

**“The Centrality of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and its Implications for
Missions in a Multicultural Society”**

INTRODUCTION:

Christianity stands or falls with the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The apostle Paul certainly understood this to be the case. In that great resurrection chapter, 1 Cor. 15, Paul says, “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without foundation, and so is your faith. In addition, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified about God that He raised up Christ – whom He did not raise up... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (vs. 14-15, 17). Henry Thiessen agrees with the apostle when he writes:

It [the resurrection] is the fundamental doctrine of Christianity. Many admit the necessity of the death of Christ who deny the importance of the bodily resurrection of Christ. But that Christ’s physical resurrection is vitally important is evident from the fundamental connection of this doctrine with Christianity. In 1 Cor. 15:12-19 Paul shows that everything stands or falls with Christ’s bodily resurrection: apostolic preaching is vain (v. 14), the apostles are false witnesses (v. 15), the Corinthians are yet in their sins (v.17), those fallen asleep in Christ have perished (v. 18), and Christians are of all men most miserable (v. 19), if Christ has not risen.¹

It is difficult, if not impossible, to explain the birth of the church and its gospel message apart from the resurrection of Jesus. The whole of New Testament faith and teaching orbits about the confession and conviction that the crucified Jesus is the Son of God established and vindicated as such “by the resurrection from the dead according to the Spirit of holiness” (Rom. 1:4). Talk of the man Jesus coming back to life again through bodily resurrection is no mere theoretical or esoteric discussion that ivory tower theologians banter about to justify their existence in the academy. No, William Lane Craig is exactly correct when he notes the relevance of the resurrection now and for the future:

¹ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures In Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 331.

Against the dark background of modern man's despair, the Christian proclamation of the resurrection is a bright light of hope. The earliest Christians saw Jesus' resurrection as both the vindication of His personal claims and as a harbinger of our own resurrection to eternal life. If Jesus rose from the dead, then His claims are vindicated and our Christian hope is sure; if Jesus did not rise, our faith is futile and we fall back into despair.²

It is not surprising that skeptics from outside the church have attacked the bodily resurrection from the very beginning. However, there is great disappointment in the attacks launched against the truth of Jesus' bodily resurrection from those who claim to be a part of the Christian community. Schubert Ogden of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University dismisses the bodily resurrection of Jesus as both impossible and irrelevant. "Thus, if *per impossibile*, the corpse of a man was actually resuscitated, this would be just as relevant to my salvation as an existing self or person as that the carpenter next door just drove a nail in a two-by-four, or that American technicians have at last been successful in recovering a nose cone that had been first placed in orbit around the earth."³

On April 10, 1998 the infamous *Jesus Seminar* released its second major work, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*. Timed for a release date that would coincide with Easter, a pre-press release boldly proclaimed:

Jesus According to THE ACTS OF JESUS:

1. "Jesus was not born of a virgin; Jesus' father was either Joseph or some unknown male who either seduced or raped the young Mary."
2. "Jesus was an itinerant sage and a social deviant. Wandering about from place to place, teaching and healing and living on handouts – he regularly infringed the social codes in force in his society."
3. "Jesus was considered a healer during his lifetime. From today's perspective, Jesus' cures are related to psychosomatic maladies."

² William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth And Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994 rev. ed.), 255.

³ Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 136.

4. “Jesus did not walk on water, feed the multitudes with loaves and fishes, change water into wine, or raise Lazarus from the dead.”
5. “The body of Jesus probably decayed as do all corpses. The resurrection of Jesus was not something that happened on the first Easter Sunday; it was not an event that could have been captured by a video camera.”⁴

Also in the spring of 1998, Bill Phipps, now the moderator of the United Church of Canada said, “I don’t believe Jesus was God, but I’m no theologian. I don’t believe Jesus is the only way to God. I don’t believe he rose from the dead as scientific fact. I don’t know whether these things happened. It’s an irrelevant question.”⁵

It should be pointed out that these recent attacks on the bodily resurrection of Jesus are not new. They are rooted in the Enlightenment, exalt an extreme form of rationalism, and embrace an antisupernatural worldview. In many ways they are the same song put to a slightly different tune. The German scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) set the tone for this understanding of the New Testament around 1950. The *Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), edited by John Hick, attempted to mythologize the entire Christ event. The Jesus Seminar and their fellows are basically attempting, as N.T. Wright says, “to put new life into what remains basically the post-Bultmannian study of Jesus.”⁶

Resurrection Options

When one approaches the issue of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, those of us who affirm its truth readily acknowledge that we bear the burden of proof. After all, we are making the claim that Jesus did what no other person has ever done in all of human history. He died, rose from the dead and remains alive until this day. Adopting the model of historical/private investigators we can quickly boil our options down to three.

⁴ Harper San Francisco press release. See also Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 461-62.

⁵ Quoted in *World*, March 7, 1998, p. 18.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Contemporary Quest for Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996, 2002), 23.

First, the resurrection of Jesus is false, it is a great hoax. Jesus did not rise from the dead but certain persons, probably the disciples, fabricated a lie and pulled off one of the best, if not the greatest, hoaxes of all time.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus is fiction, it is mythology. On this view the church over several decades made Jesus into someone and something he really was not. They began to tell stories about Him that were significantly embellished over time. Eventually they transformed or theologized Him into God incarnate who died on a cross for our sins and later rose from the dead. Now of course none of this really happened. After all, dead men do not rise. Still, the stories about Jesus continue to evoke wonder and inspire us to live more noble lives even to this day.

