

A CONVERSATION WITH LEE STROBEL

LEE STROBEL was an award-winning journalist and the legal affairs editor for the *Chicago Tribune*. He was educated at the University of Missouri and also at Yale Law School, where he earned a Master of Studies in Law degree. And he was an atheist. But after investigating the Gospel and Christianity for nearly two years, Strobel accepted Jesus Christ. He later wrote “The Case for Christ,” which recounts that journey. Strobel recently spoke with *Decision* about how he became convinced that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be.

Q: WHAT STARTED YOU ON YOUR QUEST FOR TRUTH ABOUT THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST?

A: Well, I was an atheist for most of my life after having learned in school that Darwin replaced God and that God was out of a job because evolution explained the origin and development of life. And I had married a woman, Leslie, who was an agnostic. However, she met a friend who was a Christian, and over time this friend shared the message of Jesus with Leslie.

She came to me one day and said, “I’ve made a big decision. I’ve decided to become a follower of Jesus Christ.” That was the worst possible news that I could get. I thought it was going to be the end of our marriage. But over time, I began to see positive changes in her character and values and the way in which she related to me and to the children.

Q: HOW DID THE CHANGE IN YOUR WIFE AFFECT YOU?

A: It intrigued me. It was winsome and attractive, and she attributed it to God. But, of course, I didn’t believe in God, so I didn’t know what to make of this. Leslie invited me to church, and I decided to go and see if maybe I could get her out of this “cult” that she was involved in.

So I attended church on January 20, 1980, and I heard a message on basic Christianity. For the first time in my life, I understood the concept of grace. I walked out that day still an atheist. The pastor didn’t convince me that day that God exists. But one thing I said was, “If this is true, it has huge implications for my life.” So I decided to use my legal and journalism training to investigate systematically whether there was any credibility to Christianity. I devoted almost the next two years of my life to that investigation.

Q: CHRISTIANITY IS OPEN TO THE SKEPTIC’S PROBING MIND, ISN’T IT?

A: That is one of the things that impressed me about Christianity. It makes a claim about this individual, Jesus, who supposedly lived in the first century, supposedly did miraculous deeds and supposedly was crucified and rose again from the dead. These were things that, as a journalist, I could check out—because if He really did live, He left evidence behind. I could use the same kind of techniques that I used to report for the *Chicago Tribune* to uncover the evidence and determine whether there was any credibility to these claims about Jesus.

When I started the investigative process, I thought it would last only a few weeks. As an atheist, I believed I would find the soft spots of Christianity, discover the holes in the historical record and be able to dismiss it rather quickly. But the more I checked it out, the more evidence I began to see. It was the most stimulating two years of my life.

Q: YOUR TRAINING IN JOURNALISM AND LAW EQUIPS YOU TO PROBE AND EXAMINE FACTS WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF EXPERTISE. WHAT ABOUT THE AVERAGE PERSON WHO DOUBTS THE VERITY OF CHRISTIANITY?

A: I would encourage anyone who has questions or doubts or uncertainties about the claims or identity of Jesus to pursue the facts. Doubt is OK as long as it drives us to seek answers. When we’re driven to seek answers, we will find that God will provide the information we need to satisfy our hearts and our minds.

Often, people are closed to the possibility of the supernatural, and they rule that out at the start. They say, in effect, “OK, Jesus can’t be the Son of God, since He did miracles, and I don’t believe in the supernatural. Now, give me the evidence for Jesus.” That’s counter-

productive. I think we need to have enough humility in the investigative process to know that we don't have all the answers. The other thing I did—and I would encourage others to do this as well if they are seeking evidence for God—is to pray. Even though I was an atheist, I said, “God, I don't believe You're there. But if You really are there, I would like to get to know the truth about You.” As an atheist, I didn't believe anybody was listening, so I had nothing to lose. But, if somebody was listening, I wanted to know.

Q: WHERE DID YOU START?

A: The first thing I did was to try and determine whether the New Testament accounts about the life of Jesus were reliable. I was fascinated to find how strong the evidence is that the biographies of Jesus can be trusted. My attitude as an atheist was that Jesus was a legend or that He was just an ordinary man, and a long time after His death people created stories about miraculous deeds and the Resurrection.

Q: WHAT DID YOU DISCOVER IN THAT REGARD?

A: I found that the writings about Jesus can be dated back so close to the life of Jesus that legendary development could not have seriously distorted the historical record about who He is. The most persuasive part of that is a creed found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. It encapsulates the essence of Christianity. It says that Jesus died for our sins and that He was buried and was resurrected on the third day. Then it mentions the names of eyewitnesses, including skeptics who had encountered the risen Jesus Christ. This creed has been dated back by scholars from a wide range of theological beliefs to as early as three to eight years after the life of Jesus Christ. So you don't have a massive amount of time between the life of Jesus and the creation of this creed during which legend could have developed and distorted the historical record.

