

CHRISTIANITY TODAY



||| A PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL DEVOTED TO STATING, DEFENDING
AND FURTHERING THE GOSPEL IN THE MODERN WORLD |||

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The Bodily Resurrection of Our Lord: Its Importance

THE General Assembly has repeatedly affirmed that it is an essential article of Christian faith that our LORD JESUS CHRIST "rose again from the dead with the same body with which He suffered." The fact that the General Assembly has deemed it necessary to make such a pronouncement bears witness to the fact that even within the Presbyterian Church there are many who do not hold this opinion concerning the place that the bodily resurrection of CHRIST occupies in Christian thought and life. Within the memory of living men His resurrection—meaning of course, His bodily resurrection—was regarded by friend and foe alike as an article of a standing or falling Christianity. Our fathers, certainly our grandfathers, whether they were Christians or non-Christians, would have been practically unanimous in approving the representation of the late DR. FAIRBAIRN:

"The resurrection created the church, the risen CHRIST made Christianity, and even now the Christian faith stands or falls with Him. If it be proved that no living CHRIST issued from the tomb of JOSEPH, then that tomb becomes the grave not only of a man, but of a religion, with all the hopes built on it and all the splendid enthusiasms it has inspired."

Today, however, there are many calling themselves Christians—and apparently their number is on the increase—who, so far from looking upon CHRIST's resurrection as an article of a standing or

falling Christianity, maintain that it can be discarded altogether without sacrificing anything essential to Christian faith. This, if we mistake not, is one of the fruits of that anti-supernaturalism of thought and sentiment that has become so dominant in recent years even among those calling themselves Christians. In the nature of the case, just as the "non-miraculous Christianity," so much in vogue today, cannot allow that an event so obviously miraculous is needed to account for the origin of Christianity, so it cannot possibly allow that confidence in its reality is fundamental to the Christian's life and hope. Be this as may, we are fully persuaded that those who take this new attitude toward the resurrection of CHRIST are profoundly mistaken, and that as a matter of fact His resurrection

is so essential to Christian faith and hope as to warrant the strong language of PAUL:

"If CHRIST be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and our faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of GOD; because we have testified of GOD that He raised up CHRIST whom He raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not CHRIST raised: and if CHRIST be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins."

The basic question at issue in this connection is, of course, the question, Did JESUS really rise from the dead? That is not the question before us now, however. The question before us is rather, assuming the reality of this event does it so enter into the substance of Christianity as to constitute an indispensable element in the religion we profess? It need not be overlooked, however, that, if the resurrection of JESUS is essential to Christianity, the whole mass of that evidence that evinces the truth of Christianity also evinces the reality of the resurrection.

It is impossible in the space at our disposal to even mention all the ways in which the resurrection of JESUS enters as a constitutive and indispensable element in making Christianity what it is. All we can hope to do is to direct attention to some of the more outstanding considerations which make clear that the resurrection of CHRIST is essential to Christian faith and hope.

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To maintain that faith in a resurrected CHRIST is an essential Christian belief is to maintain that this event has more than an evidential value. Its importance in this respect is indeed great. Despite the attacks made upon it, we have no hesitation in saying that it is "the most certain fact in the history of the world." And yet it ought to be clear to all that if the resurrection had only an evidential value, it could not be spoken of as absolutely essential to Christian faith and hope. Somewhat as the testimony of COLUMBUS and his crew was once more or less indispensable as an aid to faith in the existence of this Western continent, but is no longer needed for that purpose, so it might be maintained in that case that though the resurrection was once indispensable to faith it can now be attained in other ways. We hold indeed that the resurrection of CHRIST is the fundamental apologetical fact of Christianity, and that its reality carries with it and substantiates all the main claims of Christianity, including its claim to be the one supernatural religion, but we are far from supposing that its value is only evidential. An essential article in the nature of the case is an article necessary to the very existence of Christianity.

