

## Carr vs. Cole

I really enjoyed listening to [the exchange between Canon Michael Cole and Steven Carr](#) concerning the resurrection of Jesus on Premier Christian Radio out of London. Cole is a Christian who sought to defend the Christian view that the resurrection of Jesus actually happened as described in the gospel stories. [Carr](#) is an atheist who raised numerous points against the Christian view of the New Testament record and ably countered Cole's arguments and claims to evidence. Both gentlemen maintained a quick-paced and polite exchange, never allowing the discussion to degenerate to personal invective. And the host of the show, Justin Brierley, refrained from heckling and badgering the non-Christian "protagonist," allowing Carr sufficient time to make his points.

Cole dragged out the same tired defenses that Christians can be expected to bring up, assuming that the New Testament documents are not only historically reliable but also uniform in what they affirm. As is typical with many Christian defenses, his claims to evidence took for granted key suppositions which can be reasonably dismissed on a more critical approach than believers tend to apply to their own views.

Carr held his own confidently and eloquently, making excellent counterpoints in response to the tired Christian position. One of Carr's main points was that the resurrection of Jesus as described by Paul in his letters is fundamentally different from the resurrection described in the gospel stories. The gospel stories describe Jesus being resurrected in a *physical* body, while Paul clearly indicates that it was a *spiritual* body, even scolding the Corinthians, for instance, for asking how a physical body can rise from the dead. The one kind of body does not turn into another kind of body.

Carr points out that Paul never explained to the Corinthians or other budding churches that Jesus' risen body could be touched and examined, as we find in the gospels (cf. John 20-21). He stated (00:23:10\*):

Whenever Paul talks about the resurrection, he never stresses that the flesh rose. All the early creeds, such as in Romans 1, or 1 Corinthians 15 or Philipians 3, never have a bodily Jesus walking the earth. Jesus ascended, he went to heaven, and after that he appeared in visions and trances toward these people.

Indeed, Paul's show no awareness of most traditions found in the gospels, and Cole nowhere shows that Paul either had knowledge of the gospel stories or that he believed that Jesus was resurrected in a physical body. On the contrary, Cole seemed to think it wasn't an issue whether the resurrection body was physical or spiritual. Rather, he simply stressed that Paul affirmed the resurrection and that this alone is all that is really important, but nowhere really dealt with Carr's points.

In response to one caller, who asked inquired on what Carr himself believes, Carr responded (00:28:18):

Well, I don't believe what Paul writes, but Paul's letters are primary evidence, the sort historians really value. If for example two thousand years from now historians discover a letter by a Moonie, saying that he believed that Reverend Moon was the messiah, that would be really good proof of what Moonies believed. And Paul's letters are really good proof of what the early Christians really believed.

At one point Cole admitted that the gospel accounts may not be completely harmonious on every minute detail, acknowledging differences such as whether the angel was inside or outside the tomb. However, he clearly thinks such discrepancies are trivial against a far more significant point, namely that they all agree that Jesus' tomb was empty and Jesus was seen walking and talking after he died by crucifixion. But Carr rightly pointed out that even this is misleading. Mark, agreed by most scholars to be the earliest of the gospels, originally ended at 16:8. While it mentions the sepulchre, its post-resurrection scenes are confined to an appendix which was tacked on later, in verses 9-20. As [Robert Grant plainly puts it](#):

The ending of the Gospel of Mark (16:9-20) is no part of what its author originally wrote. (a) Justin alluded to it and Irenaeus quoted from it; it is included in some important uncial manuscripts, mostly 'Western'. (b) On the other hand, it is absent from the writings of Clement, Origen and Eusebius, and is omitted in Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, as well as in the older Latin and Syriac versions; the Freer manuscript contains a different ending entirely. (c) Therefore, though it was undoubtedly added at an early date, it is not authentic.

This means that the original version had no post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. In fact, as Grant mentions, Mark has had [several endings](#) that were appended to its original ending at 16:8. But its problems do not stop there. [Grant](#)

[points out](#) that the "textual problems of the Gospel of Mark occur primarily at the beginning and at the end," but also acknowledges that "throughout the gospel scribes have made additions in order to bring the book into closer conformity with Matthew and Luke."

Carr himself brought out some very important points about the gospel of Mark. When host Brierley asked (00:54:30):

When it comes to the gospel accounts, how happy are you to believe that they are authentic and that they are an eyewitness account of what happened?

Carr responded (00:54:36):

Well Paul never uses them, so he couldn't have thought much of them. The earliest gospel is the gospel of Mark, and that bears no marks of being a work of history. It never names any sources, it never gives any chronology, it never says who it is - it's anonymous, we don't know who wrote it, we don't know when it was written, we don't know why it was written, we don't even know if it was intended to [be] history. And it doesn't have a resurrection appearance - it ends at Mark 16:8 where Jesus is not seen; all that happens is that some women are told that Jesus is risen, and they don't tell anybody. Anonymous works are just rejected by historians out of hand. No historian would then accept that.

