Another Response to David, Part 2: The Witness of Paul

In this blog I continue my interaction with David's 16 August comments to my blog In Response to David on I Corinthians 15:3-8.

David wrote:

On several counts, you project your modern understanding back into ancient context:

quoting me:

They obviously do not have a physical person in mind when they make these kinds of declarations, so why suppose the early Christians were speaking about a physical Jesus when they claimed to have "witnessed" him?" If the word "witness" enjoys a very loose meaning for many of today's Christians (and it very often does), why suppose it didn't enjoy similar flexibility among the early Christians?

David continued:

A word's current usage cannot be transferred anachronistically "backwords" (get it?).

Looking at it again, I actually think it's the other way around: Christians today have adopted the bible's own looseness of meaning of the word 'witness' into their conversation today (just as they have in the case of other words, like love, peace, rest, etc.). This actually makes even more sense, for what are they taking as their model for usage of the word 'witness' if not what the bible itself says? So I'm committing no fallacy here. Christians of all ages seem to think of themselves as "witnesses of the spirit." Unger's elucidates this as "the direct testimony of the Holy Spirit to true believers as to their acceptance with God and their adoption into the divine household" (*The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, p. 1370). Unger's goes on to say that "the two classic passages upon which this doctrine is especially based are Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6," and claims that "the witness of the Spirit is to be regarded as a sequence to or reward of saving faith" (Ibid.). If it is legitimate for believers to consider themselves "witnesses of the spirit" in this or some roughly similar sense, why would it be illegitimate for them to consider themselves witnesses of Jesus when they experience an appearance of Jesus before them, as in the case of the waking fantasies which many Christians I have known personally claimed to have experienced?

When Peter gives his sermon in Acts ch. 2, and says (v. 32) "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses," what do you think he means? No gospel account puts anyone with Jesus in the tomb when his dead body was supposedly brought back to life.

In Acts 4:32-34 we find the following passage:

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold

The word 'witness' here seems so out of place on my (21st century) understanding of the concept for which it stands. But I'll try to be flexible. For the early Christians, the use of 'witness' here was not illegitimate. For them, the dramatic change in the people's response provided "witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." What is perhaps anachronistic is my assessment of such usage as loose, for this is not how I would use the word. But clearly Christians of the 1st century using the word 'witness' to include in its scope of reference spiritual objects (which is all I had in mind in my statement above) is not at all anachronistic.

David wrote:

The error is counted doubly when you attempt the feat with two different languages. (Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* pg 33)

Perhaps your complaint is better directed to the translators of our modern English bibles, for they are using the word 'witness' in a variety of ways (I count 93 instances of the word 'witness' in my King James Version, and the

meaning seems to flex through a multitude of senses) and while definitions are rarely if ever explicit in the bible, the New Testament's usage of 'witness' does not at all seem incompatible with my point above, which you have sought to challenge in this way. If Paul had a waking fantasy of Jesus, like today's Christians have, why wouldn't he think of himself as a witness to Jesus? Even the book of Acts does not have the physical post-resurrection Jesus of the gospels paying a visit to Paul as they have him do before his immediate apostles before his ascension. And Paul in no way distinguishes between the experience of Jesus that he claims others have had, and his own. Would you not consider Paul a witness? That would seem quite strange, but I know that apologetic defenses can lead believers into very strange (and undesirable) positions.

I wrote:

If I had seen a man who was actually resurrected from the grave, whom I thought was "the Son of God," I would waste no time in writing down exactly what I had seen, where I had seen it and when I had seen it. If I knew of others who had the same experience, I would not hesitate to get their testimony down in writing, or at least to have them endorse such statements of witness. But that's me.

David responded:

Do you live in the oral culture of first century Palestine? If you did chances are you'd be illiterate, and if you could read and write could you afford it? How could you assure the transmission of your document?

