In Philippians 1:16 the Apostle Paul says, “I am put here for the defense of the Gospel?” Where was he? He was in prison, and he says, “I want you to know that what happened unto me has really served to advance the Gospel. As a result it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.” Wherever you may end up in your life in the future, remember Christ has put you there for the defense of the Gospel. You can witness in suffering in the hospital; you can witness in prison to your guards; you can witness to your relatives and defend the faith in the most difficult circumstances.

We thank you, Our God in heaven, that You so led the Apostle Paul that in his crises in life, he was able to be a faithful apologists, and we thank you for giving us that privilege today, and we ask that You will use each one who hears these words to faithfully give his life and thought to You for the sake of others and the building up of your kingdom through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A three-part lecture on why I am a Christian began last time with why I believe in God. I believe in a biblical God distinct from the world, but active in it because such theism makes more sense than other worldviews. It coherently accounts for why there is anything at all, that every dependent thing had a beginning in the finite past, and that we deal daily with a regular order of natural law. The intricate balance of factor is necessary to a life-support system on planet earth, a test to a purpose behind it. Belief in the Creator of persons also provides the most coherent account of our distinctive transcendence of a closed system of natural causes. We transcend the limits of space and time intellectually by thinking about past, present, and future, and many other places on earth. We transcend our thinking when we see the correlation of critical human knowing with data from nature. Theism can account for similarities indicated by hard evidence within each kind that God created, and also the great gaps that remain as evidence for gradual developments between the kinds in evolutionary theory.
A theistic hypothesis also accounts best for the universal obligation of persons and cultures to moral law, to the inalienability of human rights, the universal demand for justice, and the historical fall accounts for the need for mercy, forgiveness, and caring. The broad movements of history judging corrupt nations and causing a temporary unimpressive church to flourish for twentieth centuries also indicates purpose and power transcending the kaleidoscope of events in history.

Today, add part two to why I am a Christian. I am committed to the Creator of nature and the administrator of moral values who in the First Century was supremely revealed in the Jesus of history. The prime issue then is the nature of the First Century person who changed history for twentieth centuries. Who was Jesus of Nazareth? There is no reasonable question that He lived. The problem is what do we think of Him and what should we think of Him? He Himself was concerned about our thinking. He asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” Was He a prophet come back to life? A good man; a bad man? An angel? The Messiah of Israel? The incarnate logos of God who would redeem both Jews and Gentiles? The hypotheses need to be considered in our methodology after having defined the issue.

C. S. Lewis popularized a verificational approach as I argued in the appendix to our text Testing Christianity’s Truth Claims. C. S. did not start out with a blank mind and reason to Jesus’ deity, but with preconceptions of who Jesus was. He critically considered the hypotheses of whether Jesus was one) a liar, two) a lunatic, or three) Lord of all. Adults cannot start out with a blank mind concerning who Jesus was. We must honestly acknowledge our preconceptions and test their validity. We look at several of the alternative perspectives that continue to influence the twenty-first century.

Communists alleged that Jesus was an evil man. He went along with the capitalists of His time, promising laborers pie in the sky by and by, while all the time defrauding them of what they had rightfully earned. In contrast, modernist Christians held with Harry Emerson Fosdick that Jesus was a marvelously good man. Muslims number Him among the great prophets of Allah, but He is overshadowed by Muhammad. Christian Scientists who practice exclusively mental healing, consider Jesus to have been a great Christian Science practitioner. Spiritualists claim that He was a successful median and New Agers consider Him a channeler who received secret messages and power from dead spiritual masters.
Jehovah’s Witnesses consider Him the first and highest created angel. I lived next to a chiropractor one time who thought Jesus healed people by putting His hands on them, not ceremonially, but to manipulate subluxations. But one is not like Christ nor a Christian because a chiropractor. I do not oppose chiropractic, but the suggestion that Jesus healed people by adjusting the skeleton hardly fits the cultural or prophetic contexts. Many liberals and New Agers think truth is one, but all these groups speak of it under different names. So the biblical Jesus is considered merely a literary myth representing a pantheistic Christ to utilize for our own happiness.