Third, the resurrection is fact and the supreme event of history. This view affirms that the New Testament accurately records the historical and supernatural resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. His resurrection was bodily and permanent. Further, the resurrected Christ was seen on numerous occasions by various witnesses who testified, some even to the point of martyrdom, to the reality of the resurrection.

These then are the options before us. It is beneficial to examine the naturalistic theories that dominated the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then we will note the more sophisticated models of the latter part of the 20th century. Following that we will construct an apologetic, a defense, for the historic, evangelical position of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Finally we will show its implications for missions in our 21st century multicultural context.

Naturalistic Theories That Reject The Resurrection

Naturalistic theories attempt to explain away the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They basically believe any naturalistic explanation of the event is better than a supernatural explanation. These theories were popularized by 19th century liberal theologians, and a few of them are still

advocated as we move into the early part of the 21st century. A quick survey of eleven theories is both interesting and instructive.

1) *The Swoon theory* – This view argues that Jesus did not really die. He passed out or fainted as a result of the enormous physical punishment He suffered. Later, He revived and regained consciousness in the cool, damp tomb. Somehow He was able to unwrap Himself and get out of His grave clothes. He was also able to move aside the large stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb. Bruised, bleeding, battered, and beaten He emerged from the tomb and convinced His followers that He had risen from the dead. There is some variation within this view. In his bestseller *The Passover Plot*, Hugh Schonfield says the whole thing was planned by Jesus with help from Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus was drugged while on the cross, which made it appear that He had died. Unfortunately He was seriously injured and actually died a short time later.⁷ An outrageous expression of this view is that of Barbara Thiering who teaches at the University of Sydney, Australia. She believes Jesus was crucified alongside Judas and Simon Magus at Qumran! He was given snake poison to fake His death and later recovered. He would go on to marry Mary Magdalene and later Lydia, and he would father several children!⁸

2) *The Spirit theory* – Jesus was not raised bodily, but He did return in a spirit form or as a spirit creature. This view is sometimes popular with liberal theologians with a mystical orientation, and also New Age types (e.g. *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*). One particular group that holds this view is the Jehovah's Witness cult. They teach that Jesus was created by God as the archangel Michael and that while on earth he was only a man. Following His death on the cross God restored Him in a spiritual form only. In *Let God Be True* the Watchtower asserts, "King

⁷ Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (New York: Bantam, 1965), 112-65.

⁸ Barbara Thiering, *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992).

Christ Jesus was put to death in the flesh and was resurrected an invisible spirit creature...”⁹ In fact the Watchtower Society believes it would have been humiliating for Jesus to have returned to heaven physically: “Jesus did not take his human body to heaven to be forever a man in heaven. Had he done so, that would have left him even lower than the angels... God did not purpose for Jesus to be humiliated thus forever by being a fleshly man forever. No, but after he had sacrificed his perfect manhood, God raised him to deathless life as a glorious spirit creature.”¹⁰

3) *The Hallucination theory* – This view was initially set forth by the German scholar David Strauss (1808-74). How do you explain the alleged appearances of Jesus to His disciples? He argued, “according to our view the imagination of his [Jesus] followers aroused in their deepest spirit, presented their master revived, for they could not possibly think of him as dead. What for a long time was valid as an external fact, first miraculous, then deceptive, finally simply natural, is hereby reduced completely to the state of mind and made into an inner event.”¹¹ A creative and modern spin-off of this view is that of Ian Wilson who believes Jesus pre-programmed his disciples to hallucinate by means of hypnosis. He says, “it is possible that he [Jesus] prepared his disciples for his resurrection using the technique that modern hypnotists call post-hypnotic suggestion. By this means he could have effectively conditioned them to hallucinate his appearances in response to certain prearranged cues (the breaking of bread), for a predetermined period after his death.”¹²

4) *The Vision theory* – The disciples had experiences which they interpreted or understood to be appearances of the risen Jesus. They did believe these to be literal and real appearances. For example Jürgen Moltmann believes that the disciples saw visionary appearances of the risen Christ

⁹ *Let God Be True* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, rev. ed. 1982), 138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41. Quoted from Hank Hanegraaff, *Resurrection* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 10.

¹¹ Quoted in Craig, 269.

¹² Ian Wilson, *Jesus: The Evidence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 141.

and that He communicated to them both a call and a mission.¹³ Though not identical to it, this theory has some similarity to the Spirit theory (#2).

5) The Legend/Myth theory – This view holds that over time the Jesus stories were embellished and exaggerated. This is basically the view of the *Jesus Seminar* as we have already noted. Some in this camp will even deny that the historical Jesus of Nazareth even existed, though their numbers are quite small. Bottom line, this view is radically committed to an antsupernatural agenda and it separates the Jesus of history (who He really was) from the Christ of Faith (what the Church later imagined Him to be). The resurrection is something of a wonder story indicating the significance the mythical Jesus held for them. The tomb most certainly was not empty.