Yes, my point above does assume literate capacity, and no, we both know that neither of us lives in first century Palestine. My point here is one of character: I would not be sloth in broadcasting my witness, especially if I were personally charged by a great commission. I certainly would not wait 20, 30 or more years before getting my experience documented, during which time my memory of it could easily atrophy or distort my recollection of the event. As for whether or not I could "afford it," well, again, I'm not there, so this question seems deliberately unanswerable. Similarly with your question about assuring the transmission of my document. How did the author of the gospel according to Matthew assure the transmission of his document? Or did he? Other individuals spread throughout the intervening centuries seem to be creditable for this task, not the author himself.

Now your objection is sensible on the basis of my worldview, for the concerns you raise would impact the situation. But how could it be sensible on the basis of the Christian worldview, where naturalistic constraints like the one you raise should ultimately be of no concern? Would a supernatural deity appear only before the illiterate? Christians are always trying to tell us that it's a fallacy to assume everyone "back then" was illiterate, uneducated, unscientific, superstitious, etc. (and I don't, by the way). But we can't have it both ways here. If Jesus appeared only to the illiterate, I'd say that was a bad choice on his part. Also, if he did appear to only illiterate persons, why should this matter? Jesus is supernatural, and could easily empower an illiterate person with supreme fluency in a multitude of languages if he wanted to. In fact, the writer's sudden ability to write could itself be evidence of Jesus' supernaturalism, something the gospel writers were so eager to insert into their stories.

See how supernaturalism takes the apologetic backseat here? No, I do not live in the oral culture of first century Palestine, and you know it. I know this too. And the chances that had I lived in those days I'd most likely be illiterate is ultimately irrelevant. Would this stop a supernatural deity? Why think it would? Your response here assumes naturalistic constraints. Why would these apply if Christianity's supernaturalism is true? Having to acquire literacy in order to write is understandable on my worldview, which recognizes the primacy of existence and therefore does not presume to fake the nature of the human mind. But Christianity denies the primacy of existence. What guided Matthew's hand in penning his gospel, if not a divine hand, according to Christianity? What force assured the transmission of his gospel through the ages and into our hands, if not a divine force, according to Christianity?

It seems more and more that the authors of the New Testament texts were just as bound to the reality I know as I am. Their stories suggest otherwise, but the textual development speaks louder than this.

David wrote:

Even granting your position for the sake of internal critique, how many average people in our modern society have ever written a historical account of some life changing event they experienced?

I don't have the statistics on this, nor would I see this as at all relevant. My point above was a testament to my own character, not to some ad populum law of averages. This should be clear from the leading statement: "If I had seen a man who was actually resurrected from the grave..." Then again, I've observed many people writing about things

that have happened in their own lives. For many years I kept a diary, and often I would record things that happened, especially those that had a profound impact on my life. But then again, that's me. I've known some others who claimed to have done this themselves, but diaries tend to be private (until they're posthumously published, in some cases).

David wrote:

How about the Virginia Tech mass homicide? This was a major event to witness. Who decides - and why - whether or not it's a major event? I was going to school at James Madison University at the time (2 hours down the road), and saw no written accounts circulating amongst my close friends who were only several feet away from the killer that day. Indeed not even blogging about their experiences?"

I wasn't there, but I blogged about it shortly after it happened on two occasions. See my blog <u>Virginia Tech</u> and also <u>Christian Reaction to Virginia Tech</u>.

There were also news reports about the event for days and weeks afterwards, many of them including interviews with firsthand witnesses.

I am close friends with a man whose son was a student at Columbine when Klebold and Harris went on their rampage. My friend (also named David) wrote to me several times about his son's experience shortly after the incident. I don't know if his son ever wrote about it (I wouldn't expect a 13-year-old to write much about anything), but that's irrelevant.

But the incident at Virginia Tech is hardly analogous to a religious experience like a resurrected man-god walking and talking with you and commanding you to go tell the world. It seems that Peter and co. took their sweet time in fulfilling this commandment.

David wrote:

No, but they told me plenty about it. Even if they did write some of it down, would it still be around in a couple of millennia? Maybe so with today's standards, but I don't think that even close to a reasonable expectation for 30 AD.