Joseph Campbell, author of numerous books on the power of myth, did not consider humans inclined to sinful behavior, denied the transcendence of God, and simply uses Jesus as the symbol of each person seeking his or her own bliss by turning within one's self. Our hope is not in God above or the atonement of Christ in the First Century, but in our own potential. The distinctively Christian proposal, however, is that Jesus was the eternal Word who was with God and was God. He entered history in the flesh to exhibit the power and ways of God, and then purchased our redemption on the cross.

Which hypothesis do I conclude to be true? Which without contradiction coherently explains the historical data regarding the observable phenomena of His life on earth for thirty-three years? And which hypothesis makes sense of His inner psychological, moral, and spiritual experience? Join me in making a survey of the historical data that had their effect on the skeptical before the New Testament was even completed. The argument at this point appeals not to divinely inspired and authoritative Scripture, but to historically reliable records, including biblical records and to data from outside the Bible. For a historian’s approach to these sources, see Gary R. Habermas’, Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus (1984) and The Verdict of History (1988). Habermas cites sources from ancient non-Christians, including historians, government officials, other Jews, other Gentiles, Gnostics, lost works, and archaeological findings. Add the ancient creeds and biblical facts attested by biblical critics as reliable, and the evidence for the life of Jesus is conclusive indeed. If all these different writers were able to create the most influential person ever, they deserve an all-time award for working together without an editor. Possibilities and probabilities of that are negligible indeed. Such diverse writings did not invent the person; the person invented the records.
We will look further at the biblical revelation of God, but for now consider the claims Jesus made in the First Century. To Satan who tempted Him He said, “Do not put the Lord Your God to the test.” He claimed to do something only God can do—to forgive sin. Jesus asked people to love Him more than their own fathers, mothers, sons, or daughters. Like no other founder of a religion Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life. I have come down from heaven. Before Abraham was, I am. I and the Father are one. I am the Light of the World. I am the Good Shepherd. I am the Resurrection and the Life. I have power to lay down my life and I have power to take it again. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me. I will come back and take you to be with Me. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away.” After His dramatic resurrection, He accepted His disciples’ worship and said, “All power is given to Me in heaven and earth. Baptize disciples in My name and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”

Was Jesus just a good man? A merely good human being could not have claimed what He claimed. He could not have claimed to forgive sin, to require a loving allegiance above family, or to encourage worship. When He said, “You believe in the Father, believe also in Me.” No good man like Billy Graham could make such statements and still be considered good. The world renowned evangelist would become unpopular in a hurry should he ever say, “I came from heaven; no one comes to the Father, but by Me.”

If the hypothesis of a good man does not fit the facts, what about the possibility that He was a liar? No serious scholars of biblical or extra-biblical evidence have held that Jesus was an intentional deceiver. He is the last one in whom scholars find moral perversion and deceit. Again, serious students of the First Century do not regard Jesus a lunatic. He did not suffer from some form of megalomania. If others made the claims that He made, that might be a plausible analysis, but when Jesus makes those claims, He is taken seriously. Why? Because His life supports them.

Consider the ways. His sinless character supports His claims. Judas, His betrayer, said, “I have betrayed innocent blood.” His enemies sent false witnesses against Him. Pilate, His judge said, “I find no fault in Him.” Jesus could say before a crowd, “Which of you convinces Me of sin?” His close friend Peter who knew Him well for three years wrote, “He was without blemish and without spot.” And John who knew Him very well also wrote, “In Him is no sin.” His character stands far above all others who have ever lived.
He did not come to destroy the law or claim to be beyond good and evil like the gurus of our times. But He fulfilled the Spirit of God’s moral law in the power of the Holy Spirit.

His incomparable teachings also stand out in their authority and impact as a witness to the truth of His claims for Himself. His hearers exclaimed, “How did this man get such learning without having studied?” His teaching such as those in the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule, and principles of discipleship have never been equaled, let alone surpassed. The temple guards who heard His teaching said, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.” He spoke with a unique authority that did not depend on human sources, for His authority came from above from His Father in heaven.

