

Bishop Takes Prawn: The Great Easter Debate

April 11 2001

Civic Centre, Springwood NSW

The topic: "That the evidence that Jesus is alive is stronger than the evidence that He is still dead."

For: Bishop Robert Forsyth (Anglican Church)

Against: Richard Lead (Australian Skeptics)

My first reaction, when I heard about the topic of this debate, was 'Why have it at all? Why do the churches in the Springwood area want to hold a debate on what for them is a non-question? What could they gain? After it was all over, I was still wondering.

I think it is important to state, even though this point has been made many times in these pages over the years, that the Australian Skeptics hold no position on religious faith. People from any and all religions are welcome in the Skeptics at any time. However, the magic word 'evidence' was used in the topic of the debate and the search for evidence is our bread and butter.

I made my way to Springwood with Richard Lead who was kind enough to offer me a ride. On the way we discussed why the churches would want such a debate. Could they produce evidence apart from the biblical reference? Richard didn't think so.

Once at the Springwood civic centre, I found myself a good spot and

the crowd was 350 or so; a full house. What follows is only a brief overview of the case put forward by both sides, mentioning only a few of the key points and themes.

After a short introduction of both speakers by the Mayor of the Blue Mountains Shire, Jim Angel, Bishop Forsyth stepped up to kick things off with 15 minute opening argument. The thrust of his argument was more or less 'Jesus was once alive, a real man, therefore He is still alive as per the Christian belief'. Many examples from the Bible were cited concerning the eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus and the resurrection. The evidence is in the accounts of people who were there and wrote of what they saw. He ended with the words, "[God] has uniquely and specially intervened and left us evidence, stronger evidence than that against, surprisingly, in the testimony of these witnesses."

Richard Lead's 15 minutes of fame started with him informing the audience that the Australian Skeptics



Skeptic and Bishop in pre-debate propaganda swapping exercise.

set up my video camera. Richard gave me a fistful of subscription forms for *the Skeptic* and between Alynda Brown and myself, we made sure everyone had a copy. I estimate

Bishop takes Prawn

and the Christian church have no quarrel and indeed we have many Christians in our ranks. "We test claims, not beliefs."

I could almost feel the disappointment in the air, as I'm sure many people turned up to see the Skeptics and the church at each other's throats. Then, after a few jokes, (now that's open to debate!) Richard began by teaching the audience a new word, "Undisproveable". No matter what he did he could not disprove the statement "That the evidence that Jesus is alive is stronger than the evidence that He is still dead". Instead he concentrated on the historical aspects of the Bible, who wrote the scriptures and more importantly, when. "Remember", he said, "the Devil can quote scripture too!" and proceeded to point out other examples of people being resurrected, including Lazarus and the dead who ran through the streets after the crucifixion, as reported in one of the Gospels. The point being, that resurrection is not a unique event in the Bible.

Bishop Forsyth replied with more eyewitness accounts from the Bible. "They are serious weighty claims!" The story of doubting Thomas and other first-hand observers followed. "Although we cannot see, we can believe from the evidence from their testimony."

Richard Lead continued, wondering why, if Jesus was all that was claimed in the Bible, miracles and all, why are there no secular references to him? He went on to explore the history of the Bible and the early Christian church, commenting



Bishop pulls rabbit from a head.

on the many different sects and their differing view on just who Jesus was.

Both speakers were then given a brief time to wrap up. While Bishop Forsyth made a religious appeal, Richard Lead mentioned some more Biblical references regarding the accounts of the resurrection, questioning the differing accounts.

Question time was a chance for both speakers to stray somewhat from the topic of the debate with various people asking Richard about the Skeptics and Bishop Forsyth being asked about the nature of God. Although many jokes and light-hearted jabs ensued, the questions from the floor were generally of a

high standard with people resisting the urge to tell personal stories. The Bishop went out of his way to assure listeners that he had no problems with the age and condition of the natural world as described by science, quipping that this probably put him offside with several Christians in the audience.

At the end of question time, both speakers were thanked and given rapturous applause by all. No vote was taken and I think there would have been little point to this, instead the audience headed for the tea and

bikkies on offer where the debate was kept alive.

As on the night, I feel there is little point in awarding a victory to one side or the other. The victory was, in my view, in the enjoyment had by all present of an entertaining, amicable, funny and thought-provoking night. I had the impression the many people gained a much better understanding of the Australian Skeptics along the way as well as great respect for Bishop Forsyth.

As a postscript I must mention that Richard Lead and I arrived in Springwood an hour so before the debate as we had an important mission to accomplish. Find and eat a

real hamburger from a real milk bar!

"Ahh," Richard sighed after polishing off a fine example of a real hamburger. "You know, I could eat another one of those without any trouble at all." I think this help set the tone for the evening, which was pleasant and all in all, well worth our time. I'm sure *Skeptic* subscribers who also attended would agree.



Lead gets what's coming to him.

Richard Saunders