What if their actions were guided by an irresistible supernatural force? I mean, let's compare apples to apples here, shall we? Did any of your close friends report that they feel moved by a supernatural force to tell the world about this event, and yet fail to do so? The gospels are supposed to be divinely inspired, are they not? That is what I was always taught. Given this, I don't know why Christians would care whether or not they were written by eyewitnesses. Eyewitnesses could be relying on so-called "autonomous thinking" in determining what they witnessed, or they could have difficulty distinguishing between "the wisdom of God" and "the wisdom of the world," which Paul rejects, relying on their own judgment of what they observed instead of "letting go and letting God." An eyewitness account might take one's own interpretation of what one perceives as authoritative in understanding it. But if man's mental faculties are contaminated by "the curse of sin" as so many Christians claim, then it seems that one would want something stronger than this. Indeed, for the Christian, what could be more reliable than divine inspiration? What could be authoritative than a testimony like, "I wasn't there, but here's what God told me to record"? When we get to Paul, what exactly do we have? He bases what he tells us in his letters on the claim that he received a revelation from God. The appeal to eyewitness accounts seems to be an unwitting reversion to a form of naturalism, for it does not rely on appeals to supernatural transmission of knowledge. Instead, it relies on the senses and one's own cognitive faculties, but if "God be true, but every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4), why should we take testimony of this sort seriously?

David wrote:

Geisler (same book) points out it may very well be the case that Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter, and James were among the 500 as well as nine who are elsewhere named Apostles (Geisler/Turek, pg 248); if he's right then there are written accounts.

Well, since Paul never names any of the 500 people he mentions in passing in I Cor. 15, we could say anyone living at the time was among them. In fact, on Christianity's supernaturalism, we could go well beyond this, and say that some or all of the 500 people had been dead for decades or centuries prior, and rose out of their graves a la Mt. 27:52-53, and gathered to see the post-resurrection Jesus. Or, maybe these were people from later centuries transported back in time to see the post-resurrected Jesus. Or, maybe they came from other planets. Since we're

asked to conclude that Christianity's supernaturalism is "the best explanation" of the data, on what basis could we discount these alternatives?

I wrote:

Paul nowhere suggests that Jesus had taught these things during his life on earth. But that's what we find when we get to the gospels: Jesus marching a squad of disciples through the ancient countryside between various towns in Palestine performing miracles, healing the blind, the lame and the infirm, giving moral instruction and teaching in the form of parables. We never learn any of this from Paul.

David responded:

It's as if you are surprised by the fact that Paul was writing letters on the road and not historical narrative.

No, that is not what surprises me. Paul may have been writing on the road (and writing on the road 2000 years ago would not be like writing on the road today - I know, I've done a lot of travel, both domestic and overseas, and today we move *very* quickly by comparison), but this did not prevent him from quoting OT sources and giving moral teachings of his own. Had he known that Jesus had taught the same things, I find it surprising that he did not appeal to Jesus' authority. And if Paul were guided by a supernatural force (e.g., "the Holy Spirit"), and/or his hand was divinely inspired to write what he wrote, why should writing on the road be any kind of impediment? Then later we have stories which put Jesus into a historical setting where he does give the teachings that Paul gives as his own. If the gospels are true, I would find this quite surprising, perplexing even. But since it is the kind of thing we' d expect to see if the later narratives were literary developments rather than histories, it's not at all surprising. What's surprising at this point is how eager believers are to "soldier on" in spite of all the problems their position faces and cannot surmount.

David wrote:

Was Paul's purpose in writing those letters to give exhaustive account of Jesus' earthly ministry? No.

Paul need not have given an "exhaustive account of Jesus' earthly ministry" in order to document knowledge of one. Indeed, we do not even learn from Paul that Jesus ever had an earthly ministry. Informative mentionings of it here and there would be quite adequate to establish his knowledge of it. And since he is said to have conferred with people who traveled with Jesus on that ministry, I would expect that he would have known about it.

David wrote:

Would these references have made his arguments more compelling? Perhaps to you, but where has it been argued that the original intended audience shares your worldview?

