



# THE CASE FOR CHRIST

*A Journalist's Personal Investigation  
of the Evidence for Jesus*

LEE STROBEL

# **The Case For Christ**

**By: Lee Strobel**

Category: nonfiction religion

Synopsis:

The Case for Christ records Lee Strobel's attempt to "determine if there's credible evidence that Jesus of Nazareth really is the Son of God." The book consists primarily of interviews between Strobel (a former legal editor at the Chicago Tribune) and biblical scholars such as Bruce Metzger. Each interview is based on a simple question, concerning historical evidence (for example, "Can the Biographies of Jesus Be Trusted?"), scientific evidence, ("Does Archaeology Confirm or Contradict Jesus' Biographies?"), and "psychiatric evidence" ("Was Jesus Crazy When He Claimed to Be the Son of God?"). Together, these interviews compose a case brief defending Jesus' divinity, and urging readers to reach a verdict of their own.

Other books by Lee Strobel  
God's Outrageous Claims  
Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary  
What Jesus Would Say

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Finally, I'd like to thank the scholars who allowed me to interview them for this book. Again and again I was impressed not only by their knowledge and wisdom but also by their humble and sincere faith—as well as their desire to help spiritual seekers investigate the outrageous claims of Jesus.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### Reopening the Investigation of a Lifetime

In the parlance of prosecutors, the attempted murder case against James Dixon was "a dead-bang winner." Open and shut. Even a cursory examination of the evidence was enough to establish that Dixon shot police sergeant Richard Scanlon in the abdomen during a scuffle on Chicago's south side.

Piece by piece, item by item, witness by witness, the evidence tightened a noose around Dixon's neck. There were fingerprints and a weapon, eyewitnesses and a motive, a wounded cop and a defendant with a history of violence. Now the criminal justice system was poised to trip the trap door that would leave Dixon dangling by the weight of his own guilt.

The facts were simple. Sergeant Scanlon had rushed to West 108th Place after a neighbor called police to report a man with a gun. Scanlon arrived to find Dixon noisily arguing with his girlfriend through the front door of her house. Her father emerged when he saw Scanlon, figuring it was safe to come outside.

Suddenly a fight broke out between Dixon and the father. The sergeant quickly intervened in an attempt to break it up. A shot rang out; Scanlon staggered away, wounded in his midsection. Just then two other squad cars arrived, screeching to a halt, and officers ran over to restrain Dixon.

A .22-caliber gun belonging to Dixon—covered with his fingerprints and with one bullet having been fired—was found nearby, where he had apparently flung it after the shooting. The father had been unarmed; Scanlon's revolver remained in his holster.

Powder burns on Scanlon's skin showed that he had been shot at extremely close range.

Fortunately, his wound wasn't life-threatening, although it was serious enough to earn him a medal for bravery, proudly pinned on his chest by the police superintendent himself. As for Dixon, when police ran his rap sheet, they found he had previously been convicted of shooting someone else. Apparently, he had a propensity for violence.

And there I sat almost a year later, taking notes in a nearly deserted Chicago courtroom while Dixon publicly admitted that, yes, he was guilty of shooting the fifteen-year police veteran. On top of all the other evidence, the confession clinched it. Criminal court judge Frank Machala ordered Dixon imprisoned, then rapped his gavel to signal that the case was closed. Justice had been served.

I slipped my notebook into the inside pocket of my sports coat and erupted downstairs toward the press room. At the most, I figured my editor would give me three paragraphs to tell the story in the next day's Chicago Tribune. Certainly, that's all it deserved. This wasn't much of a tale.

Or so I thought.

#### THE WHISPER OF AN INFORMANT

I answered the phone in the pressroom and recognized the voice right away-it was an informant I had cultivated during the year I had been covering the criminal courts building. I could tell he had something hot for me, because the bigger the tip, the faster and softer he would talk-and he was whispering a mile a minute. "Lee, do you know that Dixon case?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure," I replied. "Covered it two days ago. Pretty routine." "Don't be so sure. The word is that a few weeks before the shooting, Sergeant Scanlon was at a party, showing off his pen gun." "His what?"

"A pen gun. It's a .22-caliber pistol that's made to look like a fountain pen. They're illegal for anyone to carry, including cops." When I told him I didn't see the relevance of this, his voice got even more animated. "Here's the thing: Dixon didn't shoot Scanlon. Scanlon was wounded when his own pen gun accidentally went off in his shirt pocket. He framed Dixon so he wouldn't get in trouble for carrying an unauthorized weapon. Don't you see? Dixon is innocent!" "Impossible!" I exclaimed.

