



Why would anyone want to be a Christian?

by Rex Morgan

Christianity isn't nearly as popular in New Zealand as it used to be. Leading clerics have hit the news headlines for unchristian behaviour, including opulent lifestyles, adultery, and repulsive sex crimes. Aggressive atheists ridicule Christians for being naïve. Christians bicker amongst themselves and fight with Muslims and those of other religions. Churches are divided over current issues such as same-gender attraction and women in leadership. Christians in many countries are brutally persecuted and martyred. A new generation of young people is biblically illiterate.

In view of trends like these it's easy to question why anyone would want to be a Christian in New Zealand these days. But multiple millions of people around the world continue to hold firmly to their Christian faith,¹ and thousands more are becoming Christians every day. What's more, millions of these adherents consider Christianity to be so important that they are willing to die for it.

Why are these individuals so staunch in their beliefs? Have they been duped into believing a fairy tale? If you think so, can you *prove* it is a fairy tale? It's patently unfair to dismiss anything without even examining it. Are you willing to take a few moments to consider the reasons people believe in Christianity? Then you can make an informed judgment on the matter.

The main reason people become Christians is that they believe in Jesus Christ. They believe he lived, died, and rose out of the grave.

Living and dying is nothing special, but being resurrected—that is certainly unique!

To determine if this claim is correct, we need to look at the evidence as to whether Jesus lived or not, and the credibility of his resurrection.

The historicity of Jesus

Actually there is overwhelming evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ, both in secular and biblical history. The Jewish historian Josephus referred to him around AD 93, and the Roman historians Tacitus and Pliny both wrote about Christ and the Christians around AD 115. Unless his life was significant or the movement he started remarkable, we wouldn't expect to read a lot about an itinerant preacher living for a short time within a small community in one corner of the vast Roman Empire. However, a number of non-Christian writers of the time made reference to him, and his life is recorded in some detail in Christian writings. The Christian writers were his followers, so they could be classed as being biased. But it is notable that there are thousands of manuscripts of their works dating as far back as AD 100, so these are valid evidence of Christ's historicity, too.

The Wikipedia article on the historicity of Jesus, citing many corroborating references, says: 'Nearly all modern scholars of antiquity agree that Jesus existed and most biblical scholars and classical historians see

the theories of his non-existence as effectively refuted. There is no evidence today that the existence of Jesus was ever denied in antiquity by those who opposed Christianity'.²

Craig A. Evans, American Professor of the New Testament, stated: 'No serious historian of any religious or nonreligious stripe doubts that Jesus of Nazareth really lived in the first century and was executed under the authority of Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea and Samaria.'³

Renowned German scholar Rudolph Bultmann noted: "Of course the doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as founder behind the historical movement."⁴

Historian Michael Grant wrote: "In recent years, no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus—or at any rate very few, and they have not succeeded in disposing of the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary".⁵

The evidence we have for the life of Christ is much stronger than we have that Plato ever lived, or Homer, or many historical figures that we take for granted.

There is also abundant historical evidence of Christ's death by crucifixion.⁶ But what about the resurrection? Can that be proved?

Virtually all scholars who have studied the resurrection, whatever

their school of thought, agree that three things were true:

1. the tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered empty by a group of women on the Sunday following the crucifixion;
2. Jesus' disciples had real experiences with one whom they believed was the risen Christ; and
3. as a result of the preaching of these disciples, which had the resurrection at its centre, the Christian church was established and grew.

The Jewish nation in which Jesus lived had long been anticipating the appearance of a Messiah, but they expected that he would be a powerful leader who would take over the government of the nation, and

indeed the whole world. According to their belief, anyone hung on a tree was cursed by God,⁵ so there was no way they would accept that the Messiah could be shamefully executed on a stake as a criminal. After Jesus' death, even his own disciples gave up hope in him⁶ and went back to their previous occupations.⁷ It took something really special to cause people to follow him after his ignominious death. If he had not been resurrected, it's very difficult to see how Christianity could possibly have started.

The fact that literally thousands of Christians in the first century AD, including the twelve apostles, were willing to give their lives as martyrs for Jesus Christ is very powerful evidence that he did exist and was resurrected. People will die for what

they believe to be true, but no one will die for what they know to be a lie.

What Jesus taught

So, people become Christians because they believe Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected, but the main reason they follow him is because of his teachings. They are as unique as the fact that he was resurrected!

