

EASTER 2011

This week, comedian and professing atheist Ricky Gervais wrote a 'holiday message' for Easter in The Wall Street Journal entitled, "Why I'm A Good Christian." To prove his point that he is a "good Christian" compared to a lot of Christians, he outlined the Ten Commandments and analyzed how he fared against each law. Giving himself a 10 out of 10 – passing all counts of murder, idolatry, and blasphemy – Gervais considered his perfect score "not bad for an atheist."

The thrust of his message, however, was not focused on his own tallied "goodness," but rather the lack of goodness in Christians today. "It's not that I don't believe that the teachings of Jesus wouldn't make this a better world if they were followed," the 49-year-old actor stated. "It's just that they are rarely followed." Agreeing with Gandhi's words – "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians" – Gervais admitted that he too held this opinion of Christianity even when he used to believe in God as a child. "Jesus was a man. His message was usually one of forgiveness and kindness. These are wonderful virtues but I have seen them discarded by many so-called God-fearers when it suits them." "They cherry pick from their 'rulebook' basically," he added. "I have seen such cruelty and prejudice performed in the name of Christianity (and many other religions for that matter) that it makes me wonder if there has been a bit too much selective reading and reinterpretation of the doctrines." Preaching what seemed like a resounding message towards Christians today, Gervais echoed Gandhi's words: "Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Dr. Robert Johnston, professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary responded to Gervais' message, stating that sadly, he was correct. And whether or not Gervais' observations are completely valid or not, ironically he and many others – yes, even secular atheists – continue to remind Christians what Christianity should really look like. The actor closed his article by saying, "So maybe we should all go back to the basics to find out where it all got confused." And although it feels odd to agree with an atheist on Easter Sunday, I would say on that point we totally concur. Because what the world considers "Christianity" today bears little resemblance to its first century counterpart.

The very life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities, so astounding that they are both still commemorated worldwide in an essentially secular society 2000 years later. Our Savior arrived in this world through a virgin's womb and left it through an empty tomb. He entered human existence through a door marked "no entrance" and left triumphantly through a door marked "no exit." And that same supernatural savior set up a church that could operate only within a supernatural dimension.

People discounted His virgin birth the entire time He was here. After all, the appearance of angels to Mary, Joseph and a rag-tag group of shepherds happened quite privately and thus could be written off as merely the incoherent ramblings of uneducated, gullible minds – or worse. However, no one could discount the very public resurrection of Jesus Christ from a sealed and guarded tomb located just a few meters from the spot where he had been brutally crucified, hung in a humiliating display of agony for six long hours until everyone knew he was dead.

Acts 1:1-5 The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God: And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.

1 Corinthians 15:1-9 Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

1 Corinthians 15:13-20 But if there be no resurrection of the dead, **then** is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, **then** is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, **if** so be that the dead rise not. For **if** the dead rise not, **then** is not Christ raised: And **if** Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. **If** in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.

IF/THEN statements – Christianity hangs on Christ's resurrection!

What is so important about Easter? It proves that Jesus was who He claimed to be – He was God in the flesh! Of all the claims that Jesus made, the claim that He would rise from the death was the most audacious ... and He made it several times. Sometimes He said it subtly, sometimes He said it outright ...

John 2:19 Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

Matthew 20:18-19 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.

It was Jesus' claim to be the Son of God that offended the Jewish religious hierarchy. That's why they had him arrested. Jesus actually went through six trials that night – before Annas, Caiaphas (high priest), the Sanhedrin (religious Supreme Court), Pilate (governor of Jerusalem), Herod (governor of Galilee), then back to Pilate. What did they find to accuse him of? Nothing! They even brought in people with phony charges, but those didn't stick. Finally they convicted him on one count: claiming to be the Son of God. That's why Jesus went to the cross!

Everyone who has ever been presented with Jesus has already made some kind of decision about who he is. You either believe he's a liar, or a lunatic, or Lord. It can't just be: "I believe he was a good teacher." He couldn't be just a good teacher, because then He would not say, "I'm God, and I'm the only way to heaven." A good person would not say that unless it was the truth.

Jesus allowed himself to be put on trial and crucified just so there would be no doubt about who He was. When He was hanging on the cross, the skeptics and critics mocked him, "If you're the Son of God, why don't you just come down from that cross and show that you're really God?" Jesus had something more spectacular planned – "I'm going to let you bury me for three days, then I'll come back to life to prove I am who I said I am."

Matthew 27:40 And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

Easter is the good news about Jesus Christ our Lord, who died for our sins and then rose from the dead. Four historical records say he showed himself to 500 people at one gathering. Can you imagine witnessing his death and then seeing him walking around Jerusalem three days later?

That clinched it! The city of Jerusalem was the very last place on earth Christianity could have started if Jesus' tomb remained occupied!

Harvard law professor Simon Greenleaf, who lectured for years on how to break down testimony and determine whether or not a witness is lying, said: "The annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of [such] heroic constancy ... and unflinching courage. It is therefore impossible that [the disciples] could have persisted in affirming [these] truths ... had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact."

Anyone can claim to be God, but how do you prove it? You prove it by rising from the dead! When Jesus came out of the grave, that one act validated everything else He ever said about himself. The founders of other religions said, "Follow me – and I'll show you the way to truth." Jesus said, "Follow me – I AM the way, the truth and the life!"

Romans 1:4 And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:

IF Jesus rose from the dead THEN Christianity is true!
IF Jesus rose from the dead THEN life does not end at the grave!
IF Jesus rose from the dead THEN you need to do something about Him!

John 20:11-12 But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

In that tomb on Easter Sunday morning, Mary saw the most familiar silhouette in all of Judaism – only in one other place do we find two angels facing each other over a flat slab. That was the Ark of the Covenant, and between those angels dwelt the Shekinah presence of God. The reason there was an empty tomb is that GOD was the one in that tomb! And you can't keep our God in a grave!

Romans 8:11 But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

"So maybe we should all go back to the basics to find out where it all got confused." I wholeheartedly agree. The early Christians didn't start with a theology, they started with a supernatural experience with a living Christ!

Matthew 27:22 Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified.