

Jesus!

“Receiving the Ministry of Jesus Christ” (Luke 11:14-36)

Take a first look.

Jesus’ ministry evoked amazement, opposition, and skepticism. How have we received His work in this time and place?

I. *Contact*, a movie based on a novel by Carl Sagan, focuses on an ambitious astronomer, Ellie Arroway, played by Jodie Foster, who is convinced there is life on other planets. Nearly everyone ridicules Ellie for the tireless hours she spends listening for signals sent by little green men in outer space. This all changes, however, when Ellie discerns a pattern in a radio signal from another galaxy. The possibility of extraterrestrials is a reality, and the world looks to her for answers.

While Ellie never doubted that extraterrestrial life existed, even when there wasn’t proof, she never believed and continues to not believe that God exists. As a child, she disrupted her Sunday school classes with cheeky demands for proof of God. When her beloved father dies and she is left an orphan, Ellie’s doubt is ironclad. As an adult, not even the country’s most venerated theologian, Palmer Joss, played by Matthew McConaughey, can scrape away her skepticism.

Ellie and Palmer’s paths frequently cross during the weeks in which dignitaries meet to discuss the pros and cons of responding to the extraterrestrial message detected by Ellie. At a White House gathering, Ellie and Palmer, friends by this time, step outside to philosophize about the existence of God. In an attempt to shake Palmer’s faith, Ellie proposes that they follow scientific rationale to resolve their dispute.

Believing that she’ll be able to stump Palmer, Ellie says, “Hey, I got one for you.”

Palmer asks, “What do ya’ got?”

“Occam’s razor,” Ellie replies. “Have you ever heard of it?”

Palmer responds, “Hackem’s razor. It sounds like some slasher movie.”

Ellie’s countenance exudes confidence. “No. Occam’s razor,” she corrects him. “It’s a basic scientific principle. And it says all things being equal, the simplest explanation has to be the right one.”

“Makes sense to me,” Palmer answers.

Lightheartedly, Ellie presents the enigma. “All right. So what’s more likely: that an all-powerful, mysterious God created the universe and then decided not to give any proof of his existence, or that he simply doesn’t exist at all and that we created him so that we wouldn’t have to feel so small and alone?”

Palmer seriously considers the conundrum and stoically replies, “I don’t know. I couldn’t imagine living in a world where God didn’t exist. You know, I wouldn’t want to.”

Ellie asks, “How do you know you’re not deluding yourself?” And with a huff, she declares, “For me, I need proof.”

Palmer pauses, and then responds, “Proof. Did you love your father?”

Surprised by the intimate question, Ellie gasps, “What?”

“Your dad, did you love him?”

Ellie quickly replies, “Yes, very much.”

Looking intensely into her eyes, Palmer says, “Prove it.”¹

II. THE ATTITUDE OF ELLIE ARROWAY IS NOT UNUSUAL IN OUR TIME. “I need proof,” says the thoroughly modern person. But this is a sidetrack to the real issue of making a response to the God

¹ *Contact*, (Warner Brothers, 1997), rated PG, written by James V. Hart and Michael Goldenberg, directed by Robert Zemeckis; submitted by Melissa Parks, Des Plaines, Illinois.

Who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ as “full of grace and truth,” as John records in John 1:14.

III. JESUS FACED JUST SUCH A SPIRIT IN HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY. When His power was displayed in the healing of a demon possessed person, the responses were ranged from amazement and awe to serious opposition to wary skepticism.

In fact, they weren't too different then than they are now! Let's look together as a slice of Luke's telling of Jesus' story and learn some important lessons about receiving the ministry of Jesus Christ in our time.

Take a closer look at Luke 11:14-16 (at this point).

I. JESUS' MINISTRY IS RECEIVED WITH MIXED REVIEWS. Vv. 14-16

1. *Jesus' ministry was received with amazement. When Jesus drove out a demon that had left a man unable to speak, the crowd was amazed.* This was a standard response of “the crowds.” They simply were amazed that a man could perform such acts of power. Here was a genuine miracle right before their eyes. A man who couldn't speak, who was obviously deranged (these folks had no trouble believing that the man was under the power of a demon), now was healed. He could speak. I imagine (we are not told) that his first words were words of praise to God for what He had done for him through Jesus Christ.

A—This is a good start, but it is certainly not the same as faith. I suggest that many people believe that people's lives have been changed because of Jesus Christ, but their amazement at the change goes no further.