Note these fundamental strikes against the presumed authority of Mark. This gospel:

- does not name any sources that have been used to inform it (tradition affirms that the source was the disciple Peter, but does it say this?)
- it ascribes no dates to any of the events it describes
- the author nowhere identifies himself
- the author nowhere indicates when he wrote it
- the author does not tell readers that he intended to write a history to begin with

The whole account appears to be largely a midrashic concoction.

At one point, while defending the literalist Christian view, Cole stated (1:05:25):

Now the evidence that he is God does not depend entirely on the resurrection. Many other things as well. I think I also want to bring in personal experience. I said earlier on that I've been a Christian from the age of twelve. And I'm just aware of God being there in the person of Christ in all sorts of different situations, speaking to me by his spirit through the word of God. There was one particular experience when I was very, very conscious of the risen Christ, actually standing with me in the church I was serving, asking whether we would make him Lord of that church... I wouldn't say anything about that for 24 hours, it was too personal, too close.

In responses to this, Carr pointed out (1:06:55):

Canon Michael again says he had an experience of the risen Christ. Now that wasn't a bodily experience. So Conan Michael is disproving the bodily resurrection with his very own experiences.

Carr's point here is extremely significant. Many believers today claim to have experienced the "real Jesus," allegedly sensing Jesus standing right beside them even though we would not see this Jesus figure with them if we were to look at them. Cole himself claims to have had this kind of experience where he "was very, very conscious of the risen Christ, actually standing with me." Of course, Cole is not claiming that Jesus was beside him in a physical body, bloody wounds and all, that anyone could see and come up to touch, as the gospel of John has Doubting Thomas do. The point here is that *the believer does not need Jesus to be in a physical body in order to claim to have a personal encounter with him*. This certainly casts 1 Cor. 15:3-11 in a new light.

I, too, have seen Christians make the very same kind of claim, and I've even met adherents of other religions who make similar claims about the deities and heroes of their religions. Is this an instance of hallucination per se? I don't think it is, and I'm certainly willing to suppose that such experiences are not hallucinatory in the clinical sense. But they do seem to be religiously induced, akin to a waking fantasy which the adherent may willfully indulge while seeming increasingly real to him. As Cole puts it, "it was too personal, too close." Reviewing the experience over and over in his mind, the adherent may in fact try to relive the experience, to capture any detail that may have been missed the first time around, amplifying the overall significance of the experience in his mind. At some point, he no doubt wants to believe that it was a genuine, authentic experience of a spiritual being as his memory of it grows in its seeming metaphysical proportions.

I have known many Christians who have made claims of this nature before a group of like-minded adherents. Some of the more enthusiastic believers will often ask others if they also felt the presence of Jesus. This was a routine occurrence in the church I attended in the early 1990's. The praise worship would be congenially interrupted as one of the sisters broke out into a wailing cry, her eyes shut but turning her face upwards, with tears running down her cheeks (she apparently had a very bad day at work). One by one other members of the church would join the swooning, which typically had a most pitiful, even whiny sound to it, as if their lives were unbearably miserable. Then the sister who started it all would begin to speak aloud, addressing everyone but no one in particular. She would begin by saying how good her god has been to her, and then enumerate a long list of miseries she's had to endure over the past week. She clearly needed the church environment in order to "recharge," otherwise she might not get through another week of torture living her life. Soon almost everyone in the church would be reacting to "the Spirit" which had "gathered in our midst," as they would say, supposing that Jesus was really in the building with us, referencing passages like Mt. 18:20 to validate the experience. At the height of the commotion the pastor, who was treated as if he were an infallible puppet of the supreme being, would ask the church with a big encouraging smile, "Now who doesn't feel the presence of Jeezusss here today?" No one was going to spoil the mood of the moment to jump up and say "I don't!" The power of suggestion is indeed very strong in a social setting of surveillance, which can easily pressure one to conform. To admit that one did not have the same experience would be tantamount to numbering oneself among God's damned. If one honestly did not experience what the sister claimed to be experiencing, he held his lip tight, and just nodded along approvingly, perhaps trying to find a way to convince himself that he was experiencing the same thing, but only in a different manner, one not so readily understood but still just as real.

So the whole church seemed to be in agreement, "on one accord" with one another as the spirit of Jesus invaded and conquered the restlessness of human spirits weary from a long work week in the evil wicked world. The pastor would thus interpret this collective experience as uniform confirmation of the confession, and in his mind he would be right to explain to others that all 50 or 100 of us had actually experienced Jesus. There was of course no risen Jesus standing there in a physical body. A physical Jesus was in no way needed for the church congregants to "feel" his presence. For these people *Jesus is a mood, not a person*. If it is this way for today's believers, why think it was any different for the earliest Christians, who never placed their Jesus in a historical setting?