Why would they need to share my worldview in order for references to Jesus' earthly ministry to be compelling? My worldview does not accept claims on the basis of supernatural authority in the first place, so your question here seems quite misdirected. Preachers today who are addressing people who share their own worldview are constantly drawing on the narratives of Jesus' earthly life in order to buttress their points and make them more compelling. That Paul does not is quite curious. My evaluation here is not laden with anachronistic fallacy, either, since the earthly life that the gospel narratives give to Jesus is supposed to have taken place prior to Paul's ministry, and Paul determined to "preach Christ crucified" (I Cor. 1:23) and "not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). And even with these declarations, Paul never indicates the time, the place or the situation of Jesus' crucifixion.

David write:

So why blame Paul for not fulfilling your requirements when they are incompatible with Paul's authorial intent?

Is it really "incompatible with Paul's authorial intent" to cite Jesus for teachings which, according to the gospels, he gave? Is it really "incompatible with Paul's authorial intent" to mention things like Jesus being born of a virgin, being baptized by John the Baptist, gathering a band of twelve disciples and journeying with them to places like Galilee, Capernaum, Jerusalem, performing miracles, curing diseases, teaching in parables, quarreling with the chief priests, etc.? Come now, David, in your zeal to exonerate Paul's conspicuous silences, you've not only confirmed that Paul was silent on the points in question, you've also wandered into the preposterous in order to defend them.

David wrote:

1 Corinthians 9:10 'To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband'. Now why does Paul put this moral teaching in Jesus' mouth, and then immediately afterwards clarify something that he is saying instead of Jesus? Indeed this teaching was nothing new (Gen 2:24; Mal 2:16).

As you point out, Paul most likely got this teaching from the OT and since the OT was held with veneration, it is a teaching that is attributable to "the Lord". On many occasions Paul recasts OT teachings as if they were part of the rollout of a new covenant.

Still more to come!

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: Christian Legends

posted by Bahnsen Burner at 6:00 AM

11 Comments:

david said...

This post has been removed by the author.

August 26, 2008 11:25 PM

david said...

Dawson said: When Peter gives his sermon in Acts ch. 2, and says (v. 32) "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses," what do you think he means? No gospel account puts anyone with Jesus in the tomb when his dead body was supposedly brought back to life.

Uhh, so you're pointing to one example of Peter's usage of the word and that somehow secures your argument about its usage in some other passage which you've yet to attach any relevance to with respect to your original article or any of our arguments?

Sigh...ok

The word is Martus (yes we get the word martyr from it).

Martus; witness. Literally, one who remembers, one who has information or knowledge or joint knowledge of anything...Peculiar to the NT is the designation as martures (pl., witnesses) of those who announce facts of the Gospel and tell its tidings (Acts 1:8; 2:32; 3:15; 10:39; 13:31; Rev 11:3 etc.)

No, Peter is not saying he was at the tomb or even necessarily that he saw Jesus. The semantic range is much wider than that in the New Testament, but given I don't know what point you are making by trying to say early usage was "loose" I don't see any need to continue addressing this.

August 26, 2008 11:43 PM

david said...

What is perhaps anachronistic is my assessment of such usage as loose, for this is not how I would use the word. But clearly Christians of the 1st century using the word 'witness' to include in its scope of reference spiritual objects (which is all I had in mind in my statement above) is not at all anachronistic.

The way you try to slip out accusations never ceases to amaze me. You argued that the usage today is loose, therefore why not assume the usage then was loose. Thats a fallacious argument, plain and simple. Even if you turn it the other way around and say the early usage affects the later usage, that still carries marginal weight in any

semantic analysis given we are comparing a modern analytical language with an ancient synthetic one.

And yes, "loose" doesn't provide much of an argument for anything.

As a side note, the word in Acts 4:32 is not martus, but marturion. There is a subtle difference in usage.

August 26, 2008 11:56 PM

david said...

Dawson said Perhaps your complaint is better directed to the translators of our modern English bibles, for they are using the word 'witness' in a variety of ways (I count 93 instances of the word 'witness' in my King James Version, and the meaning seems to flex through a multitude of senses) and while definitions are rarely if ever explicit in the bible, the New Testament's usage of 'witness' does not at all seem incompatible with my point above, which you have sought to challenge in this way.