Jesus emphasised qualities like love, mercy, faith, forgiveness, and honesty. He taught gentleness rather than violence, generosity rather than selfishness, doing good rather than evil. He respected all people; even those looked down on or despised by others. Jesus touched lepers, welcomed children, and treated women and foreigners with dignity and care. Even many



Nine-year-old Kim Phuc, centre, fled a napalm attack.

The Girl in the Picture

On June 8, 1972, at the height of the Vietnam War, one of the most famous photos of all time was taken.

A group of villagers was sheltering in a temple in the village of Trang Bang, near Saigon, when they heard planes overhead. Afraid they would be bombed, they ran outside to find safety, just as canisters of napalm detonated all around the temple.

A 21-year-old Associated Press photo journalist, Nick Ut, took the unforgettable black and white photo of children fleeing the burning

temple. It won the Pulitzer Prize and was chosen as the 'World Press Photo of the Year' in 1972.

Napalm, a thick jelly of gasoline, clings to human skin, causing horrific burns when ignited. As the screaming nine-year-old girl who had torn off her burning clothes approached Nick, he could see

parts of her skin peeling off. He put his camera down, gave her a drink and poured water over her. 'So hot', she kept saying, 'So hot'.

He drove her to the hospital in his jeep, and found that her name was Kim Phuc, which means 'Golden Happiness'. She spent 14 months in various hospitals and underwent 17 painful skin grafts and surgeries. Kim had suffered serious burns over a third of her body, at a time when most people who sustained such injuries over 10% of their body died.

For years afterward, Kim was just an anonymous teenage girl who always wore long sleeves to cover

her twisted scars and worried they were so ugly that no one would ever want to marry her. She became so depressed that she wanted to die.

Then Kim began spending time in a local library, where she read The New Testament, and discovered a portrait of Jesus Christ that differed radically from what she had learned about him in her family religion of Cao Dai. Eventually she began attending a Christian Church, and at the age of 19 she became a Christian.

'It was the fire of the bomb that burned my body, and it was the skill of the doctor that mended my skin', she said, 'but it took the power of God to heal my heart.' In 1986 she married a fellow Vietnamese student named Toan, who told her that her scars only made him love her more. Kim and Toan now live in Canada, and have two adult sons, both of whom have studied at Bible Colleges.

In 1996 Kim agreed to speak at Veteran's Day ceremonies in Washington, DC:

As you know, I am the little girl who was running to escape from the napalm fire. I don't want to talk about the war because I

non-Christians regard Jesus as the supreme example of a selfless life.

All of his teachings are positive axioms of wisdom, truth, and love, and countless lives have been transformed for the better after reading and following them. Jesus lived the things he taught. His character was flawless—he embodied an exemplary life of humility, service, and outgoing love.

Central to his teaching was that he was God. He said he was one with his father,¹⁰ and that he had come from heaven to reveal God to humankind.¹¹ He claimed to be ‘the way, the truth and the life’,¹² and that anyone who instilled his teachings in their life would be satisfied spiritually in a very special way.¹³ People become Christians because they are convicted by this promise, and when

they practice what Jesus taught, they find that it works. Millions of individuals have experienced amazing inner changes in their lives when they have become Christians. The accompanying article about Kim Phuc is an example, just one amongst stories too numerous to count.

An important aspect of Christ’s teaching was his prediction that he was going to be put to death and resurrected after three days.¹⁴ In fact, he claimed that he was fulfilling prophecies that had been uttered hundreds, even thousands, of years earlier.¹⁵

Books proved to have been written centuries before Christ’s birth state that a Messiah was to come who would be a Jew,¹⁶ a descendant of King David,¹⁷ and would be born

to a virgin,¹⁸ in Bethlehem.¹⁹ Other predictions stated he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey,²⁰ would speak in parables,²¹ and would be betrayed by a friend²² for 30 pieces of silver.²³ Yet other prophecies recorded that he would die with criminals, pierced in the hands and feet, with his executioners gambling for his clothing,²⁴ that none of his bones would be broken,²⁵ and that he would be buried in a rich man’s tomb.²⁶ One of the prophecies written by King David about 1000 years before Jesus was born stated that he would be resurrected from the dead.²⁷

There are more than three hundred such predictions in the Old Testament, and Jesus fulfilled every one of them. Professor Emeritus of Science at Westmont College,

can’t change history. I only want you to remember a tragedy of war in order to do things to stop fighting and killing around the world.

I have suffered a lot from both physical and emotional pain. Sometimes I thought I could not live, but God saved my life and gave me faith and hope. If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bomb, I could tell him we can’t change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace.