6) The Stolen Body theory – This is actually the earliest theory that attempts to explain away the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It goes back to Matt. 28:11-15, where it is recorded that the soldiers who guarded Jesus' tomb were bribed by the Jewish leaders to lie and say, "His disciples came during the night and stole Him while we were sleeping (v. 13). Occasionally it is alleged that the body could also have been stolen by the (1) Jewish leaders, (2) Romans, or even (3) Joseph of Arimathea. This theory was revived for a brief time by Deists in the 18th century, though it is held by virtually no one today.¹⁴

7) The Wrong Tomb theory – Belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus rests on a simple mistake: first the women and later the men went to the wrong tomb by accident. Finding the wrong tomb empty, they erroneously concluded that Jesus had risen from the dead. The liberal theologian Kirsopp Lake first defended this theory in 1907. William Craig informs us of the reception it received, "Lake's theory generated virtually no following, but was dead almost on arrival."¹⁵

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 167-68.

¹⁴ Craig, 278; Norman Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Nelson, 1989), 73-76.

¹⁵ Craig, 279.

8) *The Lie for Profit theory* – Some have said the alleged resurrection of Jesus was perhaps the greatest “religious hoax” ever attempted. It was perpetuated by Jesus’ disciples. His death by crucifixion was a huge disappointment, but His followers saw a way to turn it for good and financial profit. They began to proclaim that Jesus had risen, built a substantial following, and profited from the monies they were able to fleece from the people. You will be hard pressed to find this theory in any book, though cynical skeptics have thrown it out from time to time. Further, if this was indeed the plan of the apostles, it was a colossal failure as all but John most certainly saw their life end in martyrdom.

9) *The Mistaken Identity theory* – Sometimes related to the wrong tomb theory, this view says the women mistook someone who they thought was Jesus. They perhaps ran into a gardener or caretaker in the garden. It was dark, being early in the morning, and they could not see this man clearly. He may have been standing or working near an empty tomb, the wrong tomb. Informing them that Jesus was not in there, they mistakenly drew the conclusion that He had risen. Support for this view is sometimes sought from John 19:11-18. There Mary Magdalene initially did not recognize Jesus and the text says she “supposed He was the gardener” (19:16). However, she quickly discovers it is Jesus and gets an up close and personal look. Verse 17 says that Jesus had to tell her to let go of Him. At such close range she would not have mistaken another for Jesus.

10) *The Twin theory* – This is perhaps the most bizarre of the naturalistic theories. In a debate in 1995 with Christian apologist William Lane Craig, philosopher Robert Greg Cavin argued that Jesus had an identical twin brother. They were separated at birth and did not see each other again until the crucifixion. Following Jesus’ death, His twin conjured up a Messianic identity and mission for Jesus, steals His body (a new candidate for the stolen body theory!), and pretends to be the risen Jesus. Craig rightly notes that theories like Cavin’s make great comedy and give evidence

of an incredible imagination. They are, however, of no real value if one is serious about discovering what really happened on the first Easter morning.¹⁶

11) *The Muslim theory* – Islam rejects the biblical witness concerning the crucifixion of Jesus. God instead provided a substitute for Jesus, perhaps even making the person look like Jesus. Surah 4:157 in *The Koran* says, “They declared: ‘We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.’ They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.”¹⁷ Among Muslims there is no unanimity on who took the place of Jesus. Candidates include Judas, Pilate, Simon of Cyrene or even one of the disciples.¹⁸ Muslims do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus because they do not believe He died in the first place.

Contemporary Models For Explaining The Resurrection

Scholars today, especially liberal biblical scholars and theologians, operate out of a decidedly naturalistic worldview. They are committed to an antisupernatural perspective and they are strongly devoted to an existential/experiential understanding of faith and religion. What counts in matters of faith is experience, feeling, my own personal subjective response to whatever it is that moves me. Gary Habermas has pointed out that the “Naturalistic Theories of the 19th Century” basically devoured each other so that they are seldom held today as they once were.¹⁹ They were found to be flawed and wanting and so scholars moved on, but where? After all, if you are committed to antisupernaturalism from the start and you rule out in advance even the possibility of the supernatural bodily resurrection of Jesus, what do you do? What you do is develop more sophisticated theories that often turn out to be vague, fuzzy and unclear as to exactly what they

¹⁶ Hanegraaff, 7-8. He gives the source of this debate as : William Lane Craig and Robert Greg Cavin, “Dead or Alive? A Debate on the Resurrection of Jesus.” (Anaheim, Calif.: Simon Greenleaf Un., 1995), audiotape.

¹⁷ *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (New York: Penguin, 1956, rev. 1974), 382.

¹⁸ Hanegraaff, 8-9.

¹⁹ Gary Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1976), especially 114-71.

mean. Habermas believes, being cautious of oversimplification, that we can summarize recent thinking on the bodily resurrection in terms of 5 models.

1) The first model is held by those who tend to either dismiss or at least seriously question the facticity of the resurrection appearances. These persons tend to dismiss any literal claims that Jesus' tomb was empty or that he was actually seen by his followers. They conclude that the nature of the original eyewitnesses' experiences cannot be discovered. (Ex. Bultmann, Marxsen, Koester, Küng, Van Buren.)

2) The second model is characterized by those more interested in the nature of the disciples' experiences and who often accept a literal resurrection of Jesus. However, these scholars still insist that these experiences cannot be historically verified. They can only be accepted by faith. Karl Barth, for example, believed that the resurrection should be accepted by faith as a literal event, but that it cannot be established by historical investigation. Others who hold this view include neo-orthodox theologians such as Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Bornkamm, Rahner, Markus Barth (son of Karl Barth), Torrance, and Thielicke.