"Check out the evidence yourself," came his reply. "See where it really points."

I hung up the phone and dashed up the stairs to the prosecutor's office, pausing briefly to catch my breath before strolling inside. "You know the Dixon case?" I asked casually, not wanting to tip my hand too early. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go over the details once more."

Color drained from his face. "Uh, I can't talk about it," he stammered. "No comment."

It turned out that my informant had already passed along his suspicions to the prosecutor's office. Behind the scenes, a grand jury was being convened to reconsider the evidence. Amazingly, unexpectedly, the once airtight case against James Dixon was being reopened. NEW FACTS FOR A NEW THEORY At the same time, I started my own investigation, studying the crime scene, interviewing witnesses, talking with Dixon, and examining the physical evidence. As I thoroughly checked out the case, the strangest thing happened: all the new facts that I uncovered-and even the old evidence that had once pointed so convincingly toward Dixon's guilt-snugly fit the pen gun theory.

Witnesses said that before Scanlon arrived on the scene, Dixon had been pounding his gun on the door of his girlfriend's house. The gun discharged in a downward direction; in the cement of the front porch there was a chip that was consistent with a bullet's impact. This would account for the bullet that was missing from Dixon's gun.

Dixon said he didn't want to be caught with a gun, so he hid it in some grass across the street before police arrived. I found a witness who corroborated that. This explained why the gun had been found some distance from the shooting scene even though nobody had ever seen Dixon throw it.

There were powder burns concentrated inside-but not above-the left pocket of Scanlon's shirt. The bullet hole was at the bottom of the pocket. Conclusion: a weapon had somehow discharged in the pocket's interior.

Contrary to statements in the police report, the bullet's trajectory had been at a downward angle. Below Scanlon's shirt pocket was a bloody rip where the bullet had exited after going through some flesh.

Dixon's rap sheet hadn't told the whole story about him.



Although he had spent three years in prison for an earlier shooting, the appellate court had freed him after determining that he had been wrongly convicted. It turns out that police had concealed a key defense witness and that a prosecution witness had lied. So much for Dixon's record of violent tendencies.

### **AN INNOCENT MAN IS FREED**

Finally I put the crucial question to Dixon: "If you were innocent, why in the world did you plead guilty?"

Dixon sighed. "It was a plea bargain," he said, referring to the practice in which prosecutors recommend a reduced sentence if a defendant pleads guilty and thus saves everybody the time and expense of a trial.

"They said if I pleaded guilty, they would sentence me to one year in prison. I'd already spent 362 days in jail waiting for my trial. All I had to do was admit I did it and I'd go home in a few days. But if I insisted on a trial and the jury found me guilty-well, they'd throw the book at me. They'd give me twenty years for shooting a cop. It wasn't worth the gamble. I wanted to go home...."

"And so," I said, "you admitted doing something that you didn't do." Dixon nodded. "That's right."

In the end Dixon was exonerated, and he later won a lawsuit against the police department. Scanlon was stripped of his medal, was indicted by a grand jury, pleaded guilty to official misconduct, and was fired from the department. As for me, my stories were splashed across the front page. Much more important, I had learned some big lessons as a young reporter.

One of the most obvious lessons was that evidence can be aligned to point in more than one direction. For example, there had easily been enough proof to convict Dixon of shooting the sergeant. But the key questions were these: Had the collection of evidence really been thorough? And which explanation best fit the totality of the facts? Once the pen gun theory was offered, it became clear that this scenario accounted for the full body of evidence in the most optimal way. And there was another lesson. One reason the evidence originally looked so convincing to me was because it fit my preconceptions at the time. To me, Dixon was an obvious troublemaker, a failure, the unemployed product of a broken family. The cops were the good guys. Prosecutors didn't

make mistakes.

Looking through those lenses, all the original evidence seemed to fall neatly into place. Where there had been inconsistencies or gaps,

I naively glossed them over. When police told me the case was airtight, I took them at their word and didn't delve much further.

But when I changed those lenses-trading my biases for an attempt at objectivity-I saw the case in a whole new light.

Finally I allowed the evidence to lead me to the truth, regardless of whether it fit my original presuppositions.

That was more than twenty years ago. My biggest lessons were yet to come.

