

**Constructing an Apologetic Case from the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus: Arguing  
for a Classicalist and Minimal Facts Methodology**

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## Introduction

Plentiful evidence exists supporting the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, nonetheless Christian apologists disagree on how best to construct a case for Christian theism by incorporating this evidence. My concern in this essay is not *what is* the best case for Christian theism, but how best to go about presenting the evidence for it. I am not suggesting there is one correct methodology nor that differing approaches from my own are futile, but I will attempt to discern which apologetic methodology makes for the best *possible* case for Christian theism based on two criteria: (1) how well it incorporates the evidence for the resurrection and (2) its potential efficacy amongst all types of audiences, whether scholarly or popular, believers or nonbelievers. First, I will briefly weigh four apologetic methodologies: Presuppositionalism, Classicalism, Evidentialism, and Cumulative Case. Second, I will evaluate three approaches to the evidence for the resurrection: historical reliability, minimal facts, and maximal facts. I will argue that classicalism coupled with the minimal facts approach best meets the two criteria, and I will conclude by outlining such a case.

## Presuppositionalism

According to presuppositionalists like Cornelius Van Til, reason and logic can only be accounted for on biblical Christianity; hence their view requires the presupposition of biblical Christianity, for without it apologetic discourse would be meaningless. By presupposing biblical Christianity, presuppositionalists circumvent the need to posit persuasive theistic arguments, directing their attention toward disproving other worldviews by showing their explanation of the source of logic and reason to be inadequate. Presuppositionalists concede their position to be circular. As John Frame explains, Christians ought to be critical of theologically heterogenous scholarship and test all hypotheses on the basis of Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 209. He also writes, "But are we not still forced to say, 'God exists (presupposition), therefore God exists (conclusion),' and isn't that argument clearly circular? Yes" (pg. 217). This is a clear example of begging the question, for what they (as in presuppositionalists) set out to prove is something they

## Classicalism

The two-step methodological framework of classical apologetics begins with the discipline of natural theology—providing philosophical (and sometimes scientific) arguments for and rebutting arguments against the existence of God. Thus it includes both positive and negative postures. Here the objective is to demonstrate a generic theism, displaying the fundamental properties ascribed to the concept of God (e.g., power, immateriality, spacelessness, timelessness, morality, and intelligence).<sup>2</sup> Historically this model was held by Thomas Aquinas, and William Lane Craig is a contemporary advocate. Once the first step has been established, the classicalist may then move on to step two: demonstrating *Christian* theism through Christian evidences—historical evidences addressing the reliability of the Gospels and the historicity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. By already having shown the plausibility of God’s existence (step one), the plausibility of the evidence for the resurrection has been strengthened given that miracles are indeed possible.

## Evidentialism

Evidential apologetics ignores the utilization of natural theology in apologetic endeavors, arguing strictly from Christian evidences (rejecting the first step of the classicalist methodology while upholding the second, and can be considered a “one-step” approach). When persuasively performed, the Christian particularistic conclusions sought by the evidentialist *entail* the generic theistic conclusions from natural theology, which bypasses the requirement of philosophical inquiry. To be clear, evidentialists do not outright reject the postulation of natural theological arguments, rather they find them unnecessary, as their

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already assume is true. Moreover, I will not have the wherewithal in this brief essay to explicate the full epistemological model for each of these apologetics methodologies, nor will I be able to discuss responses to my objections when selecting the preferred methodology.