3) The third model is characterized by persons who believe the resurrection is probable, and who set forth an abstract reconstruction of the historical nature of the appearances. They often provide reasons why the empty tomb is the best explanation for all of the data and they seek "to ascertain at least a minimalistic understanding of what really happened, including the providing of reasons for the acceptance of the appearances of Jesus and the empty tomb."²⁰ However, they still are convinced that the resurrection is not demonstrable by historical methodology. Jesus' appearances are usually viewed as spiritual in nature, rather than a physical phenomenon. (Ex. Grass, Moltmann, Wilkens, Fuller, Jeremias, and O'Collins.)

²⁰ Gary R. Habermas, "Jesus Resurrection And Contemporary Criticism: An Apologetic," *CTR* 4.1 (Fall 1989), 167.

4) The fourth model believes available historical data is sufficient to demonstrate the probability that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was literally raised from the dead. For example, Pannenberg thinks the historical facts support the likelihood of the empty tomb and the literal appearances of Jesus. However, Pannenberg favors appearances in terms of a spiritual body which appeared from heaven, was recognized as Jesus when He spoke and, at least in Paul's case, was accompanied by a phenomenon of light. Others in this camp include Hunter, Brown, Dunn, Goppelt, and Ramsey.

5) The fifth model is the historic, orthodox position. Scholars here agree with the other groups that the evidence refutes the naturalistic theories. They further believe that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was found empty and that Jesus actually appeared to his followers. The major difference between this model and the last model (#4) is that scholars in this group believe that Jesus rose bodily. Jesus rose from the dead in the same body in which he was crucified, though it was a transformed resurrection kind of body (1 Cor. 15). Scholars in this fifth model are usually evangelicals. They include Craig, Ladd, Osborne, Daniel Fuller, Geisler, Wenham, Bruce, Green, Hoover, C. S. Lewis, McDowell, Montgomery, Moreland, Nash, and Habermas.²¹

An Apologetic For The Bodily Resurrection Of Jesus

Why should anyone believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? Is not the claim itself simply incredible and unbelievable from the start? After all, we are making a one of a kind, one time kind of claim that has never been duplicated at any time, in any place, by any other person. As stated earlier, Christians must, and do, bear the burden of proof on this, and the evidence must be both substantial and strong.

Habermas is again extremely helpful as he helps us, as good investigators should, gather all the available data we possibly can. He writes,

²¹ Habermas, 163-71.

Today, most critical theologians find much less history in the gospels than their 19th-century counterparts, to be sure. Yet, a substantial number of historical facts are recognized with regard to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Virtually all scholars today agree that Jesus died by crucifixion and that his body was afterwards buried. Due to his death, his disciples were despondent, believing that all hope was gone. At this point many contemporary scholars add that the burial tomb was found empty a few days later, but that it did not cause belief in the disciples.

It is virtually unanimous that, soon afterwards, the disciples had experiences which they were convinced were appearances of the risen Jesus. These experiences transformed their lives as they believed that Jesus was literally alive. These experiences also emboldened them to preach and witness in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus had been crucified and buried only a short time previously. Here it was the message of Jesus' resurrection which was the central proclamation for these eyewitnesses.

History also relates that, due to this testimony, the Christian church grew, featuring Sunday as the primary day of worship. Some scholars add here that one of the early church leaders was James, the brother of Jesus, who was a skeptic until he believed he saw the risen Jesus. Basically all agree that a persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus, was converted to Christianity by an experience which he also believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.

These are a minimum number of facts agreed upon by almost all critical scholars who study this topic, whatever their school of thought. From this summary, at least eleven separate facts can be considered to be knowable history (while another is additionally recognized by many): (1) Jesus died due to crucifixion and (2) was buried afterwards. (3) Jesus' death caused the disciples to experience despair and lose hope, believing that their master was dead. (4) Although not as widely accepted, many scholars acknowledge several weighty arguments which indicate that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered to be empty just a few days later.

Almost all critical scholars further agree that (5) the disciples had real experiences which they thought were literal appearances of the risen Jesus. Due to these experiences, (6) the disciples were transformed from timid and troubled doubters afraid to identify themselves with Jesus to bold preachers of his death and resurrection who were more than willing to die for their faith in him. (7) This message was the center of preaching in the earliest church and (8) was especially

proclaimed in Jerusalem, the same city where Jesus had recently died and had been buried.

As a direct result of this preaching (9) the church was born, (10) featuring Sunday as the special day of worship. (11) James, a brother of Jesus who had been a skeptic, was converted when he believed that he saw the resurrected Jesus. (12) A few years later, Paul was also converted to the Christian faith by an experience which he, likewise, thought was an appearance of the risen Jesus.

Such facts are crucial in terms of our contemporary investigation of Jesus' resurrection. With the possible exception of the empty tomb, the great majority of critical scholars who study this subject agree that these are the minimal historical facts surrounding this event. As such, **any conclusions concerning the historicity of the resurrection should at least properly account for [all of] them.** [Emphasis mine.]