First of all the Bible translation teams are specialized for the task of semantic transfer....are you? Second, they aren't trying to construct arguments from the meaning of a word, you are.

Actually there really isn't any argument, you asked a question and I answered it.

You said: If the word "witness" enjoys a very loose meaning for many of today's Christians (and it very often does), why suppose it didn't enjoy similar flexibility among the early Christians?

I responded to that, simple...why complicate this thing?

Your point about translations is simply laughable because everyone knows that any translation is limited in its capability to express the original languages. The whole fact that you were trying to make an argument about "witness" without consulting the original language only goes to show again how your point is completely without any merit, and now you're just trying to come up with retorts.

Ain't gonna cut it Dawson, you can't deflect my accusation to the Bible translators because they are simply going to say "hey David's right, you're totally mucking with languages here." I asked them by the way, haha: P

August 27, 2008 12:14 AM

david said...

Dawson said: "I would not be sloth in broadcasting my witness, especially if I were personally charged by a great commission. I certainly would not wait 20, 30 or more years before getting my experience documented"

How do you conclude that the 500 were given a great commission? I surely haven't suggested this. You have already said you think that the accounts of the 500 could have been lost in history, why are you even going here?

The early spread of the gospel through oral proclamation was precisely the broadcasting you are talking about, and the reason it wasn't written down until later is just proving my point again...We're talking about an **oral culture!** Most scholars contend that the written record didn't become an issue until the witnesses started dying off... in other words "now we better write this down because they aren't gonna be around forever and apparently the kingdom isn't coming as soon as we assumed."

August 27, 2008 1:59 PM

david said...

Dawson said: "Now your objection is sensible on the basis of my worldview, for the concerns you raise would impact the situation. But how could it be sensible on the basis of the Christian worldview, where naturalistic constraints like the one you raise should ultimately be of no concern? Would a supernatural deity appear only before the illiterate?"

You seem to be assuming that God would have tried to accomplish something more than He did...which is certainly

not what my worldview maintains: you are again applying an invalid critique by bringing in your own assumptions and applying it to Christianity in reductio fashion. I'm not philosophy major, but even I know it's a bad argument. If you want to show an inconsistency within the Christian worldview, you must examine it on its own internal terms not your own notions about what supernatural deities would do.

Dawson said: My point above was a testament to my own character, not to some ad populum law of averages. This should be clear from the leading statement: "If I had seen a man who was actually resurrected from the grave..."

Yes but were you not trying to rationalize about what the 500 would have done? You were using yourself as an example, but it's the 500 whom you claimed should have written something down, correct? If that's true then my statement was completely relevant.

Dawson said:

I wasn't there, but I blogged about it shortly after it happened on two occasions. See my blog Virginia Tech and also Christian Reaction to Virginia Tech.

There were also news reports about the event for days and weeks afterwards, many of them including interviews with firsthand witnesses.

I am close friends with a man whose son was a student at Columbine when Klebold and Harris went on their rampage. My friend (also named David) wrote to me several times about his son's experience shortly after the incident. I don't know if his son ever wrote about it (I wouldn't expect a 13-year-old to write much about anything), but that's irrelevant.

What you declare irrelevant is precisely what I am saying is relevant. The person experiencing the event writing about it - all of your examples are completely moot to this point.

Dawson: It seems that Peter and co. took their sweet time in fulfilling this commandment.

Really, so the early church came out of nowhere I suppose? The great commission did not say "go write a detailed historical account of what I did and make sure you include lots of references for post-enlightenment historians to corroborate it."

August 27, 2008 3:24 PM

david said...

Dawson: Paul need not have given an "exhaustive account of Jesus' earthly ministry" in order to document knowledge of one. Indeed, we do not even learn from Paul that Jesus ever had an earthly ministry. Informative mentionings of it here and there would be quite adequate to establish his knowledge of it. And since he is said to have conferred with people who traveled with Jesus on that ministry, I would expect that he would have known about it.

So now you're just going to ignore all the evidence I gave about Jesus' earthly ministry from Paul's letters?

August 27, 2008 3:29 PM

david said...

