a lot of guys, I didn’t want to read those directions in small print in the book. I just started happily mixing chemicals together, to see what would happen. It was some pretty cool stuff, but I really wasn’t learning anything. I thought of the chemistry set as a “toy”.

So if I was going to be a real chemist, I needed real chemistry books and tools. I ordered some flasks and beakers, and an alcohol burner—my folks wouldn’t let me have a true “Bunsen burner”. And on Mr. Lang’s desk I saw a copy of “The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics”, this little cube of thin, India paper, chock full of chemistry secrets. That year when my parents asked me what I wanted to get for Christmas, I said, “The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics!” Somehow, I learned this was one honking expensive reference book; Amazon.com now sells it for \$140.00, which is probably less than the list price my parents would have paid, in today’s dollars. Clearly, whatever it cost ‘way back then, this would be my only Christmas gift.

Christmas morning came, and my brother Dave and I went downstairs to the tree. We would have breakfast first, of course, before it was time for presents. But on the way to the kitchen, I rustled around under the tree and found a heavy, cube-shaped package that could only be one thing—“The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics”! I was excited but also felt like I was in on a secret. “I know what I’m getting!”

Breakfast was finally over. We went into the living room, and passed out gifts to their recipients, so each had a pile. I patiently waited my turn, holding the cube-shaped package in my hand. When my time had come, I smiled confidently, tore off the paper, and, BEHOLD! The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics! I held it up high for all to see. My parents were rather bemused that this gift seemed to be so satisfying, when I was going to get almost nothing else. Then, my brother Dave opened one of his gifts, and while he did so, I opened the cover and looked at the Table of Contents. Oh, yeah—this was where the treasure was! Then I opened to some page in the middle of the book. It was filled with formulas, charts, and tables. It wasn’t very interesting. I tried another page. Similar. I looked at another page, and another. Slowly, I began to understand that I could not understand this book. I didn’t know what most of those symbols or formulas meant. I began to see that I had made a terrible mistake. I guess I thought that if I had The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics in my hand, I would thereby be a chemist.

It's like someone walking into an auto garage, and thinking they're a car mechanic, or walking into a church building, and thinking they're a Christian!

This was a very painful lesson for me. I felt very childish, not grown up at all. I would have to learn SO MUCH before I could even READ that book I had "wasted" my Christmas on. Years later, my suspicions about lack of chemistry aptitude were confirmed in a high school, and then a college chemistry class. But I kept the earlier "let's mix and see what happens" method, so not all was lost; I became a good cook, instead!

Now, we all know science can be very useful. One pastor's wife was grading a science test at home that she had given to her elementary-school class, and was reading some of the results to him. The subject was "The Human Body," and the first question was: "Name one of the major functions of your skin." One child wrote: "To keep people who look at you from throwing up."

One of the lasting impressions I gained from my early confrontation with real science was that science is a mystery cult of specialized knowledge that gives one access to the secrets of life. I got over that in college and seminary, as I learned that the history of science shows that instead of a constant store of never-changing secrets, science has gone through several major paradigm shifts in how it understands our world. And who's to say there will not yet be further world-wide "A-ha's" in the years to come?

We all see examples of unstable "science" on the news. Every few days "a study" comes out, claiming that some food is bad for you—coffee (that is, caffeine) has often been under the microscope in these studies. Then two weeks later, caffeine is found to be not so bad, and in fact has some positive benefits. Is all of this, "science"? Well, yes and no. It takes critical thinking to sort out the wheat from the chaff. You have to ask how many people were in the study (or was it lab rats), how long the study went on, what dosages were involved, was it a double-blind study so that no one could cheat, who paid for the study (was it Starbucks?), what statistical sampling was done or was this a specialized group from which we cannot generalize? Have the results been replicated by another independent investigator?--and on and on. None of these details get reported when "the headline" of "a study" is flashed on the news. You've perhaps heard the term, "junk science"? Without asking such probing questions, a lot of "junk science" gets trumpeted around—or the LABEL of "junk science" is thrown around to discredit a result one doesn't like, without having done the work to prove it's junk.

Yes, over the years, sometimes science has also been used to undermine confidence in, say, the Bible. But when critical thinking skills are fairly applied to evidence—which is what Lee Strobel is doing in his book—we find there are good reasons to have a lot of confidence in the record we get in Scripture.

The Apostle Paul did not use the word "science" in his letter to the Christians at Rome, chapter 1, verse 19 & 20. But he does point to evidence that can be seen by all when he wrote, "What may be known about God is plain to [everyone], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made [there's the 'evidence of science'], so that [people] are without excuse."

In fact, let's look and listen to what Paul writes in this passage of Romans 1, verses 18 – 25. Open your Bibles to Romans 1, and listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Paul says the creation itself speaks of God, provides evidence of God, as God opens our eyes. From the evidence, we can see this God is a God of order, of creativity, of variety—far more than would be needed for the mere survival of species. These hints are there in creation, and there shouldn't be anyone who thinks this is all due to chance. Science, which is the study of creation, should be helping us discover more about God's nature, too, as it studies the world God made.