I—Here is the challenge of the message of Jesus Christ to every other idea or person or object that seeks to be ultimate. Jesus not only does amazing things, He is the Son of God to Whom we owe our highest allegiance. The late novelist Flannery O'Connor recognized the despair and unbelief of so many people in the English-speaking world. She wrote, “One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for.”²

These are the people we are trying to lead to Christ today through our living, our speaking, and our writing. They may be amazed, but they still haven't come to recognize Jesus as “the way and the truth and the life” (cf. John 14:6) and so they can't receive the benefit of His transforming work in their hearts until they believe this, too.

2. *Jesus' ministry was received with opposition. Some people, who watched the transforming power of Jesus' work in the demon-possessed man, accused Jesus of being under the power of “Beelzebub, the prince of demons.”* At this point, Jesus' power was recognized, but the source of His power was denied. These folks dismissed Jesus by saying that His power only came from the devil and not from God.

3. *Jesus' ministry was received with skepticism. Still others were doubtful and cautious, asking Jesus for a sign from heaven.* They didn't deny the change that had taken place in the man; they just wanted more “proof.”

² Flannery O'Connor in *The Habit of Being. Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, no. 10.

A—How have we responded to the ministry of Jesus Christ? Have we seen His power to change lives described in the pages of Scripture? Have we seen His transforming power at work in a human life? Will we simply be amazed? Will we try to come up with some alternate explanation? Will we demand more proof before we submit our own hearts and lives to Him?

I—In his book, *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel tells the story of a man named William Neal Moore. His story is nothing short of an evidence of amazing grace. But let's make one more observation before we look at it more closely.

II. JESUS' MINISTRY SHOULD BE RECEIVED AS EVIDENCE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD. Vv. 17-23

1. Jesus said that "a house divided against itself will fall," so He could only be empowered by God not Satan to drive out demons. Vv. 17-20. Jesus pressed the logical absurdity of claiming that power from Satan would actually enable Him to drive out demons. This would be a contradiction, because Satan's very purpose in human life is to capture, not to set free. But if that is logically inconsistent, then the only conclusion to be drawn is what Jesus states in v. 20: "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you."

2. *The kingdom of God demonstrates a superior power to that of Satan.* Vv. 21-23. The strong man can guard his house all he wants until a stronger one comes against him. In this case, it is Jesus Christ, God's very Son, Who is bringing His liberating assault against the heart where Satan's demons are dwelling. He is the "Someone stronger" needed to set people free, and to show them His way and truth and give them His spiritual life.

A—This is the primary purpose for the miracles of Jesus. They are meant to point people resolutely and unequivocally to Him as the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

I—This is just what the story of William Neal Moore demonstrates. At the time of the publication of the book *A Case for Faith*, Moore was a pastor in Rome, Georgia. Lee Strobel described him as "at once shy and warm, gentle and sincere, winsome and loving." His very smile made Strobel feel welcome when he met him.

But that man—which Strobel also called "a doting father, a devoted husband, a faithful provider, a hardworking employee, a man of compassion and prayer who spends his spare time helping hurting people who everyone else seems to have forgotten"—had not always been this way. In May of 1984 he was sitting in the deathwatch cell at the Georgia State Penitentiary with seventy-two hours left before he was a "dead man walking" to the electric chair just down the hall.

He admitted to the crime for which he was facing the death penalty. He had gotten drunk and broken into the house of seventy-seven-year-old Fredger Stapleton, to steal the cash that Stapleton was alleged to have kept in his bedroom. From behind a door, Stapleton had let loose with a shotgun blast which Moore had answered with a pistol. Stapleton was killed instantly, Moore fled with \$5,600 and was caught with it the next morning.

After being sentenced to death for his crime, two church leaders visited him in prison at the behest of his mother. They told Moore about the mercy and hope that were available through Jesus Christ.

"Nobody had ever told me that Jesus loves me and died for me," Moore explained to Strobel. "It was a love I could feel. It was a love I wanted. It was a love I *needed*." Moore said yes to Christ's free gift of forgiveness and eternal life, was promptly baptized in a small tub that was used by prison trustees, and his life was changed.

Moore had sat on death row for 16 years. He became something of a missionary to the inmates at Georgia State Penitentiary. He led Bible studies, conducted prayer sessions, and took dozens of Bible courses by correspondence. He counseled and guided his fellow inmates. He won the forgiveness of his victim's family. He became known as "The Peacemaker," because his cell block was such a model of safety, quiet and orderliness, largely because it was inhabited by mostly men Moore had led to Jesus Christ.

Mother Teresa even campaigned for his pardon. The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* described him as "a saintly figure." To the surprise of everyone, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Parole actually voted in those last couple of days to commute his sentence to life imprisonment and then later, to everyone's astonishment, they pardoned him. On November 8, 1991, he was released.