Dawson: Why would they need to share my worldview in order for references to Jesus' earthly ministry to be compelling? My worldview does not accept claims on the basis of supernatural authority in the first place, so your question here seems quite misdirected. Preachers today who are addressing people who share their own worldview are constantly drawing on the narratives of Jesus' earthly life in order to buttress their points and make them more compelling. That Paul does not is quite curious. My evaluation here is not laden with anachronistic fallacy, either, since the earthly life that the gospel narratives give to Jesus is supposed to have taken place prior to Paul's ministry, and Paul determined to "preach Christ crucified" (I Cor. 1:23) and "not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). And even with these declarations, Paul never indicates the time, the place or the situation of Jesus' crucifixion.

Yes, an audience already willing to accept supernatural claims doesn't share your worldview.

As you have already said, Christians today hold to naturalistic assumptions much more.

Need I say more?

August 27, 2008 3:33 PM

david said...

Dawson: Is it really "incompatible with Paul's authorial intent" to cite Jesus for teachings which, according to the gospels, he gave? Is it really "incompatible with Paul's authorial intent" to mention things like Jesus being born of a virgin, being baptized by John the Baptist, gathering a band of twelve disciples and journeying with them to places like Galilee, Capernaum, Jerusalem, performing miracles, curing diseases, teaching in parables, quarreling with the chief priests, etc.? Come now, David, in your zeal to exonerate Paul's conspicuous silences, you've not only confirmed that Paul was silent on the points in question, you've also wandered into the preposterous in order to defend them.

Yes and yes to your questions.

I am quite comfortable with my position on Paul's authorial intent, and you have yet to demonstrate even a passing ability to exegete any text properly so by all means...your assertion that I've wandered into anything or "confirmed that Paul was silent" (as if I ever denied such a thing) is yet another rhetorical device lacking anything other than an arrogant bias to elicit my response.

August 27, 2008 3:37 PM

david said...

Dawson said: 1 Corinthians 9:10 'To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband'. Now why does Paul put this moral teaching in Jesus' mouth, and then immediately afterwards clarify something that he is saying instead of Jesus? Indeed this teaching was nothing new (Gen 2:24; Mal 2:16).

As you point out, Paul most likely got this teaching from the OT and since the OT was held with veneration, it is a teaching that is attributable to "the Lord". On many occasions Paul recasts OT teachings as if they were part of the rollout of a new covenant.

The only way you're going to convince me of that is if you show me somewhere that Paul refers to God as kurios and not theos.

We have already talked about kurios and its usage to denote Jesus. Do you really want to go down this path?

August 27, 2008 3:39 PM

david said...

Dawson said: Now your objection is sensible on the basis of my worldview, for the concerns you raise would impact the situation. But how could it be sensible on the basis of the Christian worldview, where naturalistic constraints like the one you raise should ultimately be of no concern? Would a supernatural deity appear only before the illiterate? Christians are always trying to tell us that it's a fallacy to assume everyone "back then" was illiterate, uneducated, unscientific, superstitious, etc. (and I don't, by the way). But we can't have it both ways here. If Jesus appeared only to the illiterate, I'd say that was a bad choice on his part. Also, if he did appear to only illiterate persons, why should this matter? Jesus is supernatural, and could easily empower an illiterate person with supreme fluency in a multitude of languages if he wanted to. In fact, the writer's sudden ability to write could itself be evidence of Jesus' supernaturalism, something the gospel writers were so eager to insert into their stories.

See how supernaturalism takes the apologetic backseat here?

It amazes me how you import your own assumptions into my worldview to conclude what kind of beliefs I should or should not espouse.

Your argument is essentially that since a supernatural worldview makes it logically possible for certain things to happen, then why not just assume they did happen? Cause you know, why not?

Why not in the Christian worldview (not just generic supernatural ones)? Because God has revealed Himself in a specific way, and though many incorrectly go putting him in the gaps...this is not the correct approach to Christian epistemology. The basis for knowing God did anything is that he revealed it in some way. Therefore it is perfectly valid for a Christian to use all the same tools that a empiricist or rationalist uses. The Christian worldview merely make use of more means of knowing than others do.

August 28, 2008 10:14 AM

Post a Comment