Now, it needs to be carefully noted that the actual resurrection of Jesus, in the sense of his exit from the tomb, is nowhere narrated in the New Testament. The teaching that he actually rose from the dead was a conclusion drawn from the fact that he had literally died, followed by his appearances in a transformed body to numerous individuals and groups.²²

Having established these historical facts which are widely agreed upon and accepted by resurrection scholars, one can construct an apologetic for the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Evidence for the resurrection of Jesus can be divided first into 2 basic categories: 1) Subjective evidence and 2) Objective evidence. Subjective evidence is the evidence of experience. It is sometimes called the pragmatic or experimental test. Here the question is asked, "Does an encounter with Jesus change lives? Does He make a difference? Does Christianity and Christ work? When I was growing up, my favorite song as a little boy was "He Lives." That song ends with an important question and an important answer: "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart." This is subjective evidence, the testimony of personal experience. Perhaps no line of evidence is more powerful when it comes to sharing your faith. Telling others who you were before you met

²² Habermas, 161-62.

Jesus, how you received Him as Savior and Lord, and the difference He has made in your life is a powerful witnessing tool. However, we must recognize and acknowledge that other religions have religious experiences. Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, New Agers and cultists often proclaim to have had an experience that was ultimate for them and that changed their lives. Experience in and of itself is not sufficient to make the case. Therefore, we add to our defense objective evidence. It is important to point out that when we speak of objective evidence we mean historically verifiable evidence. Our model is that of the courtroom where witnesses are called and a judgment is rendered, not the model of the scientific laboratory. We cannot prove the bodily resurrection of Jesus through some scientific formula that is conducted in a laboratory. In fact we cannot prove anything in history in this way. The question we want answered is this: Does the evidence *persuade* us that we have good reason for believing this alleged event really happened? I believe we can marshal a strong case of compelling evidence that Christ did indeed rise from the dead. Fifteen lines of evidence will be quickly summarized.

1) Naturalistic theories fail to explain the event. Naturalistic arguments of the previous centuries did not stand up to careful analysis. Virtually all of them have been abandoned or substantially revised, and even liberal scholars seldom embrace them today. They were highly selective in the biblical data, choosing that which helped their theory and jettisoning that which did not. Such arbitrary methods were doomed to fail from the beginning.

2) The creation of faith in the disciples and the radical change in their lives. Something happened that caused the followers of Jesus to believe that they had real and genuine encounters with the risen Lord. Furthermore, these encounters with Jesus changed them from timid and fearful cowards in hiding to bold and courageous witnesses of the resurrected Christ. In addition, according to the traditions of the church, each of the disciples, with the possible exception of John,

died the death of a martyr. Each of them died alone, and yet each of them died still proclaiming Jesus as the risen Lord with their last dying breath. The importance of this can scarcely be overstated. While it is the case that persons will die for a lie (consider the terrorists of 9-11 and what they believed awaited them following death), it is not the case that persons will die for what they know is a lie. In an interview with Lee Strobel, the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland says this about the disciples,

they were willing to spend the rest of their lives proclaiming this [the resurrection of Jesus], without any payoff from a human point of view. It's not as though there were a mansion awaiting them on the Mediterranean. They faced a life of hardship. They often went without food, slept exposed to the elements, were ridiculed, beaten, imprisoned. And finally, most of them were executed in torturous ways. For what? For good intentions? No, because they were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had seen Jesus Christ alive from the dead. What you can't explain is how this particular group of men came up with this particular belief without having had an experience of the resurrected Christ. There's no other adequate explanation.²³

Strobel, a former skeptic and agnostic, adds to Moreland's argument and notes that the conviction of the disciples in the face of death was used by God in his own conversion.

It had been put to me this way: People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they're true, but people won't die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false.

While most people can only have faith that their beliefs are true, the disciples were in a position to know without a doubt whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead....If they weren't absolutely certain, they wouldn't have allowed themselves to be tortured to death for proclaiming that the Resurrection had happened.²⁴

²³ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 247.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 247-48.

It is of some interest that even the Jewish scholar Lapidé Pinchas sees the force of this argument. Though he is not a Christian, he believes, surprisingly, that Jesus rose from the dead.

Why? Listen to his words:

The resurrection of Jesus was a real historical occurrence, and not something first and foremost taking place in the hearts and minds of the first believers. The crucifixion of Jesus by itself could not have motivated the courage of martyrdom and unquenchable hope for the cause of salvation which Jesus preached and embodied in his actions.²⁵

3) *The empty tomb and the discarded grave clothes.* The Christian movement could have been quickly crushed and brought to an end by one act: producing the dead corpse of Jesus. Evidently, based on the evidence, no one was able to do this. William Lane Craig points to 8 lines of evidence supporting the fact that the tomb of Jesus was empty:

- 1) The historical reliability of the story of Jesus' burial supports the empty tomb.
- 2) Paul's early testimony in 1 Cor. 15 supports the truth of the empty tomb.
- 3) The empty tomb story is part of Mark's source material and is old, perhaps dating to within 7 years of Jesus' crucifixion.
- 4) The phrase "the first day of the week" is very ancient.
- 5) The story itself is simple and lacks legendary development.
- 6) The tomb was probably discovered empty by women.
- 7) The disciples could not have preached the resurrection in Jerusalem had the tomb not been empty.
- 8) The earliest Jewish propaganda against the Christians presuppose the empty tomb.²⁶

²⁵ Lapidé Pinchas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 16.