Some of the more outstanding respects in which the resurrection of CHRIST is essential to Christian faith and hope follow:

(1) The resurrection of CHRIST is inseparable from belief in the trustworthiness of the New Testament Scriptures. No doubt if the resurrection were only mentioned here and there in the New Testament Scriptures it would be possible to believe in their general trustworthiness while denying the reality of the resurrection, but in view of the generally admitted fact that the reality of the resurrection is everywhere assumed throughout the New Testament Scriptures it is evident that we cannot deny the reality of this event without believing that said Scriptures are through and through untrustworthy.

(2) The resurrection of JESUS is inseparable from belief in the trustworthiness of JESUS himself. He deliberately staked the validity of His claims, His teachings and His promises on this event. How can we have confidence in Him if His body mouldered under the Syrian skies?

(3) The resurrection of JESUS is an essential element in our conviction that JESUS by His death made atonement for our sins. The thought of JESUS as alive would afford us small comfort apart from our assurance that on the cross He offered up Himself as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and to reconcile us to God. What would it avail us to be assured that JESUS lives did we not know that by virtue of His atoning death He is qualified to bestow upon us the forgiveness of our sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified through faith in Him? And yet His rising in the same body with which He suffered is inseparable from this conviction. We would not be able to say, "He was delivered for our offenses," if we could not also say, "He was raised again for our justification." CHRIST'S dying for us may show His love for us, His eager desire to save us, but it was His rising again from the dead that showed His power and ability to save us. The most we could do apart from the resurrection would be to repeat the sad words of the disciples on the way to EMMAUS: "We hoped that it was He who would redeem ISRAEL." But accept the words of those who said, "We have seen the LORD," and the death of JESUS becomes not the death of our hopes, but their ground and basis. Then, we too may join in the glad jubilation: "Blessed be the GOD and FATHER of our LORD JESUS CHRIST who, according to His great mercy, begat us unto a living hope, by the resurrection of JESUS CHRIST from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away."

(4) The resurrection of JESUS is an essential element in the revelation of the Christian doctrine of immortality. Christianity does not merely teach the immortality of the soul; it teaches the immortality of the whole man—and the whole man according to the Scriptures and a sound psychology includes a body as well as a soul. CHRIST'S resurrection is both the pledge and the pattern of our own. It is because we believe that He lives in the completeness of His divine-human nature that we have the courage to believe, as we lay away our dead in their graves, that ultimately they shall live again not merely as disembodied souls but in the fullness of their natures.

Such are some of the ways in which the resurrection of CHRIST evinces itself as

fundamental to Christian faith and hope. More might be said—for instance the bodily resurrection of our LORD is a presupposition of His return as prophesied in the New Testament—but we hardly think that more need be said. If the thought of the immortality of the whole man is not fundamental to Christianity; if the thought of the trustworthiness of the New Testament is not fundamental to Christianity; more especially if the thought of the trustworthiness of JESUS Himself is not fundamental to Christianity; and more especially still, if possible, if the thought of JESUS as the living One Who by virtue of His death upon the cross is qualified to be our SAVIOUR from sin is not fundamental to Christianity—then surely there is no such thing as Christianity as it has been confessed by the Church of all ages, including the Church today in all its great branches.

We are not absurdly arguing that the resurrection of CHRIST is essential to all that is called Christianity. There are those calling themselves Christians to whom the expiatory death of CHRIST is abhorrent, to whom JESUS is merely the first Christian and in no proper sense an object of worship—even those who say that as far as their religious lives are concerned it would make no difference even if it should be discovered that JESUS never lived. This merely means, however, that we must distinguish between real Christianity and Christianity falsely so called.

In insisting that the resurrection of CHRIST is essential to Christianity we would not be understood as affirming that all those who do not agree with us on this point are non-Christians. That would be the case only if intellectual consistency were a condition of Christian discipleship. Fortunately for many, it is not. We have been discussing, not the terms of salvation, but what it behooved CHRIST to be and do in order that He might save us. Saving faith is not necessarily conditioned by the thoroughness with which the intellect grasps its content and presuppositions. At the same time ignorance and intellectual inconsistency are not advantageous to the maintenance and spread of Christianity, and in the long run we may be certain that genuine Christianity will stand or fall in proportion as the resurrection of CHRIST is rightly grasped and firmly believed.