

Sunday, May 08, 2005

## Five Hundred Anonymous Witnesses

Many Christian apologists naturally want to put a lot of weight on the so-called testimony of those who allegedly witnessed a living Jesus after he was said to be crucified and entombed. Unfortunately for Christians, however, there are very few purported witnesses to the events that we read about in the New Testament, and even those are too shaky to serve as reliable evidence. So it is not surprising to find Christian apologists trying to exploit certain passages in the New Testament to say more than they really do say as they try to find a shortcut that bypasses this problem.

An common example of this is a reference to five hundred anonymous believers who allegedly saw Jesus after his crucifixion in I Corinthians 15:6. The verse reads as follows:

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. (KJV)

If five hundred or more believers saw Jesus at one of his post-resurrection appearances, as the typical apologetic reasoning goes, this would serve as astounding evidence for the gospel stories.

And even though such passages do not seem to figure largely in the apologetic writings of Cornelius Van Til (I Cor. 15:6 does not even earn an entry in the scriptural index of Greg Bahnsen's *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* - cf. pp. 741-744), appeals to eyewitness testimony are apparently not the exclusive territory of evidentialist apologists. John Frame, for instance, himself a well known spokesman for presuppositional apologetics, writes the following:

It is quite legitimate, as we shall see, to argue on the basis of evidence, such as the testimony of the five hundred witnesses to the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6). Eyewitness accounts may be used argumentatively as follows: "If Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances are well attested, then the Resurrection is a fact. His post-Resurrection appearances are well attested; therefore, the Resurrection is a fact." (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 9.)

Regardless of the particular apologetic orientation of any would-be defender of Christian theism, whether evidentialist or presuppositionalist or otherwise, the tradition that there were "five hundred witnesses to the Resurrection" could in no way be considered "well attested," because it is mentioned by only one writer in all of the New Testament, and he mentions it only one time. And if there were any known extra-biblical attestation of these alleged five hundred witnesses, apologists wouldn't stop trumpeting it from every mountaintop. Indeed, if it were true that so many people saw a man who they thought was divinely resurrected from the dead, it would be amazing that only one person mentions it, and even then only in passing!

But already there's a massive sleight of hand at work in Frame's statement, and most apologists would themselves probably not detect it, let alone encourage its exposure. **There is no testimony of five hundred witnesses to the Resurrection in 1 Cor. 15:6.** The testimony here is the author's - a single man, namely the apostle Paul - not a testimony endorsed by the five hundred persons he alleges as witnesses. So we have the testimony of one man here, and one man only. One man does not count as five hundred.

Also, even if we grant that these five hundred persons did in fact see the man named Jesus, even Christians cannot say that they were "witnesses to the Resurrection," for "the Resurrection" allegedly took place in a sealed tomb where *no one* could witness it! Apologist Gary Habermas admits this very point on p. 307 of Lee Strobel's *The Case For Christ*, acknowledging that

nobody was sitting inside the tomb and saw the body start to vibrate, stand up, take the linen wrappings off, fold them, roll back the stone, wow the guards, and leave.

So Frame errs when he insinuates that these alleged "five hundred brethren" witnessed Jesus' *resurrection*. If there were five hundred such persons, and they saw a man named Jesus, all they witnessed was a man, not a dead man miraculously coming back to life.

To defend the reliability of Paul's claim that "above five hundred brethren" saw the resurrected Jesus, Habermas gives the standard reaching defense in response to Strobel's perfunctory interrogation on the matter:

Now stop and think about it: you would never include this phrase unless you were absolutely confident that these folks would confirm that they really did see Jesus alive. I mean, Paul was virtually inviting people to check it out for themselves! He wouldn't have said this if he didn't know they'd back him up. (*The Case For Christ*, pp. 312-313.)

Now to say that this response is weak - especially coming from someone who holds a Ph.D and whose dissertation was on the resurrection - is an understatement. Yet this is the standard reply given to those who ask about the legitimacy of the "the five hundred brethren" cited in I Cor. 15. There are several reasons why this canned response fails. For one, we must remember that 1 Corinthians is a *letter* written by the apostle when he was ministering at Ephesus (I Cor. 16:8), and this letter was *delivered* to the church at Corinth *by someone else* (probably by Sosthenes, according to [Felix Just](#)), and perhaps read to the congregation once it was received. This means that members of the audience at the Corinthian church, supposing it was read to them, could not have asked Paul directly for details about these "five hundred brethren," unless they traveled to Ephesus and arranged a meeting with him. This would apply also for any members of the church who only read the document.