²⁶ Craig, 272-277.

To Craig's impressive list I would add that the grave clothes left behind make the case even stronger (John 20:3-5). First, this detail is theologically and historically insignificant. The only reason to mention it is because of the fact that Peter and John saw them. Second, grave robbers do not unwrap a body that they steal from a tomb! They grab the body and "hit the bricks" (or stones!) as fast as they can. The most compelling answer as to why the grave clothes were left behind is because the one who had been in them no longer needed them!

4) Testified to have been seen by women first. In the Jewish culture of the 1st century women were not qualified to be witnesses in a major legal proceeding. They were deemed unreliable and therefore they could not testify in a court of law. Given this fact, it is amazing, even astonishing, that the Bible records that women saw the risen Jesus first. If the early Church was trying to persuade people to believe Jesus rose from the dead, saying that women saw Him first was not a wise strategy. If the story of the empty tomb was something conjured up, it is not conceivable that women would be the first witnesses to the event. The only reason to say women saw Him first is because women saw Him first.²⁷

5) Change in the day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday by Jews. Jewish identity to this day is connected to their observance of the Sabbath. For centuries they have honored it and kept it as sacred unto the Lord. Yet something happened c.A.D. 30 that caused a large group of Jews in Jerusalem to change their day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday. Whatever happened would have to have been extraordinary. It was, they claimed, the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Bob Stein points to the antiquity of this change and its connection to the empty tomb: "The only tradition involving the first day of the week is the tradition of the empty tomb... The fact

²⁷ Ibid, 276.

that the switch from Sabbath to Sunday took place early in the life of the church indicates that the tradition of the empty tomb was known from the beginning.”²⁸

6) Unlikely nature of mass hallucination. Mass hallucination actually is not unlikely. It is impossible. Hallucinations are inner, subjective experiences of the mind. They happen inside of us not outside of us. They occur personally and individually, not as a group experience. The repeated appearances of Jesus at different times and to different people is a death knell to this theory.

7) Numerous and varied resurrection appearances which lasted for 40 days and then abruptly ended. The New Testament records several occasions on which Jesus appeared to his followers shortly following His resurrection. Ten distinct appearances stand out:

Appearances	Witnesses
1. John 20: 11-18	Mary Magdalene
2. Matthew 28:1-10	Other women
3. Luke 24:34, 1 Corinthians 15:5	Peter
4. Luke 24:13-15	Two disciples on Emmaus Road
5. Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-25	Ten apostles
6. John 20:26-31; 1 Corinthians 15:5	Eleven apostles
7. John 21:1-22	Several apostles
8. Mathew 28:16-20; 1 Corinthians 15:6	The apostles and more than 500 disciples
9. 1 Corinthians 15:7	James, Jesus’ half-brother
10. Luke 24:44-52; Acts 1:4-9	The disciples at His ascension

Several important observations should be noted in relation to these appearances. First, the disciples claim Jesus appeared at different times and to different people. Second, some appearances

²⁸ Robert Stein, *Jesus the Messiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 266.

are to groups and others are to individuals. Third, it is not an easy assignment to harmonize the resurrection appearances. Stein points out that, “Many scholars have despaired of ever arriving at a satisfactory solution.”²⁹ While some may see this difficulty as a negative for our apologetic, it is actually a positive. It gives evidence that there was no collusion among the followers of Jesus to concoct a story that they all had down pat. No, the differing, though complementary nature of the resurrection appearances, supports their authenticity. Fourth, that the appearances lasted for 40 days and then came to a complete and abrupt stop demands an explanation. Acts 1:4-11 gives us an answer: the ascension of Jesus back to heaven. I am unaware of any other compelling alternative answer to this fact.

8) *The 50 day interval between the resurrection and the proclamation of the gospel at Pentecost (Acts 2) in Jerusalem.* For some reason the disciples of Jesus did not go about proclaiming the gospel of the risen Lord for 50 days after the event took place. Why? What would explain this delay in public witness when delay could only hurt the cause, especially if they were to attempt to proclaim a hoax? Again the biblical witness is clear and compelling. They waited until Jesus had ascended (Luke 24; Acts 1) and the Holy Spirit had come to empower them for witness (Acts 2). Christ had to leave before they would act on their own and the Spirit had to come to give them boldness for witness. The rest of the story is, as we often say, history.

9) *The Jewish leaders nor the Romans could disprove the message of the empty tomb.* It is an undeniable fact of history that those who opposed and crucified Jesus could not disprove His resurrection. The earliest attempt to explain the empty tomb was to say the disciples had stolen the body (Matt. 28:11-15). It is significant that even in the beginning they did not deny that the tomb was empty. As previously noted, all they had to do was produce the body of Jesus and the Christian movement was dead. Again it appears there was no body to produce.

²⁹ Ibid., 261.

10) The unexpected nature of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The disciples did not anticipate that Jesus would rise from the dead, though He had predicted it on several occasions (e.g. Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). In fact Mark 9:32 tells us they did not understand. Perhaps they thought He was again speaking in parables. No, when Jesus was crucified their hopes were dashed. They, like the two on the road to Emmaus, “were hoping that He was the One who was about to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). They looked for and hoped for a mighty Messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression and restore the glory of Israel as in the days of King David. A dying and rising Messiah was not what they expected, in spite of the fact the Old Testament quietly, but clearly, predicted Him. The fact that the disciples were fearful, despondent and in despair is especially fatal to any type of hallucination or hypnosis theory. There was no expectancy or anticipation on their part that Jesus would rise from the dead. All the evidence strongly affirms it came as a complete surprise.

