Does it matter if Jesus was crucified with nails or ropes?

A recent *Christianity Today* article—and subsequent apology—reminded me of the forbidden questions of my evangelical upbringing.

by Brandon Ambrosino
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In April, Daniel Silliman, a senior news editor at *Christianity Today*, wrote an article ("Was Jesus Crucified With Nails?") about an essay published in the *Biblical Archaeology Review* by New Testament scholar Jeffrey P. Arroyo García, who presents a well-researched case that nails might not have been used during Jesus's crucifixion.

Here’s how Garcia summarizes his findings:

> “...when ancient texts and archaeological evidence are examined together, it appears that nailing a victim to a cross may not have been as common as most people think. And it might have been introduced in Judea only after the time of Jesus.”

Compelling? Yes. Do I want to read more? Yes. Am I convinced? I don’t think so. But neither was Garcia—at least according to his interview with CT: “I don’t stand and say this, definitively, is how it happened. I basically find it interesting. It could be there were nails, or it could be that there weren’t nails.”

Silliman’s article was published on April 14. One week later, it was revised to condemn Arroyo’s research and warn readers:

> “This article has been revised to clarify that Scripture, including the Gospel of John, indicates that Jesus was crucified with nails and that Christianity Today, along with Christian scholars and theologians throughout church history, affirms that account.”

Silliman issued an apology for being “curious” about a New Testament scholar’s research and for “implicitly call[ing] into question the inerrancy of Scripture.”

Christianity Today’s editors want everyone to know that their magazine is a *really* Christian publication.

At my Pentecostal church and at Liberty University, you couldn’t just be a Christian. You had to *really* be one.

As a child, I was always surprised to hear that someone was a Christian. The default factory setting for most people, I believed, was Going to Hell.

In our Pentecostal congregation, to be saved meant not doing any of the things we considered sinful, believing all of the things we considered true, and doing all the charismatic things we did at altar calls. In other words, being saved meant being like us. Most people, even most Christians, were not like us, therefore—sorry—Hell. We don’t make the rules! Actually, we did. We just didn’t have the self-awareness to know that the game for which we made our own rules was not the same thing as

Christianity.

During my time at Liberty University, the conservative Evangelical university founded by Jerry Falwell, I doubled down on this game. My teachers tapped into my exclusivistic instincts and taught me how to defend them by invoking words like orthodoxy and apologetics. We also liked to deploy the phrase the biblical definition of X, where "X" might be manhood, marriage, creation, or any other Evangelical talking point we could prop up with scripture.

At my childhood church we might have answered the question, "but are they *really* a Christian?" by noting whether a self-professed Christian smoked or listened to secular music. At Liberty, we answered it by noting, for example, whether they embraced any aspect of Darwin's theory of evolution (it's merely a theory, we'd emphasize). In both contexts, the modifier "really" was extremely important. You couldn't just be a Christian. You had to *really* be one.

"But do they really believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?" we would ask of theologians who started to sound like they'd been taken in by the Jesus Seminar (historical-critical methods were also merely theories, we loved pointing out). Do they really believe in the historicity of the gospels? Do they really believe God created the world in six literal days? If they *really* believed this stuff, then they were what we would label "Orthodox," with faith positions we called "traditional" and "biblical."

For many Evangelicals, the Bible is both inerrant (without error) and infallible (incapable of error). Most Christians believe scripture is generally trustworthy and reliable in its presentation of God and theology, but those who embrace inerrancy and infallibility go further by claiming that even the history narrated in biblical texts is free of falsehoods. At least, they emphasize, in its original form.

Well, I have no idea what the original form of the Bible is. As historians and Bible scholars have long ago pointed out, the Bible we have today—even its earliest copies—emerged over long periods of time and shows clear evidence of its own historical, literary, and even theological development. At some point in that process, Christians formed a consensus on authorized canons (yes, more than one, which is why when I became Catholic I was introduced to Baruch, Tobit, and other books Protestants don't consider canonical). But the important question for people of faith is this: how did our ancestors, both Jews and Christians, theorize God's relationship

to these different oral and written texts. And did they theorize it in the same way that modern readers do?

Inerrancy is, after all, merely one interpretation of how we ought to view our relationship with the Bible. It is—if I may borrow a term from my Evangelical friends—a theory of reading.