Many of the veterans were in tears as they applauded her moving remarks. One of them said: ‘It’s important to us that she’s here. For her to forgive us personally means something’. One man scribbled out a note and asked for it to be given to Kim. ‘I’m the man you are looking for.’

Kim agreed to see the man right away, and held out her arms to hug him, the same arms she had held out in agony as she ran along the road with her skin burning.

‘I am sorry, just so sorry’, he sobbed. ‘It’s okay. I forgive. I forgive’, said

Kim Phuc, recalling her favourite Bible verse, ‘Forgive, and you will be forgiven’ (Luke 6.37).

In 1997, Kim started a foundation to help other child victims of war, and became a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for Peace. Since then, she has travelled the world telling her story of love, hope, and forgiveness. She says her Christian faith brought her physical and emotional peace in the midst of hatred and bitterness, loss, and hopelessness when the pain seemed overwhelming: ‘When I became a Christian I gained a wonderful connection with God, and from that point I learned to forgive’. Now she says that terrified little girl in the photo is ‘not running anymore. She’s flying’.

‘Forgiveness freed me from hatred’, she wrote in her biography, entitled *The Girl in the Picture*. ‘I still have many scars on my body and severe pain on most days, but my heart is purified. Napalm is very powerful,

but faith, forgiveness, and love are much stronger. There would be no more war if everyone were to learn to live with true love, hope, and forgiveness.

‘If the little girl in the photo could do it, ask yourself, Can I?’



Today Kim Phuc reflects on the effects that the iconic photo and her faith have had on her life.

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5 Elizabeth Street, Petone
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Peter Stoner, enlisted the aid of 600 students to carefully calculate the probability of anyone conspiring to fulfil these prophecies. He conservatively estimated that the chance of one man fulfilling just 48 of the recorded predictions was one in 10 to the power of 157, an almost inconceivably large number.

The fulfilment of those remarkable prophecies provides further evidence for Christians to be believers.

Why did Jesus die?

The necessity for Jesus' death is another key factor in people becoming Christians. It is obvious that every human being has done wrong, or sinned against God's law of love, many times. God loves us and wants to have a relationship with us. Jesus showed this by becoming a man so he could die for us, thereby paying the penalty we owe for our sins. So people become Christians because they want to accept this sacrifice to forgive their sins, and his promise to live in them and give them eternal life.²⁸

When all these reasons are put together, you can see that Christians have quite a lot of cause to believe

what they do. Especially when they pray to God and find that he answers their prayers!

If you have looked carefully through this list of factors, you are now in a better position to make an informed choice on whether or not Christianity is valid. If you are not persuaded by all these points, it is worth considering what you do believe and why. Everyone has got to believe something about God. Either he exists or he doesn't.

Christians are often asked to explain why evil exists if there is a God. But those who don't believe in God need to explain both why evil exists and why *good* exists. If there is no God, then how did goodness, love, and moral or spiritual qualities like those arise from a physical universe?

If you would like to know more about being a Christian, please feel free to write to *Inside Life* at the address on the inside front cover of this magazine, and we will be pleased to be of assistance to you.

Notes

¹ The Pew Research Centre in 2015 estimated 2.3 billion Christians

worldwide [<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>].

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity_of_Jesus

² Bart D. Ehrman (22 March 2011). *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are*. HarperCollins. p. 285. ISBN 978-0-06-207863-6.

³ C.A. Evans & N.T. Wright, *Jesus, the Final Days: What Really Happened*. Westminster, 2009, p. 3.

⁴ Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*. Collins/Fontana, 1958, p. 13.

⁵ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*. Charles Scribner & Sons, 1977, p. 200

⁶ The Wikipedia article 'Crucifixion of Jesus' states: 'The baptism of Jesus and his crucifixion are considered to be two historically certain facts about Jesus', and cites references for this.

⁷ Deuteronomy 21:22–23.

⁸ Luke 24:21.

⁹ John 21:3.

¹⁰ John 10:30.

¹¹ John 16:28; 17:25–26.

¹² John 14:6.

¹³ John 4:14.

¹⁴ Matthew 20:18–19.

¹⁵ Luke 22:37.

¹⁶ Genesis 49:10.

¹⁷ 2 Samuel 7:12.

¹⁸ Isaiah 7:14.

¹⁹ Micah 5:2.

²⁰ Isaiah 62:11.

²¹ Psalm 78:2.

²² Psalm 41:9.

²³ Zechariah 11:12–13.

²⁴ Psalm 22:16–18.

²⁵ Psalm 34:20.

²⁶ Isaiah 53:9.

²⁷ Psalm 16:10.

²⁸ John 6:40; 14:20–21.



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