A.N. Sherwin-White, the great, classical historian from Oxford, did a study on the rate at which legend grew up in the ancient world. He found that the passage of two generations of time was not even enough time for legend to accrue and to wipe out a solid core of historical truth. Here we have something that dates back so closely to the events themselves that we can trust this account as being accurate. I became convinced that this record is trustworthy in terms of communicating to us the information we need to know about the life, teachings, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Q: SO THE MORE YOU LOOKED, THE MORE YOU BECAME CONVINCED OF THE VERACITY OF THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS OF CHRIST?

A: Yes. Not only has there never been a discovery that has disproved the historical record of the New Testament, but numerous discoveries have corroborated its claims. For instance, Luke, who authored one of the Gospels and Acts, was a first-rate historian. In Luke 3:1, he identifies Lysanias as “tetrarch of Abilene.” Some people used to make fun of Luke and say, “Luke doesn't know what he's talking about, because Lysanias was not a tetrarch; he was a king who was put to death about 50 years before Luke claims he was living. Luke's got everything messed up, and he can't be trusted.” Then a few years ago, about 14 miles west-northwest of Damascus, in an area called Abilene, they found an inscription to “Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene.” It turns out that there were two people named Lysanias and that Luke was absolutely right in what he wrote.

Q: HOW SIGNIFICANT IS IT THAT LUKE WAS ACCURATE IN REFERRING TO HISTORICAL EVENTS?

A: Archaeological discoveries have demonstrated that Luke was accurate in even the incidental details that really don't contribute much to the historical record but which archaeology can check out and investigate. This raises the question, “Why would Luke be meticulously accurate in the recording of these incidental details that don't really matter and yet be sloppy in recording things that are really important, like whether or not Jesus rose from the dead?” And so the fact that Luke was careful in his reporting of incidental details suggests to us that he was also careful in reporting to us what he wrote about the life, teachings, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Q: AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST IS WHERE CHRISTIANITY RISES OR FALLS.

A: Absolutely. Anybody can claim to be God. Jesus claimed to be God, but what credentials did He have to back up that assertion? We have an abundance of historical data that demonstrates that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ actually occurred.

During my research, people would tell me, “Lee, the single most powerful bit of evidence to me is this: The eyewitnesses that reported the resurrection of Jesus must have really believed what they were saying because they were willing to be put to death rather than disavow their claim that Jesus was the Son of God.” I

remember saying, "That's not evidence. People have been willing to die for their faith all throughout history. They sincerely believed that if they died for what they believed, they would go to eternity to be with their god." So I discounted this evidence of the willingness of the disciples to die for their faith.

But then somebody told me, "You're missing the point, Lee. The disciples didn't just *believe* that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and thus proved He's the Son of God; they knew for a *fact* it was true. They touched Jesus, they talked to Him, they ate with Him. They knew He wasn't a legend, or make-believe, or wishful thinking. Knowing it for a fact, they were willing to die for it."

That's an entirely different case and is incredibly powerful corroborative evidence that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an actual historical event. If you're a skeptic, you have to explain all of the ripples through history that are inexplicable apart from the truth of the Resurrection. The spread of the Early Church, the contagious wildfire of belief in Jesus Christ that the Roman Empire could not snuff out despite brutal persecution, testifies to the veracity of the Christian faith, because it is based on the reality that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be.

Q: AT WHAT POINT IN TIME DOES AN INDIVIDUAL KNOW THAT ENOUGH EVIDENCE HAS BEEN GATHERED AND A CONCLUSION OR DECISION IS NECESSARY?

A: I think it's important to go into this process with an open mind and an open heart, and to resolve up front that when you have enough evidence, you will reach a verdict. After two years of systematically investigating this kind of evidence, it became very clear to me one day that I had sufficient knowledge upon which to make a decision. It was clear to me that this avalanche of evidence pointed powerfully toward the truth of Christianity.

Q: THIS ALSO INVOLVES SOME RATHER UNSETTLING NEWS ABOUT OURSELVES. C.S. LEWIS SAID THAT WE ARE "REBELS WHO MUST LAY DOWN OUR ARMS."

A: Absolutely. This process of investigating evidence for Christ is not purely an intellectual endeavor. It's a spiritual battle, and we are people who, the Bible tells us, are inclined to suppress the truth about God (Romans 1:18). Remember, the sinfulness of mankind is thoroughly documented. Just turn on the news any night or read any newspaper. When I came to the con-



CONVINCED: Lee Strobel was an atheist. His wife, Leslie, was an agnostic. Both committed their lives to Christ and now serve the living God.

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clusion that Jesus' claim to be God's Son was true, I had little problem concluding at the same time that I was a sinful individual who needed forgiveness and grace. The evidence of my sinfulness, of my self-will, of my self-destructiveness and of my evil thoughts and deeds was overwhelming. I was a person who deserved eternal separation from God.

Finally, on November 8, 1981, when I was alone in my room and had reviewed all of the evidence I had encountered during my probe, I concluded that it would take more faith to maintain my atheism than to become a Christian. The most logical and rational thing that I could do was to confess my sin and receive Jesus Christ as my Savior. I simply needed to bend my knee to Him and receive Him as my Forgiver and Leader. I did, and the journey since has been incredible. ■

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