From time to time, I hear Evangelicals discussing inerrancy in public forums, usually in some sort of apologetic context. Perhaps someone has come forward and made a claim that threatens strict versions of inerrancy, and so an Evangelical who has been authorized to speak on behalf of the majority–or an Evangelical magazine like *Christianity Today*— comes forward to remind everyone what it means to *really* be a Christian.

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John is the only gospel to mention anything about nails. When Thomas hears Jesus was resurrected, he says he won't believe it unless he's able to place his fingers into the nail holes on Jesus's hands. But given the late dating of John's gospel, it's entirely plausible to wonder if this story pops up to serve apologetic purposes (i.e. to find a new way to remind the nascent Jesus community that Christ was resurrected bodily, that the Christ who was raised is the Jesus who was killed). But wondering is beyond the pale for CT and its readership, because it challenges popular Evangelical theories of biblical interpretation. "I didn't think about John 20:25," said Silliman in his apology, "and the implication of the idea that Thomas was mistaken to think the resurrected Jesus would have nail marks in his hands. Thomas clearly would not have said that if the Romans at the time used ropes."

Clearly?

This echoes a claim Silliman makes earlier in the apology where he says Arroyo's was "obviously an idiosyncratic view" and "almost certainly wrong."

The American Evangelical church spends a lot of time maintaining and enforcing boundaries. To them, only their interpretations of Scripture are "orthodox"; others, like mine, are considered heretical or outside the norms of "biblical Christianity."

They embrace “historical” Christianity; mine is considered “progressive” or “postmodern.” Their position on John’s gospel is “traditional;” mine is—well, a bit too queer. These boundaries must be policed at all times. If they let down their guard even momentarily and begin to employ the “liberal” literary methods of biblical scholars—scholars who are Christian but not really Christian—then their entire structure of faith is at risk of crumbling to the ground.

We can’t, they warn us, ask whether Jesus was crucified with nails because that means a sentence in the Bible might not be historically trustworthy, and if that’s the case, then what grounds do we have to believe any of it? And if we don’t have those grounds, then how can we be sure we’re saved? And if we can’t be sure of our salvation, then how can we guarantee that when all is said and done, we wind up on the right side of the most important boundary that matters? Like most things for Evangelicals, the nails used in Jesus’s crucifixion are literally a matter of heaven and hell.

Why, though, stop with the nails? John says Jesus appeared to Thomas on the eighth day following his resurrection. Does the precise date matter? If we believe Jesus appeared to Thomas on a Tuesday, are we on the verge of becoming atheists? The same story says that Jesus abruptly appeared to the disciples inside a room even though “the doors were locked.” What kind of a lock are we talking about? And how many doors? We aren’t told how Jesus got inside; might he have crawled through a window? And if Thomas’s words matter, then do we have to conclude that John preserves his words verbatim? Or are we okay believing the gist of Thomas’s words? But if we’re okay believing the gist of Thomas’s words, then why not believe “the gist” of John’s story: that God raised Jesus to new life, that this new life preserved the scars of his old one, and that some of Jesus’s closest friends had doubts that God did what he did?

There’s a sarcastic turn of phrase used to dismiss theological discussions that seem pointless and overly scholastic: How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? When I first read about the brouhaha at Christianity Today, I wondered how many angels could dance on the head of a crucifixion nail? How long were the nails used by the Romans? How many thwacks did it take to get the nails all the way through Jesus’s body? Are the wounds in Jesus’s hand shallow or are they perfect holes such that light shines through them? How many fingers did Thomas put into Jesus’s hands? Did he use a different finger to explore Jesus’s side?

Did the scene really happen as John narrates it?

John wasn’t written so that we would believe in nails, but that we “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing [we] may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

John, like the other three gospels, shows its hand, is clear about its intentions, its aspirations, its theological agenda. Every single story, right down to subtle details about clothing and setting, is written to convince us to put our faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, to persuade us to really—yes, really—believe in him. This doesn’t mean John is wrong or the New Testament isn’t inspired. John owns up to his inspiration and to his hope that, upon reading his stories, we might find ourselves inspired to go and, like him, tell the Jesus story in our own ways, with our own idiosyncratic twists.

Whether Jesus was held to the cross with nails or with ropes, what matters is that he was ingloriously and brutally killed by Rome. Behold this dying man! shout all four of the gospels, in (and let’s be clear about this) complete agreement. For it is precisely here where our saving God gets to work.