Jesus’ extraordinary works, combined with His character and teaching, to confirm His claims. In a day when lepers were untouchable, He put His hands on them and healed them. He gave sight to a man born blind, He raised Lazarus from the dead, He controlled the forces of nature. When a hurricane Hazel became life-threatening, He calmly said, “Peace, be still,” and nature’s winds and waves obeyed Him. Even at His death, people recognized that He came from above as He said, “While all others came from beneath.” In an outrageously unjust betrayal and trial, He remained self-controlled. An earthquake darkened the sky, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom, the thief on His right realized His deity and cried out, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” The Roman centurion exclaimed, “Surely this Man was the Son of God!” Jesus accomplished what He came to do. He came to give His life a ransom for many.

As conclusive as all these converging lines of evidence are in support of His amazing claims, they are to be supported by a far more exceptional line of evidence. After being buried for three days, He left His tomb empty. He then appeared as a normal healthy person to women and men as individuals and in groups. He met with the disciples when Thomas was absent, and again when the doubter was present. On that occasion, Jesus showed Him the wounds in His hands, feet, and side, invited Him to touch the wounds and not be faithless, but believing. Thomas cried out, “My Lord, and My God!” Jesus appeared to over 500 people at once, many of whom were still alive when Paul wrote the great chapter of the Bible on Christ’s resurrection and ours (1 Corinthians 15).
The reversal of the irreversible forces of decay and decomposition demonstrates the truth of His claims to be pre-existent, to have knowledge and power that transcend a closed system of natural law. Medical descriptions of His death were not the last word on His life. By supernatural power, He fulfilled His promise—“Destroy this temple, His body, and in three days I will raise it up again.” “Up from the grave He arose in a mighty triumph o'er His foes.” He won the decisive victory over sin, injustice, and its consequence, death.

In *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, 1967, C. F. D. Moule simply resents certain undoubted phenomena of the New Testament writings and asks how the reader proposes to account for them. The fact is that a group of Jewish followers were not just another Jewish First Century sect like the Pharisees or Essenes. Although with Jews in general, they were monotheists with a personal commitment to religion and the ethics of the family, but Christians had a distinctive difference. They had no inclination toward paganism or the mystery cults. The core of their message accounts for their distinctiveness. What made Christianity a different world religion, the research of Moule substantiates, was its followers’ belief in Jesus’ resurrection and His demonstrated uniqueness as the Son of God and the substitutionary Savior of the world. There was nothing to discriminate Christians initially from any other Jews of their day except their convictions about Jesus and that it was these which forced them out of Judaism and kept them from lapsing back into it.

Those who try to account for the beginnings of Christianity by some natural historical events fail to find one of sufficient magnitude to fill the need. The commitment of the early Christians was not based on a merely human person, but on evidence about Jesus’ supernaturality. But the decision to accept Jesus as Lord cannot be made without the historical evidence. If it were a decision without that evidence, it would not be about Jesus, but only about an ideal or an ideology. We need to know what manner of man Jesus was, how was He related to Judaism, why did He die, and what lies behind the conviction that He is alive? Much recent theological writing has tended to dismiss the importance of history in favor of the transcendental call to decision; or alternatively, to dismiss the transcendent in favor of such history as can be confined within the categories of a naturalistic world picture. Both leave us with no Gospel. Historical apologetics for all the modernistic criticisms of it needs no defense.
Can either of the alternative hypotheses make sense of the uniqueness of the Christian faith apart from the value judgments to which the early Christians were led? Again, can you account for the value judgments that He was indeed God without the historical basis? It is the combination of Christ’s resurrection event with its significance that forms the supreme evidence that Jesus was what He claimed to be. The historical base of Christianity’s theology of new life in Christ is confirmed by several extent, observable phenomena that call for explanations still today. Think not only of the origin, but of the continuation of the Christian church. Would the Christian church be here in history twenty centuries later if it had not been for Jesus’ resurrection? One wag has said, “No other business run so poorly could have survived through so many centuries if it were not for the providence of God.”

Well, if not because of Christ’s resurrection in the First Century, then what is it that has sustained the Church? What event was of sufficient magnitude to explain this? If Christ rose from the dead, I can account for the change in the lives of the apostles who planted churches in the then known world. Peter who denied the Lord came to be one of Jesus’ most courageous proclaimers. No other event can account for the transformation of Saul, the persecutor of church members, into the most dynamic church planter around the Mediterranean world. If not Christ’s resurrection and Pentecost, what events in the First Century can account for the change in the lives of the disciples and the birth of the Church?