At 1:13:00 Cole goes on to describe belief in his god as a *choice*. The context of what he says suggests that one can simply *choose* to believe, as if something will be true if one can simply *choose* it to be true. Statements like this reveal the inherent subjectivism of such beliefs, implying that truth is something that will conform to our wishes. Christians have often said similar things to me.

Take for example the following statements which have been made to me over the years by Christians (these are verbatim quotes):

God has given you a choice, choose wisely, dont waste your life serving your selfish wants

As God He has no obligation to propve to you! You may accept or reject...your choice [sic]

Eternal life, in heaven, or eternal death, in hell. What do you choose?

You can choose to deny Jesus all you want.

You should put your full trust in the LORD and allow Hlm to guide you and accprt the path HE has choosen for you. [sic]

YOU choose not to believe it!

Heaven really is the last reason I choose to be a Christian.

We can choose to believe what we want and who we want.

Etc.

Christians seem to find it reassuring to characterize a non-believer's non-belief as something they have deliberately *chosen* in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, as if non-believers were inherently opposed to truth as such (and yet, we're told that we were created by an infallible and perfect creator). I cannot *choose* to believe something that I already think is untrue or know to be false. In this way, knowledge supercedes belief. If my coworker

tells me he saw our boss levitating 10 feet off the ground and walking through walls, my knowledge of the world would prevent me from simply believing this. The formula that Christians give for induction into their belief club is a formula for dishonesty, for it encourages one to affirm beliefs on the basis of irrational criteria (e.g., belief makes one feel secure, fear of consequences of not believing, anxiety over questioning childhood beliefs, etc.) and contrary to one's better knowledge.

\* Transcriptions are mine, so any mistakes are also mine. The time markings refer to the point at which the transcribed statement begins on [the recording](#).

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:30 AM](#)

## 5 Comments:

[Steven Carr](#) said...

Thank you for your evidence. I agree that Canon Michael Cole's 'experience' of Jesus is proof that Jesus did not need to physically appear to anybody, before Paul would write about Jesus appearing to various people in 1 Corinthians 15.

I meant to say that Paul's letters are primary evidence, not private evidence.

Primary evidence is what historians value most.

Paul's letters show that whole groups of converted Jesus-worshippers (in Thessalonica and Corinth) believed that the dead were lost and scoffed at the idea that God would choose to make corpses live again.

How could these Jesus-worshippers have come to believe that? Had not their Lord and Saviour 'proved' the resurrection in Matthew 22?

[June 29, 2006 10:21 AM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Nice overview and comments...

Many good points here, but the strongest is what you mentioned at the end...it sums up what I've said to my 'believing' family over and over:

I can't CHOOSE to believe...I can't MAKE myself believe. Saying the words "I believe in Jesus" do not make it real to me.

[June 29, 2006 2:41 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Steven wrote:

*I meant to say that Paul's letters are primary evidence, not private evidence.*

Thank you, Steven. In fact, it was this very sentence - though the following clause - which proved most difficult for me to transcribe. What you write here makes much better sense, and I have corrected the statement to read as follows:

"Well, I don't believe what Paul writes, but Paul's letters are **primary evidence**, the sort historians really value."

I agree wholly with the point you were making in your response at this turn, a point which Christians themselves seem to overlook in some ways. Some Christian apologists want to take the bible as evidence proving its own claims. I explained to [Dusman](#) that "I'm perfectly willing to accept the text of the New Testament as evidence showing what some ancient people \*believed\*." That's something quite different. But no matter how many times you explain this to

some, they seem unable or unwilling to grasp it.

Regards,  
Dawson

[June 29, 2006 5:08 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

NR,

Good to see you again!

You write:

*Saying the words "I believe in Jesus" do not make it real to me.*

Indeed, simply affirming belief in something does not make that something real or true. Nor does actually believing it. As I've pointed out, reality does not conform to our consciousness. But isn't this view suggested by Christians who insist that one can merely *choose* to believe? I think this was a major pain point for me when I was a Christian: merely believing was not going to be sufficient to me. I wanted to *know*. Well, now I do know, and hence I am now an atheist.

This is definitely something worth exploring as I rummage through some of the e-mails Christians have sent me over the years. Some have made some pretty amazing statements, though I don't think they realized it or thought they were amazing for the reasons I find them amazing.

Regards,  
Dawson

[June 29, 2006 5:25 PM](#)

[Zachary Moore](#) said...

Thanks, Dawson, for this great analysis (and to Steven for appearing on the show). I listened to this exchange a few months ago, and really loved the points Steven made. I agree that the "personal experience" of modern Christians is all we need to appeal to when explaining the lack of necessity for a bodily resurrection in Paul's letters.

Incidentally, it would be nice if Christian radio shows here in the states were conducted with such respect as seen on Premiere.

[June 29, 2006 7:08 PM](#)