When Strobel interviewed him, he pressed Moore to say what the difference was that had so changed his life. He stated, "'Plain and simple, it was Jesus Christ,' he declared adamantly. 'He changed me in ways I could never have changed on my own. He gave me a reason to live. He helped me do the right thing. He gave me a heart for others. He saved my soul.'"³

What a powerful modern witness to the power of Jesus Christ to transform a man's life forever! But how will we respond to such a story? Will we simply be amazed? Will we try to find some alternate explanation so "the God principle" doesn't have to be invoked? Will we be skeptical and demand more proof?

III. JESUS' MINISTRY SHOULD BE RECEIVED WITH OBEDIENCE. Vv. 24-28

1. To be passive in regard to Jesus is to be against Him. We can't be passive in this matter. Either we are for Him or against Him; either we remain enslaved to Satan and his diabolical purposes or we are free in Jesus Christ to live with joy and purpose as He intends.

2. To be empty in regard to Jesus is to be vulnerable to a worse evil. Jesus said that simply getting rid of Satan's influence is not enough. An empty soul is only temporary relief. Emptiness will be filled with something. And if that something, or Someone, is not the Spirit of God indwelling the soul as a result of faith in Jesus Christ, the end can be much worse than the beginning for that person. Note vv. 24-26.

3. To be blessed in regard to Jesus is to both "hear the word of God and obey it." Jesus' own mother could not be blessed more than the simple disciple of Jesus who hears and obeys His eternal word.

A—Are we willing to take the next step, to overcome our distance of simple amazement, to get past our temptations to explain away Jesus Christ, or to submit our doubts to the evidence of Christ and to put our obedient faith in Him?

I—One of the men that Lee Strobel had met while Lee still claimed to be an atheist was a man named Ron Bronski. When he heard of him, he was still working as a journalist covering the criminal courts in Chicago. He found out from his contacts in the Gang Crimes Unit of Chicago P. D. That Bronski was a well-known thug, second in command for the Belaire gang in Chicago's Northwest Side.

He was described as a "sociopath" by one investigator, simply "garbage" by another. He was wanted on a charge of aggravated batter for shooting a rival gang member in the back. When Strobel followed up the lead given him about this man, a story of religion changing a person's life, Lee looked for Bronski in Portland, Oregon, where he was allegedly living. He called the pastor of his church and

³ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 256-59.

got this report: “Ron is one of the most beautiful, loving people I know.... He’s totally committed to Christ. We pray together several times a week, and he’s always doing things like visiting the sick and praying with them, using his street knowledge to preach to troubled kids. I guess people would call him a “Jesus freak....” He knew there was still a warrant out for his arrest ..., so he saved his money and took the train to Chicago to turn himself in.”⁴

Strobel found out that this was not some sort of scam, but that everyone, even the police detectives who had hunted for him and the prosecuting attorney who filed the charges against him, saw the amazing change in Bronski’s life. The judge set him free on probation. “‘Go home to your family,’ he told a surprised and grateful Bronski.”

Twenty years later Bronski was still a minister to street kids in the inner city of Portland and a close personal friend of Lee Strobel.

Are we willing to come to Christ with such obedient faith and allow Him to change our hearts and lives?

IV. JESUS’ MINISTRY SHOULD BE RECEIVED WITH PURE HEARTS. Vv. 29-36

1. *Jesus’ generation asked for a sign because it was a “wicked generation.”* They were not wicked for having honest doubts. They were wicked, and so they put up false objections to putting their faith in Him.

2. *Jesus challenged His hearers to have pure eyes and a soul full of light.* This meant that they would see the truth in Him and allow His light into their souls.

A—This is the same challenge for us today. We, too, must allow the eyes of our hearts to see the truth about Jesus Christ, to get over our artificial objections which are often smokescreens to ward off discipleship, and to turn to Him with confident faith.

I—This is what Jesus’ disciples did in His earthly generation. This is what William Moore did. This is what Ron Bronski did. This is ultimately what Lee Strobel did as God brought him from *atheist to agnostic to doubter to seeker to disciple to evangelist*.

This is why the stories of the New Testament are so helpful. God had transformed the lives of each of the writers. This is why Strobel’s books are helpful, too. He writes from the perspective of a transformed life.

Take it home (applications).

I. Will we respond to the ministry of Jesus Christ as God desires?

1. We must admit we need His spiritual and moral transformation.

2. We must believe in Jesus.

3. We must confess faith in Him by inviting Him into our lives and taking the step of baptism and church membership.

II. Will we allow God to transform our minds, our habits, our attitudes so that our lives become genuine evidence for His present reality and power?

⁴ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 223-25.