We also can still see today the fact of the change in the day of worship. For centuries Jewish people had worshipped on the Sabbath, on Saturday, the last day of the week. Any church leader who has suggested changes in the times of worship services even on the same day knows something of the difficulty of changing longstanding traditions. Generally, churches no longer need to meet between milking times. But after centuries of worship on the Sabbath Day, on the first day of the week, people were united in one church by Spirit baptism into the body of Christ. The Day of Pentecost, like the resurrection, was the first day of the week. Again at their gathering on the first day of the week Paul asked the members of the Corinthian Church to bring contributions as God had prospered them. If the change to worship on Sunday is not traced to Jesus’ resurrection on the first day of the week, then what other tradition-shaking event could possibly have accomplished that?
Another extant evidence of Christ’s resurrection is a remarkable document—the New Testament itself. Remove the climatic last chapters of each Gospel reporting Jesus’ resurrection and none of the four Gospels would ever have been written. If Christ did not rise, where is the more adequate hypothesis to account for the existence of these documents? Similarly, remove the resurrection from the Acts of the Apostles and the objective of Peter’s message to the Jews at Pentecost is dismembered. His thesis falls to the ground that Jesus, whom you crucified and who rose from the dead, is both Lord and Christ. Or imagine Paul’s address at Athens without the conclusion that God has given assurance to all men that Jesus is our final Judge in that He raised Him from the dead. Add the great resurrection chapter of 1 Corinthians 15; if the phenomenal event of Christ’s triumph over death did not occur, how will you account for the continued existence and influence of the literature of the New Testament? Its books stand today as living witness to the indelible event of the First Century that marks the Christian faith off from every other kind of philosophical or religious faith.

I have told you who I think Jesus was. I believe He was what He claimed to be. I believe that His claims are supported by His character, His teaching, His works, His death, His resurrection from the dead. The number of converging lines of evidence do not permit me to consider Him merely a good man, however marvelous, or merely of mythological significance. He was not merely a good teacher, prophet, practitioner, medium, and He simply would not have remained good and have made the claims if these hypotheses were true. Neither was Jesus merely a great angel. Angels forbid worship of themselves and command people to worship God. By His resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that He is what He claimed to be—the unique Son of God, Savior of the World. And I’m wondering how you answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that He is?”

I am a Christian because belief that Jesus was the incarnate logos with God who came into the world from God coherently accounts for the Old Testament predictions and related First Century phenomena. Accepting the truth of His claims for Himself, I can account for the transcendent knowledge and power demonstrated at His birth, reflected in His astounding claims, and confirmed by His character, works, teaching, death, and resurrection. Furthermore, only on a Christian theistic worldview can I account coherently for the transformations in the lives of the disciples leading to the origin and continuance of the Christian Church,
the change in its day of worship, and the calendar from BC to AD—and the very existence of the New Testament which remains for all to read today.

I am a Christian because of all the world’s philosophies, the hypothesis of the God revealed in the Jesus of history and the teaching of Scripture bests account for the world the First Century phenomena, and also the phenomena surrounding the Bible. Let me add that I believe that Jesus is indeed what He claimed to be not only for logical and factual reasons, but also existential reasons. I am a Christian because belief in the God revealed in Jesus Christ in the First Century is viable.

My belief in Jesus Christ delivers me from real guilt. You remember that Paul Tillich, in analyzing our existential condition, mentioned that we suffer from anxiety concerning death, meaningless in life, and guilt. I am not speaking now of guilt feelings because of being over sensitive, but of actual violation of the character of God expressed in His moral laws and exhibited in the character of Jesus Christ. Before the absolute norms of justice and love, I have come far short. Though I was brought up in a Christian home by parents whose own parents were Christians, I was a sinner by nature, inclined to lie, cheat, and steal. And all of us have internally that inclination to rebel against the absolutes for ourselves though we require of them of others.

One day as a child I understood that I was guilty before God as I heard a preacher in my home church. I did not go forward at the invitation to receive Christ’s forgiveness by grace, but my mother, knowing the situation, sensing my conviction of sin, led me to Jesus Christ at my bedside that night. I remember the next day bounding up the stairs two at a time saying, “I am so happy and here’s the reason why, Jesus took my burdens all away.” There is no other source of just forgiveness from our guilt.