<sup>2</sup> It is not obvious that God’s existence is even partially demonstrable through philosophical arguments, let alone anything remotely comparable to entirely, insofar as humans are limited and God is *wholly other*. Many theologians have fought this notion. While I cannot deal with this issue here, the classicalist may show or presuppose that God’s existence is at least partially demonstrable through philosophical arguments, possibly arguing that incorporating the study of logic, ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics is consistent with the biblical affirmation of natural theology.

apologetic approach is empathically Christocentric.<sup>3</sup> Gary Habermas points out that evidentialists may employ philosophical and scientific arguments at times, as they regularly engage in negative apologetics.<sup>4</sup>

### Cumulative Case

While classicalism and the “cumulative case” approach are both cumulative in nature, in order to build a cumulative defense of Christian theism, the latter emphasizes the advantage of enforcing arguments and evidences from a wide array of sources—philosophy, theology, history, science, and subjective experience (none of which take priority over another). This can also be referred to as *an inference to the best explanation*.<sup>5</sup> Not only is its versatility attractive, but a successful refutation of a single argument necessitates only the removal of that particular argument from one’s cumulative case, not the rejection of the conclusion of Christian theism. By deriving the value of the conclusion from the diversity and range of arguments rather than from any individual argument, each individual argument plays only a complementary role. This provides an appealing flexibility to customize an apologetic case per the efficacy of that particular person or audience, whether popular or scholarly.<sup>6</sup>

### Selecting An Apologetic Methodology

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph M. Holden, *The Comprehensive Guide to Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2018), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 95. Again, negative apologetics is the exercise of refuting objections to Christian theism.

<sup>5</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, “Cumulative Case Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 151. The real difference between classicalism and cumulative case is found in their objectives. The objective of the former is to first “prove” theism and second to “prove” Christian theism. There is no set number of arguments that it takes to accomplish either. And the latter objective is to raise the probability of the conclusion that Christian theism is true by successfully adding various arguments and evidences. The aim is not a conclusion that follows logically or necessarily, but one that follows by inference or best explaining the data.

<sup>6</sup> Reformed epistemology is another notable approach. The position of reformed epistemologists is that belief in God, similar to other basic beliefs we hold about ourselves and the world around us such as the reality of the external world or consciousness, does not require arguments and evidence in order to be considered rational. Do not confuse this with the notion that arguments and evidence are pointless. In fact, many reformed epistemologists, most notably Alvin Plantinga, do provide rational arguments for God’s existence. Since reformed epistemology is compatible with the four views above, I will not consider it a fifth approach to apologetics.

Our objective is to select one apologetic methodology based on its potential to meet our criteria: *(1) how well it incorporates the evidence for the resurrection and (2) its efficacy amongst any given audience.* Presupposing the biblical worldview provides a beneficial starting point for the Christian apologist, however, by inherently adopting a biased historical methodology, the presuppositionalist has made himself antithetical to an honest critical-historical examination of the historicity of the resurrection. Far from successfully incorporating the evidence for the resurrection, presuppositionalism does not even attempt to do so, neither will it be well received by skeptical audiences. Worse, even if the presuppositionalist were to demonstrate that Christianity is coherent and that all non-Christian worldviews are incoherent, it does not necessarily follow that Christianity is true, as coherency is not a sufficient condition for concluding the truth of a proposition.<sup>7</sup> Presuppositionalism therefore meets neither criteria and can be considered heavily flawed.

Although it is well-suited to compose a compelling historical case for the resurrection, evidentialism is undeniably unidimensional, which subsequently produces three shortcomings: apologetic inquirers who desire philosophical argumentation will likely be unsatisfied; it leaves all theistic conclusions vulnerable to a potentially impotent or biased historical case; and its failure to address metaphysical commitments such as naturalism leaves many automatically unpersuaded. Its failure to establish the existence of God from philosophical reasoning beforehand will limit its overall historical value, particularly related to the possibility of miracles. According to Jonathan McLatchie, an evidentialist, “it does not follow that miracles are impossible unless there is an independent demonstration of God’s existence.... And any non-zero prior probability can in principle be overcome given sufficient evidence.”<sup>8</sup> I concur that evidentialism does not effectively preclude the possibility of miracles, but why