Also, Paul does not name *one single individual* of the five hundred he mentions, so how could anyone follow up on his claim that the resurrected Jesus was seen by so many people at one time? If Paul doesn't name any of these alleged witnesses, his readers wouldn't have any way to confirm his claim, unless they consulted with the busy missionary himself. We should also ask how Paul knew that so many people saw the resurrected Jesus at one time. How did he learn of this event? Was this a tradition passed down to him by other Christians? Was Paul himself there? If he was one of the five hundred, why doesn't he give more details, and why doesn't he mention it in any of his other letters? For that matter, *where* did it happen? Did it happen outside Jerusalem? Did it happen at Galilee? Again, the apostle gives his readers no details about this alleged event, so his readers wouldn't even know where to start if they wanted to go out and confirm his claim. And supposing five hundred people did see a man, how would they have known that it was the Jesus whom Paul preached that they were seeing? Paul gives no indication of how the individual seen by the "five hundred brethren" demonstrated himself to be the Jesus who died as a result of being crucified. So not only is it wrong to say that we have the testimony of five hundred persons, the apostle's own claim is inadmissible as testimony since it provides absolutely no confirmable details and has no chance of surviving cross-examination. It is even possible that the story was made up, either by Paul himself, or by someone who reported it to Paul. And if it were part of an oral tradition that was finally passed on to the apostle, it could easily have been exaggerated as it was retold.

Finally, it seems that Habermas takes for granted that no member of the Corinthian church did in fact try to investigate the claim about the five hundred brethren. If someone did try to investigate the claim about the anonymous five hundred brethren, and yet found no evidence to confirm the apostle's claim that they witnessed the resurrected Christ, should we expect Christians to have advertised this? Such negative results of an investigation into the matter could easily have been suppressed. And, for all that we know, it is entirely possible that someone who learned of Paul's claim about five hundred witnesses of the resurrected Christ, either by reading his letter, or by attending a sermon in which it was read, or by hearing it repeated from missionaries who cited Paul's letter, could have sought to inquire about the five hundred persons in question. Such a person would probably have begun his inquiry with the Corinthian church's leadership. But what details would they have been able to provide? At best, they could have referred him to Paul, a busy missionary traveling abroad and campaigning in the interest of spreading the new religion. But if the church leadership revered Paul as an apostle of Christ, they probably would not have been inclined to send a skeptical someone to nag him about a point he referenced in one of his letters, let alone encourage his questioning of what was fast becoming church doctrine. It's not a secret that congregants of a Christian church are prone to accepting what their leadership tells them uncritically. Indeed, the underlying message of even contemporary spokesmen like Habermas is quite difficult to miss: believe what the apostle claims in his letters on his say so - it is a suitable substitute for genuine evidence.

So if a Christian apologist attempts to validate the belief that Jesus was resurrected by parroting I Cor. 15:6, rest assured he's reaching and hoping that others will confuse a claim with the non-existent proof that is supposed to support it, just as he has done.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:30 PM](#)

## 2 Comments:

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

The Resurrection is the most addled belief of all addled beliefs in the pantheon of Christian absurdities. Even the Bible itself disproves the resurrection - some of the APOSTLES don't recognize "Jesus" ! How is that even possible, unless the Bible story itself admits that

the Resurrection was a lie ?

[May 08, 2005 12:09 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Well, Franc, you know what an apologist would say to that. After Jesus' resurrection he was transformed to such a degree that one would have to look twice to see that it really was Jesus. I've known some individuals who looked pretty different just by getting a haircut.

But I do think the statement in John 6:66 (dig that number!) is quite telling:

"From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him."

Imagine traveling around with a guy who performs all these miracles, and then deciding he's not what he claims to be and parting ways with him. Now that's noteworthy! Perhaps those insiders knew the guy was really full of hot air? What else could be inferred from this?

[May 09, 2005 8:09 AM](#)