The psychologists can disclose the experiences that may have led to the guilt feelings and reality, but only Jesus Christ can say, “Son, your sins are forgiven you.” I have looked at the philosophies, religions, and cults of the world and they talk about love, but it’s not just love. Jesus Christ alone provides the ground on which God can remain just and justify me in my ungodliness. I believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ because I have found peace with God through faith in Christ’s shed blood in my behalf. He died the death I deserve to die; He paid the price I owed. As my substitute, he bore the physical, mental, and spiritual death that
I have deserved. And now I have His promise that I have eternal life and I shall never perish. What a joy to know that you have new life not through trying to be as good as the rest of people around you, not through doing the best you can, which none of us do twenty-four hours of every day, but by receiving as a gift the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes I’m asked, “What do you say to a Hare Krishna at the airport?” Well, I thank them having been in India for trying to help me build up good *karma*. By buying their magazines and books, I can express to them gratitude for their effort to serve others with what they think is true, but I must say to them, “Did you know I have perfect karma?” “What?” “Yes, I have the perfect righteous standing of Jesus Christ put to my account before the holiness of God the Father, because by faith I have become united to Him.” God no longer looks upon Lewis the sinner alone, but He sees Jesus Christ and Lewis incorporated. And at the end of the month when the debts for my sins come in, they are paid by the resources of Christ rather than my own efforts and good works. What good news we have that there is deliverance from condemnation, deserved penalty, through faith in Jesus Christ. I am delivered existentially from guilt, but I’m also delivered existentially from the fear of death. Jesus Christ came to deliver us who were all of our lifetime subject to this fear by His death in our place, and by His triumphant resurrection from the grave, He demonstrated that He had successfully accomplished what He came to do.”

Many today are paying thousands and millions of dollars to try to avoid death, to find the fountain of youth, to seek help in modern medicine. And medicine is helpful in many ways. We ought to use what God has providentially provided, but with all the best that modern medicine can provide—we all will die.

The question was asked whether war doesn’t cause a lot more deaths in a given generation and the answer was no. There are 100 percent deaths in every generation. Whether sooner or later, all of us face the reality of the end of this life, and how will I stand before God when my life is done? I will not stand before His righteousness in my own merit, for I have not attained. In heaven 100 percent is not a passing grade. There is no sin there. In order to be accepted of God, I must be perfect and that perfection must be alien to me; it must come from another. It comes from Jesus Christ as His righteousness is imputed to my account. I thank God that I need not fear death because my death will be simply a movement from this life to the next. With Paul I can say, “For me
I am a Christian existentially because I am delivered from condemnation and guilt. I am freed from the fear of death, and furthermore, I have purpose in life. So many of my peers long ago concluded life wasn’t worth the struggle. It was pointless. Some have committed suicide and others have gone to early graves because of dissolute living. How thankful I am that early in life I discovered that Jesus was what He claimed to be and that if I should give my life to serve Him, I would have challenging purpose throughout my years. What a joy it has been to seek to serve His kingdom, not my own. I have had the privilege of studying His Word, teaching His truth, trying to exemplify His life in generation of generation of college graduates who have studied at the seminary. The challenge of showing the relevance of the Christian faith and life to college majors from all different fields has been stimulating indeed. To receive letters from graduates in India, in Japan, in Taiwan, in Italy, in Germany, in Austria, and countries all around the world has been most fulfilling. To visit them as they worked and see what they are accomplishing through the purpose Jesus Christ has given them has led to a most fulfilling life. The privilege of having the joy of serving one not just for time, but for eternity, is rich indeed. I remember as a boy having a motto on the wall, “Only one life twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.” And as I now face retirement, that point is as true as it was at the beginning of my vocation.

And my prayer is that you may sense something of the permanent joy of purpose and commitment to values that are worthwhile in this life abundantly and even beyond imagination in the next. And this commitment to purpose, as in the life of Paul, enables one to face some of the most difficult challenges that we can imagine. Paul was shipwrecked, tortured, beaten, left for dead, imprisoned unjustly; and yet he could rejoice in extending the kingdom of God in those circumstances. I do not know what lies ahead for you, but I know this; if you will receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you will have reason for living and will triumph over the worst circumstances in the days ahead.