## **FROM DIXON TO JESUS**

The reason I've recounted this unusual case is because in a way my spiritual journey has been a lot like my experience with James Dixon. For much of my life I was a skeptic. In fact, I considered myself an atheist. To me, there was far too much evidence that God was merely a product of wishful thinking, of ancient mythology, of primitive superstition. How could there be a loving God if he consigned people to hell just for not believing in him? How could miracles contravene the basic laws of nature? Didn't evolution satisfactorily explain how life originated? Doesn't scientific reasoning dispel belief in the supernatural?

As for Jesus, didn't you know that he never claimed to be God? He was a revolutionary, a sage, an iconoclastic Jew-but God? No, that thought never occurred to him! I could point you to plenty of university professors who said so-and certainly they could be trusted, couldn't they? Let's face it: even a cursory examination of the evidence demonstrates convincingly that Jesus had only been a human being just like you and me, although with unusual gifts of kindness and wisdom.

But that's all I had ever really given the evidence: a cursory look. I had read just enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism-a fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument. Sure, I could see some gaps and inconsistencies, but I had a strong motivation to ignore them: a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to

abandon if I were ever to change my views and become a follower of Jesus.

As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought.

### **ANSWERS FOR AN ATHEIST**

It wasn't a phone call from an informant that prompted me to reexamine the case for Christ. It was my wife.

Leslie stunned me in the autumn of 1979 by announcing that she had become a Christian. I rolled my eyes and braced for the worst, feeling like the victim of a bait-and-switch scam. I had married one Leslie-the fun Leslie, the carefree Leslie, the risk-taking Leslie and now I feared she was going to turn into some sort of sexually repressed prude who would trade our upwardly mobile lifestyle for all-night prayer vigils and volunteer work in grimy soup kitchens. Instead I was pleasantly surprised-even fascinated-by the

fundamental changes in her character, her integrity, and her personal confidence. Eventually I wanted to get to the bottom of what was prompting these subtle but significant shifts in my wife's attitudes, so I launched an all-out investigation into the facts surrounding the case for Christianity.

Setting aside my self-interest and prejudices as best I could, I read books, interviewed experts, asked questions, analyzed history, explored archaeology, studied ancient literature, and for the first time in my life picked apart the Bible verse by verse.

I plunged into the case with more vigor than with any story I had ever pursued. I applied the training I had received at Yale Law School as well as my experience as legal affairs editor of the Chicago Tribune. And over time the evidence of the world-of history, of science, of philosophy, of psychology -began to point toward the unthinkable.

It was like the James Dixon case revisited.

### **JUDGING FOR YOURSELF**

Maybe you too have been basing your spiritual outlook on the evidence you've observed around you or gleaned long ago from

books, college professors, family members, or friends. But is your conclusion really the best possible explanation for the evidence? If you were to dig deeper-to confront your preconceptions and systematically seek out proof-what would you find?

That's what this book is about. In effect, I'm going to retrace and expand upon the spiritual journey I took for nearly two years. I'll take you along as I interview thirteen leading scholars and authorities who have impeccable academic credentials.

I have crisscrossed the country-from Minnesota to Georgia, from Virginia to California-to elicit their expert opinions, to challenge them with the objections I had when I was a skeptic, to force them to defend their positions with solid data and cogent arguments, and to test them with the very questions that you might ask if given the opportunity.

In this quest for truth, I've used my experience as a legal affairs journalist to look at numerous categories of proof-eyewitness evidence, documentary evidence, corroborating evidence, rebuttal evidence, scientific evidence, psychological evidence, circumstantial evidence, and, yes, even fingerprint evidence (that sounds intriguing, doesn't it?).

These are the same classifications that you'd encounter in a courtroom. And maybe taking a legal perspective is the best way to envision this process-with you in the role of a juror.

If you were selected for a jury in a real trial, you would be asked to affirm up front that you haven't formed any preconceptions about the case. You would be required to vow that you would be openminded and fair, drawing your conclusions based on the weight of the facts and not on your whims or prejudices. You would be urged to thoughtfully consider the credibility of the witnesses, carefully sift the testimony, and rigorously subject the evidence to your common sense and logic. I'm asking you to do the same thing while reading this book.

Ultimately it's the responsibility of jurors to reach a verdict.

That doesn't mean they have one-hundred-percent certainty, because we can't have absolute proof about anything in life. In a trial, jurors are asked to weigh the evidence and come to the best possible conclusion. In other words, harkening back to the James Dixon case, which scenario fits the facts most snugly?



















































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































