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan McLatchie, “Why I Am an Evidentialist: A Brief Appraisal of Apologetic Systems” (2020).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan McLatchie, “Why I Am an Evidentialist: A Brief Appraisal of Apologetic Systems,” (2020). McLatchie basically admits that it would be easier to argue for a miracle if God’s existence is shown to be plausible. Nevertheless he rightly points out that although the possibility of a miracle occurring without first showing that God exists is weaker, it is not a zero probability, that is, impossible. And since it is non-zero, the evidentialist can give sufficient evidence to raise the non-zero probability.

willingly absorb a higher burden proof? For if the existence of God is established prior to the evidence presented for the resurrection, it raises the level of plausibility for a supernatural hypothesis, namely, the resurrection, because it has already been shown that miracles are indeed possible. Craig rightly says that “Christian evidences will be most effective when combined with arguments of natural theology,” and vice versa.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, I argue that the two remaining methodologies—classicalism and cumulative case—meet the first criterion—incorporating the evidence for the resurrection—to a greater extent than evidentialism.

Inasmuch as both appeal to scholarly and lay audiences, the deciding factor will be how well both methodologies incorporate the evidence for the resurrection. Given that cumulative case apologetics fails to prioritize any particular argument, it potentially weakens the unique persuasive strength of the resurrection hypothesis when placed amongst relatively weak arguments, thus only partially meeting the first criteria. The primary objection to classicalism seems to be that its first step is not necessary, although even evidentialists concede that it may be helpful.<sup>10</sup> This precisely establishes my point: classicalism has greater potential as an apologetic and pertaining to the resurrection case. By already demonstrating God’s existence from natural theology, it incorporates the evidence for the resurrection to the greatest degree possible and is to be favored over a cumulative case. Classicalism is henceforth the best equipped apologetic methodology to produce the strongest case for Christian theism.

### **Historical Reliability**

Now that we have concluded an apologetic methodology, we may now ask which approach to the evidence for the resurrection is best suited for persuading popular and scholarly audiences of both

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<sup>9</sup> William Lane Craig, “Evidential Apologetics: A Classical Apologist’s Response,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 127-128. Michael Licona affirms this perspective: “if a supernatural being wanted to raise Jesus from the dead [i.e., if one first shows that such a being does exist], [the resurrection hypothesis] is the most plausible explanation for the relevant historical bedrock” (Licona, 602).

<sup>10</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “Classical Apologetics: An Evidentialist’s Response,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 60.

believers and skeptics. Among these options are the historical reliability approach, minimal facts case, and, less proclaimed, maximal facts case. Scholars who take the historical reliability approach build a case for the resurrection hypothesis by setting out to show first that the New Testament *documents are authentic*, and second that the New Testament *authors are reliable*. Authenticity is demonstrated with three lines evidence: extant manuscript copies, ancient literary comparison, and source dating.<sup>11</sup>

Reliability is similarly shown in three steps: integrity of the witnesses, sanity of the writers, and accurate testimony verified by independent sources.<sup>12</sup> If both the documents and the authors are proven reliable, then the New Testament content, including the resurrection hypothesis, would be inferably verified.

### Minimal Facts

Most notably utilized by Habermas and Michael Licona, a minimal facts apologist builds a compelling case for the resurrection hypothesis by compiling a set of strict facts called the *historical bedrock*, granted by meeting two criteria: (a) the fact is strongly evidenced and (b) relevant contemporary scholars nearly unanimously regard it as a historical fact.<sup>13</sup> Any conclusion must account for those set of facts. The minimalist case is structured in two simple steps: (1) establish a set of facts that meet criteria (a) and (b); and (2) argue that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation for the historical bedrock.<sup>14</sup> The minimal facts approach safeguards against common objections made about peripheral issues not pertaining to the historical bedrock. For instance, if the objector posits that contradictory Gospel accounts exist, rendering the inerrancy of Scripture untenable, a minimal facts case is unaffected so long as it

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<sup>11</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1976), 305. The famous theologian and apologist, Norman Geisler, can be clearly seen as taking this approach in his excursus on Christian apologetics.