11) The conversion of 2 skeptics: James the half brother of Jesus and Saul of Tarsus. James was an unbeliever in Jesus as Messiah prior to His crucifixion. John 7:5 makes this clear. Yet something happened that transformed the half-brother of Jesus from a doubter to a believer, from a skeptic to a leader in the church at Jerusalem, from one who thought his brother was mad (Mark 3:21) to one who willingly suffered martyrdom for the gospel. James was killed in A.D. 62 for his faith in Jesus as the risen Christ. Something remarkable occurred that brought about this radical change in James. Saul of Tarsus was a violent persecutor of the church (Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1-2). However, something happened in Saul’s life that changed him from a persecutor of Christ to a missionary/evangelist for Christ. His own confession and testimony, recorded several times in Scripture, is that he saw the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:3-6; 22:6-10; 26:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:15-16). He even notes that those who were with him on the Damascus Road saw the light and

heard a sound, but they did not hear Jesus directly speak to Paul (Acts 9:7; 22:9). Paul was not open to the gospel. It took the resurrected Lord to convince him that Jesus was indeed the Christ.

12) The moral character of the eyewitnesses. The New Testament provides the greatest teachings found in any literature on love, truth, honesty, hope, faithfulness, kindness, and the list goes on. These teachings come from the pens of men like Matthew, John, Paul, James and Peter: all of whom claim to have been eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus. To affirm their teachings and yet reject their witness to Jesus as a lie or mistake is illogical and nonsensical. If we cannot/do not trust their testimony about Jesus, it is not wise to trust them concerning how to live life.

13) The early creedal witness of 1 Corinthians 15:3-7.

The resurrection was the heart of the earliest Christian teaching. This is based on 1 Cor. 15:3-7, where virtually all scholars agree that Paul recorded a very early creed concerning Jesus' death and resurrection, a creed which is still earlier than the book of 1 Corinthians 15. Habermas notes,

That this material is traditional and earlier than Paul is evident from numerous considerations, such as the usage of the technical terms "delivered" and "received" (which indicate the imparting of oral tradition), the parallelism and somewhat stylized content, the proper names of Peter and James ... Further pointers to the presence of traditional material include the Aramaic name Cephas (see the parallel in Luke 24:34), ... and the two references to the fulfillment of the Scriptures.³⁰

Some scholars even date Paul's receiving of this creed within a decade of the crucifixion itself, or from about A.D. 30-40. Most think that Paul probably received this material during his visit in Jerusalem with Peter and James, who are included in the list of resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15:5, 7; Gal. 1:18-19).

³⁰ Gary Habermas, "Jesus' Resurrection And Contemporary Criticism: An Apologetic (Part II)," *CTR* 4.2 (spring 1990), 374.

Now how do Bible scholars work their way back to this? I find this fascinating. First, all scholars agree that Paul wrote 1 Cor. in A.D. 55-57. Second, Paul indicates in 1 Cor. 15:3 that what he is about to write is what he preached when he evangelized them on his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17). The 2nd missionary journey dates to A.D. 50-52. But remember, he was already in possession of this crucifixion-resurrection creedal formula before he came to Corinth. Worst case scenario, this creed is in use 20 years after the resurrection. However, based upon Gal. 1:13-22, Paul was in possession of this confession or creed possibly as early as his conversion near Damascus or his visit to Jerusalem. We are now at A.D. 30-40. This reconstruction of the events is deadly to any type of mythical, fable, or embellishment theory. First, there is not enough time. Second, there are eyewitnesses who can provide a check and balance to any inaccurate or exaggerated claims. It is clear that from the very beginning of Christianity, the bodily resurrection of Jesus was at the center of the Faith.

14) The accepted character and claims of Jesus. Jesus on numerous occasions spoke of His crucifixion and resurrection. He claimed He was God (John 8:58; 10:30; 14:9) and He said He would come back from the dead (Matt. 16:21). To claim Jesus as a great religious figure and moral teacher and yet believe He was mistaken on His prediction of His resurrection will not do. If He did not rise He was either a liar or a lunatic. That is certainly how we would judge anyone today who makes the claims that Jesus made. The resurrection is essential to the confession that Jesus is Lord. Everything turns on it.

