

Easter, April 12, 2009

The Historical Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead

On this Easter Sunday millions of Christians around the world celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord from the dead. This, however, is not just an event to be taken “on faith” in the popular sense of that phrase. Instead, it is an event that is also rooted and grounded in history – a history that is open to be seen by any honest observer of the historical record. In early Christian history the NT believers began a tradition of meeting regularly in their local house churches on the first day of the week, that is, Sunday. They called this day “the Lord’s day” (Rev. 1:10) because it was believed – based on eyewitness accounts from amongst their own members - that the Lord Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead on that day. Believing that Christ was the “firstborn from the dead” and that his resurrection marked him out as “the Son of God in power” this day came to be seen by many as a special day to meet together for “all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.” (I Cor. 1:2; 16:1-2, Acts 20:7; See NIV Study Bible notes on all of these verses).

Though there is no New Testament requirement that Christian believers are obligated to meet regularly on this day, there can be no doubt as to this historical development of the local Christian church gatherings. The beginnings of this practice are witnessed to in the New Testament itself and it is also documented in many writings of the first few centuries after Christ. In each case they point to the significance of the resurrection of Christ in the early Christian churches. The late NT scholar Bruce Metzger sets forth the historical record about the resurrection of Christ and the beginnings of the Christian Church stemming from it in his comprehensive and outstanding book The New Testament: its Background, Growth and Development:

“The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is overwhelming. Nothing in history is more certain than that the disciples believed that after being crucified, dead, and buried, Christ rose again from the tomb on the third day, and that at intervals thereafter he met and conversed with them. The most obvious proof that they believed this is the existence of the Christian church. It is simply inconceivable that the scattered and disheartened remnant could have found a rallying point and a gospel in the memory of him who had been put to death as a criminal had they not been convinced that God owned him and accredited his mission by raising him from the dead.

“It is a commonplace that every event in history must have an adequate cause. Never were hopes more desolate than when Jesus of Nazareth was taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. Stricken with grief at the death of their Master, the disciples were dazed and bewildered. Their mood was one of dejection and defeat, reflected in the spiritless words of the Emmaus travelers, “ We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). A short time later the same group of disciples was aglow with supreme confidence and fearless in the face of persecution. Their message was one of joy and triumph. What caused such a radical change in these men’s lives? The

explanation is that something unprecedented had occurred: Jesus Christ was raised from the dead! Fifty-some days after Crucifixion the apostolic preaching of Christ's resurrection began in Jerusalem with such power and persuasion that the evidence convinced thousands." (Bruce Metzger, The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Development, p. 150ff)

Metzger's account goes right to the heart of the resurrection of Christ and the formation of the Christian Church. This Church began on Pentecost and the subsequent local Christian churches began at Jerusalem and then spread out throughout much of the Roman Empire during the course of the middle decades of the first century as recorded in the Book of Acts. At first this "good news" or "gospel" message of salvation was spread by word of mouth and presented as the fulfillment of Old Testament themes and promises. Eventually, eyewitness accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were collected, organized and written down as "Gospels" and sent to either individuals or local Christian churches for the further establishment and propagation of the gospel message. Each of these accounts – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – had their own original audience and were written in a way so as to present the good news about Jesus Christ to that original audience in a way that would be best understood by that audience. Only later were these four Gospels collected and presented together in what became known as the New Testament. Given the original individualized audiences of each Gospel it is impossible today to be sure of the details as to why certain material was chosen to be presented while other material in other Gospels was not and how that material was specifically organized from the point of view of the writers. However, there can be no doubt as to the collective historical testimony of these Gospel writers nor about their collective overall purpose:

Luke, for example, states: "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4 NIV).

John also is crystal clear: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31 NIV).

Speaking with respect to the individual, yet united, testimonies of the four Gospels about the resurrection of Christ, Dr. Metzger states the following:

"Divergences in detail are certainly to be found in the accounts of the first Easter, but these are such as one would expect from independent and excited witnesses. If the evangelists had fabricated the resurrection narratives, they would not have left obvious difficulties and [apparent] discrepancies – such as those involving the number of angels at the tomb, the order of Jesus' appearances, and similar details. That the accounts have

been left unreconciled, without any attempt to produce a single stereotyped narrative, inspires confidence in the fundamental honesty of those who transmitted the evidence.

“The evangelists [the Gospel writers], moreover, give the impression of being unconcerned to provide all of the evidence on which the church rested its belief. That is, they offer only a part of the proof by which belief in the Resurrection was created and sustained.” (Metzger p. 150-1)

Of course, the overall presentation of the resurrection of Christ in the four Gospels is also supported by the united testimony of the rest of the NT documents including the Book of Acts, The NT Letters of Paul, Peter, John, and James, and the Book of Revelation. These each present the testimony of eyewitnesses – each in his own way – of the resurrected Christ and their writings set forth not only the historical fact of Christ’s resurrection but also its theological, spiritual and practical significance for Christian believers.

The subsequent history of the Christian church in the early centuries after Christ also supports the same conclusions regarding the truthfulness of the resurrection of Christ and the vitality of the Church of Christ that followed. Christians should never be afraid of the attempts by secular scholars to cast doubts upon the historicity of the events of the Christian faith. Most of these attempts are based on the false assumption that miracles cannot occur, or at least, that written accounts about miracles cannot be trusted as part of the historical record. They, therefore, predetermine and necessarily skew the outcome of their investigation of the historical evidence. This does nothing but bolster their own preconceived opinions – and often lifestyles – that are based on their own biases and choice to not believe in God or in his Son, Jesus Christ. The true historical record, however, is overwhelmingly clear for those who desire to see it. And, it is the NT documents themselves that are, and deserve to be, the most fundamental and reliable historical witnesses of the truth that the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, is indeed the risen Christ, the Son of God. It is also this victorious “good news” that is indeed “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” (Rom. 1:16)

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For other articles and more detailed information on this topic see:

Articles:

“The Resurrection of Christ” – the entire Vol. 6 Issue 1 of “The Unity of the Spirit”

“The Lord’s Day” – Wikipedia article

“Easter” – Wikipedia article

Books:

[The New Testament Documents. Are They Reliable?](#) by F.F. Bruce

[The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Development](#) by Bruce Metzger

[The Resurrection of the Son of God](#) by NT Wright