<sup>12</sup> Norman L. Geisler, 314.

<sup>13</sup> Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 278. Habermas has referred to near unanimous consent as something to the effect of a ‘ninety-something’ percentile.

<sup>14</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics (Third Edition)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 350.

makes no affirmation of such. Predicating such stringent criteria of meeting a historical bedrock fact constitutes a much more difficult historical case to refute.

### **Maximal Facts**

Less well-known than the other two, the maximal facts case for the resurrection, unlike a minimal facts case, takes no issue with using non-historical bedrock facts for supporting evidence. Hence the maximalist approach expands its evidence for a historical case for the resurrection. Each additional supporting evidence will not have anywhere near scholarly consensus, and they are typically less strongly evidenced than the minimal facts, which subjects them to stronger criticism. Nevertheless, the two most famous maximalists, McLatchie and Lydia McGrew, believe the additional evidence still presents a more compelling overall case.

### **Selecting a Historical Approach**

To reiterate, I would not be so bold as to say one approach is *always* more effective than the others. Notwithstanding, showing the reliability of the Gospels, let alone the entire New Testament documents, is not a pain-free task, dare I say untenable. So much so that to place ones entire case for the resurrection solely on its reliability is intuitively problematic, making it an unideal approach. Moreover, the approach typically begs the question. Norman Geisler is guilty of this in several places, one of which is when he attempts to rule out hallucination theories by elucidating six factors in support of the sanity of the eyewitnesses, of which at least four presume the truthfulness of the New Testament—which is what he sets out to prove.<sup>15</sup> Coupled with the fact that this approach generally does not appear in scholarly realms, I consider it less effective than its competing models.

The choice between minimal and maximal facts cases will depend on (a) does a case for the resurrection require additional facts, and (b) do these additional facts make a case more effective amongst

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<sup>15</sup> Norman Geisler, 316.



all types audiences? (a) is fairly easy to answer, for many minimal facts apologists have provided good cases without the use of additional (second-order) facts. Michael Licona concluded, after weighing six hypotheses against the historical criteria and corresponding to his three minimal facts, that the five non-resurrection hypotheses are considerably ‘weak’ and the resurrection hypothesis is ‘very certain.’<sup>16</sup> If one finds Licona’s minimal case unpersuasive based on historical analysis rather than philosophical presupposition, let him come forward. (b) however is not so quickly settled.

Between minimal and maximal cases, the key disagreement concerns the importance of scholarly consensus, particularly in that minimalists frame the fact (or leave out certain facts) so as to avoid peripheral details that would not be agreed upon by diverse scholars. Maximalists see this as ‘watering down’ the facts surrounding the resurrection; minimalists see this framework as a virtue. A typical minimalist case would frame the disciples’ appearance-claims simply as claims that the risen Jesus had appeared to them, while not explicating what kind of appearances they claimed to have had. The maximalist will find this insufficient, as McGrew writes, “If all we are going to assert and seek to explain is the claim that Jesus’ disciples had *some kind* of visual experiences soon after his death that they took to be appearances of the risen Jesus, ... and involving no senses other than sight, then the case for the resurrection is gravely weakened.”<sup>17</sup> I believe McGrew’s conclusion to be flawed, for minimalists do not dismiss the bodily nature of the resurrection appearances, in fact, that is precisely what they argue for. Where McGrew goes wrong is in her lack of methodological differentiation between a historical fact and a historical conclusion or hypothesis. Facts are not hypotheses; hypotheses are predicated upon facts. The *kinds* of resurrection appearances that occurred are deductions from the historical fact that the disciples claimed to have had appearances. While the minimal *fact* does not include such details, minimalists’ *hypotheses* do! The hypothesis is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and appeared to various followers

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Licona, 607. Interestingly, minimal facts cases themselves can contain a few more or less facts; generally ranging from three to twelve minimal facts. Licona gives three facts in his historical bedrock, Habermas is anywhere from six and twelve. Which kind of minimal facts approach is utilized is not consequential for this essay, although I gravitate towards a condensed version, as the reader will see.