15) Reliable eyewitness documents recording the events. The New Testament is the most well authenticated document of antiquity. No textual critic of any theological persuasion would deny this. There are more Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, over 5300, of an earlier date and more reliable nature than any other work of antiquity. The New Testament books were all

written before the end of the 1st century. They have been substantiated by archeology. Many were written by eyewitness followers of Christ and the books themselves have the ring of history. No religion has in its sacred writings what Christians have in the New Testament.³¹

The Theological Significance of the Resurrection of Jesus and Its Implications for Missions

The resurrection is crucial for Christian theology. It ensures the truthfulness of doctrines such as the deity of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22-24; Rom. 1:3-4), the exclusive nature of gospel (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Acts 17:30-31; 1 Tim. 2:5), the reality of heaven (1 Pet. 1:3-5) and the hope for the believer's resurrection (1 Cor. 15).³² The resurrection indicates God's approval of Jesus and His utter uniqueness; both in who He is and what He said. If God approved of Jesus' teachings, this includes his message concerning how one receives eternal life (John 14:6). The resurrection is unlike any other miracle, for its very occurrence involves eternal life. Jesus' resurrection was the very manifestation of eternal life. He was raised in a physical body which was transformed. Jesus is now immortal; he will never die again. When the disciples witnessed the resurrection appearances of Jesus, they were actually confronted with living, walking, talking, eternal life. Jesus affirms that this existence is a reality for all of his followers.³³

1 Corinthians 15, in particular, emphasizes the importance and nature of Christ's resurrection and its significance for the believer. The validity of the Christian faith rests upon it (12-19). It is integral to the gospel (1-11), our future hope (20-28), and Christian ethics (29-34). Since the salvation, motivation, and anticipation of the believer are based upon it, the resurrection is one of the few doctrines which cannot be overemphasized. It should have a significant priority in every ministry.

³¹ See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).

³² See also Rom. 6:8-9; 1 Cor. 6:12-14; 2 Cor. 4:14; 5:10; Phil. 3:21; 1 Thess. 4:14; 1 John 3:2.

³³ Habermas: Part 2, 384.

The hope of the Gospel thus is eschatological in nature (Luke 24:45-48; Acts 2:27, 35; 1 Cor. 15) and the resurrection is at the core of the Christian Gospel and Christian Theology. It tells us that the God who raised Jesus from the dead exists. It establishes Jesus' Lordship. It establishes the doctrine of Justification, which was accomplished on the cross and vindicated by Jesus' resurrection. The resurrection promises victory over death (John 14:1-9; 1 Cor. 15:55-57), and the resurrection is a pledge of God's final judgment (Acts 17:31; Heb. 9:26-27).

I do not always agree with the theology of the German theologian Karl Barth. However, when it comes to the significance of the relationship between the cross and the resurrection I believe he saw things clearly:

The mystery of the incarnation unfolds into the mystery of Good Friday and of Easter. And once more it is as it has been so often in this whole mystery of faith, that we must always see two things together, we must always understand one by the other ... for there is no *theologia cruce*s which does not have its complement in the *theologia gloriæ*. Of course, there is no Easter without Good Friday, but equally certainly there is no Good Friday without Easter!³⁴

Conclusion: What Difference Does It Make?

In our postmodern world some might ask, "so what?" "So what if Jesus did rise from the dead? I'm glad it works for you, but it's not for me, it's not where I'm at." How should we respond to those who may not deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but who do question its significance and relevance for today, for them? I conclude with 2 significant moments in my own life.

1) Several years ago I participated in a short term mission trip to Thailand. This country is almost totally Buddhist and very resistant to Christianity. We have had little success in evangelizing this country. One day we hired a guide to take us around Bangkok. As we began talking I told him I was Christian. He politely informed me that he was a Buddhist, and then he asked me to explain what a Christian is. To my amazement he had never heard about Jesus. He

³⁴ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics In Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 114.

kindly allowed me to talk for sometime and when I got to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, he literally stopped the car and turned to me in the backseat to ask if I had really said that Jesus was raised from the dead. I said that was correct and I went on to tell him that Jesus remains alive today as God and King over all things. When I finished, this Buddhist from Thailand said nothing for several minutes. He then looked at me again and said, “If this Jesus really did come back to life from the dead, He did something that no one else has ever done. If that is true, He would have the right to make a claim on every person that no one else could.” That Buddhist man did not become a Christian that day. I do not know if he has. He said he just could not believe that someone could come back from the dead, but he would think about it. However I do believe this: he saw the issue and what is at stake with crystal clear clarity.

2) Several years ago I became friends with a gifted and brilliant man named Mike Bryan. Mike is not a Christian. In fact he considers himself to be an atheist or agnostic, depending on which day it is. Mike is incredibly smart and intelligent. He is also quite curious. That curiosity led Mike to Dallas, TX and Criswell College around 1990 for the purpose of living within an evangelical community and writing about his experience. Surprisingly, especially to his editors, Mike did not produce the hatchet job they expected. He was actually quite complimentary about what he found, and so he wrote in a book entitled *Chapter and Verse: A Skeptic Revisits Christianity*.

After spending almost 6 months with us: going to classes, attending a major pastor’s conference in Jacksonville, FL., traveling on a mission trip and observing a Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, it was time for Mike to leave and return to his home in New York City. My wife and our 4 boys had fallen in love with Mike and so we had him over for dinner before he left. After dinner, as we were sitting around talking, I asked Mike this question: “Thinking about all

you have studied and experienced, what is the bottom line as you see it?" With no hesitation at all Mike responded, "That's easy. It's the resurrection of Jesus from the dead." Mike then proceeded to set forth the logic of the issue. "If Jesus rose from the dead then 1) there is a God and 2) He is that God. Furthermore, 3) the Bible is true because He said it was true and believed it was true. And, 4) that means there is a heaven and a hell, and 5) one's relationship with Jesus is the deciding factor as to which way you go." I have often wished my seminary students and fellow theologians saw the issue as clearly as this agnostic/atheist. It is my prayer you will see the crystal clear clarity of this issue as well.