Science really is a way of thinking, of asking questions, of probing for evidence. That's why Lee Strobel has a chapter on scientific evidence in his book, "The Case for Christ" which we are studying this Lenten season. In a court of law, "science" can add great weight--or totally refute--evidence presented in court. All the "CSI"-type TV shows testify to the power of applying scientific analysis to evidence collected at a crime scene. What if we use the scientific method on the case the Bible makes for Christ?

The science Lee taps into in his chapter 5 is, archaeology. So, specifically, are there artifacts, evidence from the time of Jesus, that back up what the New Testament says?

For many, many years—long before I went to seminary--some archaeologists had been answering that question with a strong "No." These ancient clue hunters had gone, say, to a place where a certain Biblical town was supposed to be. They dug down (as archaeologists are wont to do) and found--nothing. So, they concluded, the Bible record is wrong. And if a record is wrong in details, then doubts about its more general veracity begin to pile up, too. End of story.

Well, maybe not. Other archaeologists looked at the same references more thoroughly, and found that there were a couple of towns with similar names. These scientists pieced together the clues about where one of these other towns should be located; they got out their shovels and brushes, and—Lo, and behold!—here was a town with artifacts from exactly the right strata of time the Bible record indicates!

In similar ways, Biblical dates that were once rejected by a number of scholars have turned out to be true, because it was later found a couple of (Roman) rulers in close proximity of space or time had the same names. And one of these same-named rulers matches the Bible reference about him in every point.

This pattern has gone on and on—first, triumphant discrediting, then less dramatic confirmation. You will read about such things this week.

For his chapter 6, Strobel found another scholar, Dr. Gregory Boyd, to interview about work done by a small group of scholars headquartered over in Sonoma County, calling themselves "The Jesus Seminar". These folks were especially active in the late 1980's and 1990's, and caused quite a stir with articles published in *Time* magazine and other media, claiming that what we read in the Bible about Jesus is legend; nothing out of the ordinary—certainly nothing miraculous—happened. They met as a group from time to time to vote on how much trust to place in each of the sayings attributed to Jesus—from high confidence, to no confidence. You may have heard that they voted secretly by putting different colors of marbles in a box, to indicate their opinion. In the end, they decided Jesus said only about . . . 20% of the

things recorded in the Bible. And then, they brought in another document called, “The Gospel of Thomas”, and asserted it should have the same level of credibility as the four canonical gospels. The Gospel of Thomas—discovered early in the last Century, and written maybe 160 years after Jesus’ death—portrays a very different Jesus, indeed.

Now, have I intrigued—or alarmed--you enough? The media, in covering The Jesus Seminar, had no way to assess the truth claims of this small group of scholars, and because what these were saying was so contradictory to the received traditions of the church, the media gave it great play.

I won’t take time to dissect The Jesus Seminar and its claims; you’ll read about that in Strobel’s chapter 6—which he calls “The Rebuttal Evidence”, because The Jesus Seminar seeks to rebut the claims of Christianity and the main body of academic scholarship stretching across thousands of years. And because we generally distrust institutions in this country, and so many people are eager to latch onto the latest conspiracy theory--and because most folks don’t have critical thinking skills to separate the “wheat” from the “chaff”-- a lot of people have been sucked into a rejection of a Jesus they know nothing about. It’s a sad waste of time—an attack by the Enemy, seeking to keep people away from the truth. That’s the real conspiracy, the one fed by Satan’s lies. Like the archaeological evidence we discussed earlier, The Jesus Seminar’s claims also fall apart when both the evidence they marshal, and/or the assumptions they employ, get even casual direct scrutiny.

Strobel mentions some books I hope to read. I have Luke Timothy Johnson’s book, by the way, if one of you wants to borrow it. I also have The Jesus Seminar’s “magnum opus” they called, “The Five Gospels”. You can check that for yourself.

Today, I’ve gone into specifics more than in the earlier two kick-off messages. This sermon will be printed and be out on the back table next Sunday, and those of you who know how to use a computer and have Internet access can also find this sermon on our Web site as soon as I get it to Penni Smith. After you have read the two chapters in Strobel’s book we cover this week, what I’ve been saying will probably make even more sense.

Another project for someone to do, after we finish our study together, is to collect all the assessment tools Lee uses to sift evidence, tools that help us decide to highly trust—or trust not at all--something we are told or shown. He has a small illustration at the start of each chapter, and his probing test questions and reasoning are inserted into the interview he reports in each chapter. Putting those together would be a nice short course in critical thinking. Why should we trust anything? Why should we trust the Bible? Why should we trust the Bible’s God? Such tools can help answer those questions, and we all need to learn to use them. It would be great to have a laminated card we could all carry around that lists, “Questions to ask”, to get closer to the truth we really need to attend to, and then we can discard the rest.

Not only will answers to those questions make your own faith more confident and more joyful, with those answers you will find yourself able to make a case for Christ with someone else you meet. You can do that by just talking about what you’ve been reading, about these discussions we’re having, and perhaps even the perspective I bring each week. Most of you have never done that—talked to someone about why you trust God—but with this study, you could do that! Did you ever think you really could?

And, wouldn't it be cool, to cause someone to think more about God because you took the time to bring it up?! That's ministry, and I'm looking at God's ministers!

Together, "We (can) destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ," and even use science to help us do it! (2 Corinthians 10:5)

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on February 17, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]