<sup>17</sup> McGrew, Lydia. “Minimal Facts vs. Maximal Data” (2020).

bodily. They arrive at their conclusion by accounting for the minimal facts and assessing it by the historical criteria of explanatory power, explanatory scope, ad hocness, and plausibility. If one places the kind of appearance within the fact itself, as in the bodily nature of the resurrection appearances, the revised fact will require sufficient evidence, which, I believe, is quite difficult to show without presupposing Scripture.

On a minimal case, because the Christian and skeptic have already agreed on a set of facts, they need only dispute the hypotheses. Excluding additional facts (what Habermas called the ‘lowest common denominator’ version of facts), as expounded in Licona’s work, increases the likelihood of getting critical scholars on board, and it bypasses unnecessary preliminary discussion.<sup>18</sup> Far from a weakness as in McGrew’s view, I argue scholarly consensus positively reinforces a case for the resurrection. On the maximal case, the very facts themselves along with their hypotheses must be disputed. Using facts that do not have near scholarly consensus only expands disagreement to the detriment of one’s case. Therefore, does simply adding relatively weaker historical facts establish a more effective case for the resurrection? I cannot see how it does for *all* audiences. I therefore conclude that the most effective way to present a case for the resurrection amongst all audiences is by first establishing a set of facts that even skeptics will affirm, and then arguing how the resurrection hypothesis explains those facts to a greater degree than its competing hypotheses.

### **Conclusion**

I have provided solid grounds for thinking that the apologetic approach with the greatest utilization of and that which may provide the most effective case from the evidence from the resurrection is classicalism followed by a minimal facts case. Allow me to demonstrate this. Following the two-step methodology, the apologist must first show a general monotheism to be most plausible. To do so I would first posit the Leibnizian Cosmological argument, showing that God is the best explanation for why

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<sup>18</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus: The Role of Methodology as a Crucial Component in Establishing Historicity” (2012), 16-17.

anything exists rather than nothing; then the Kalam Cosmological argument, establishing a personal First Cause of the universe; I would then show why this First Cause must have certain designer properties by presenting Teleological arguments from fine-tuning; lastly, the Moral argument for God's existence to display God's moral properties; and rebut any objections. Together these arguments provide a cumulative case for thinking that the First Cause of the universe is supremely intelligent and powerful, immaterial, transcendent of classical spacetime, equipped with moral properties, and personal.

Now that a generic theism has been demonstrated, thus eliminating polytheistic and pantheistic worldviews, a minimal facts case may be given for the resurrection of Jesus—the second step of the classicalist methodology. Keep in mind that according to standard historical bedrock criteria these facts must be affirmed by nearly all relevant scholars and must be strongly evidenced. I prefer these facts: (1) Jesus died by crucifixion; (2) some of Jesus' followers claimed to have had experiences of the risen Jesus; (3) Paul, an enemy of the Christian faith, had an experience which he interpreted as an appearance of the risen Jesus; (4) the apostles sincerely believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead and were suddenly willing to die for that belief; (5) Jesus's resurrection was preached very early and was central to the early Christian message. After fairly representing competing hypotheses, I would subsequently argue that the best explanation for these facts alone based on explanatory scope, explanatory power, degree of ad hocness, and plausibility is the resurrection hypothesis. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus is maintained with a very high degree of probability. The strength of the case at hand is its clarity, succinctness, high probability, its comprehensibility for popular audiences in addition to scholarly ones, and its engagement with skeptical audiences. I have shown why the classicalist methodology and the minimal facts case for the resurrection is the most effective apologetic methodology, and I have demonstrated how this apologetic approach could be presented.

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