

Eyewitness Testimony and Personal Experience as Evidence

by Jason Limbaugh

Why do I believe Christianity to be true?

For one to be persuaded that anything is true does require a modicum of reason. However, contrary to the assertion of contemporary rationalists, the Christian's line of reasoning does not need to be anything like the convergence of a million streams of evidence into a single super-strand of incontrovertible proof. Really, very little in life that we believe and act upon has this much going for it at any particular moment.

When we reflect for just a second, what do we find? That most of those things we "believe rationally" are so believed on the basis of only two primary streams of evidence: eyewitness testimony and subjective experience. In the case of the sciences or courts of law, we often find that people are deemed to have "believed rationally" on the basis of eyewitness testimony alone. Having never participated in the actual study or seen the research or observed the actual event, we believe on the basis of someone else's testimony.

So one stream of evidence, in some cases two, suffices for the rationalist, while he forces the theist to produce an ever-lengthening list of evidences. With each piece of evidence provided an additional piece of evidence is demanded, and no evidence ever warrants the slightest consideration. To be rational, all the rationalist needs is a peer-reviewed study in his hand. He needs not have participated. He needs not have seen the research or the conditions with his own eyes. But for the theist to be rational, the absolute and unalterable requirement is God before our eyes in a Petri dish.

The Christian, though, happens to have both streams of evidence in his favor – and this makes him supremely rational and his beliefs entirely defensible. In fact, the power of these two streams should turn the tables and put the rationalist on the defensive. If it does not, the Christian should not "try harder," but pray - because he is not dealing with hard headedness, but spiritual deception. Sometimes all the powers of reason will not alone straighten out a crooked mind.

How is it that the Christian has these two sufficient streams of evidence? As a child, my parents warned me against touching the eye of the stove. Their eyewitness testimony was extremely compelling, as most credible eyewitness testimony always is. Then came my own subjective experience with intense heat.

Now, I might find the science behind heat and the neurological functions that cause pain fascinating, but I don't need to understand the science of either to rationally believe that I shouldn't touch the eye of the stove again. Eyewitness testimony and subjective experience provide a perfectly good rationale for that belief.

In the New Testament, we have solid eyewitness testimony concerning Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, God in the flesh. John the apostle, says of Jesus Christ, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at, and our hands have touched." (1 John 1:1) He wants the reader to be clear that he knew Jesus Christ personally. That he heard Jesus, saw Him, touched Him, knew Him to be dead, and saw Him after His resurrection. As did all the apostles. Why should we believe their testimony? *Their sufferings* legitimize their claims. These apostles for the Lord lost all and suffered horribly for their message. We also know from our understanding of Roman dealings that they could have been relieved of all of it by simply saying, "You know what...it was all a hoax. We never saw him alive after he came down from the cross. We paid off the guards at his tomb and we carried his body away." (A preposterous idea anyway, if one realizes what would have gone into rolling the stone away and the risk the guards would have been putting themselves at – even more so had the official story that the guards were asleep been true. Execution came easy in those days.)

We also have our own subjective experience. Jesus said, "I have made you (the Father) known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for Me may be in them and that *I myself may be in them.*" (John 17:26)

We have the subjective experience of Jesus Christ indwelling us. If the Creator of the universe took up residence in your mortal body, don't you think you would know it? Our personal experience with God Himself, in addition to reliable eyewitness testimony, grants us a solid backbone of rational belief that we have come to know the true God. At the moment we called on the name of Jesus Christ, we knew Him and we knew "Christ in us, the hope of glory."

Atheist Sam Harris would call this a leftover of evolution – a neurological firing in the religious centers of the brain. He wouldn't dispute your subjective experience. He would dispute your interpretation of it. But when else do we normally do this? Should I dispute my subjective experience when it tells me the eye of the stove is hot as well?

Two things to consider here. First, while our senses can deceive us, generally we trust them. Unless we have *done* something abnormal to alter them (like taking hallucinogenic drugs) or we are in a situation in which *unusual external circumstances* are momentarily interfering (as in the case of a mirage), our senses are to be *trusted*. So much so that if you ignore your senses you'll probably wind up in the hospital or dead very quickly.

Second, those who have experienced God subjectively will testify that it is really not sensory at all, by the normal definition. It is spiritual. It is probably nothing at all like a Sam Harris imagines it to be, as it bypasses the physical almost entirely – with the exception that the experience happens within the borders of one's own being.

And, again, let's not forget to couple this with the testimony of those who saw Jesus alive after His crucifixion, remembering their lack of motive for propagating the message and their good reason to abandon it.

Now, these things are nothing new. So why do I bring them up? One, because the enterprise of apologetics is getting too bogged down in the art of defense. As such, it is becoming nothing more than a branch of philosophy. The more it does so, the less relevant it is as an actual evangelistic tool. Two, because it is easy to forget that we have very compelling reasons for belief tied to our simple testimony which are actually easy to communicate to *honest* people. I am not saying these things will win an unbeliever on the spot, but they should give anyone with an open mind pause.