

I The Relevance of the Resurrection

Since the edict of toleration promulgated by the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century, Christianity has been the dominant religion of western Europe. The decaying paganism of the empire and the ethnic superstitions of the surrounding barbarians yielded slowly until the nations became at least nominally Christian. During the age of discovery beginning with the fifteenth century, numerous explorers opened the American continents and parts of Africa and Asia to colonization and enlarged the borders of professing Christendom. In spite of fierce external opposition and internal dissension and defection, the Christian church exerted immeasurable influence upon the civilized world. The nations in which Christianity flourished became prosperous and powerful, while non-Christian nations attained a lesser degree of political freedom and economic strength.

Now a historical crisis confronts the church. Nations dormant for centuries are awaking and grasping for power. The hitherto silent millions of Japan, India, China, and Africa are shaking off illiteracy, famine, disease, and poverty, are making new alliances and demanding a hearing in the councils of the European powers. Not only are they wielding political influence which may seriously upset the balance of power formerly favoring the "Christian nations," but they are also adopting and defending philosophies devoid of any faith, chief of which is communism. A new civilization is being born which by its antecedents and nature is hostile to Christ.

The danger of this hostility is not negligible, for the rapidly increasing population of non-Christian lands is a cause for serious alarm. China, where the church is suppressed or enslaved, has a population of 669,000,000, which may reach one billion by the turn of the century. The majority of India's 400,000,000 inhabitants are devotees of pagan deities. The Arab world, solidly Moslem, is a bitter foe of the gospel, and Russia, officially committed to atheistic communism, has already declared its militant purpose of global domination. By the inexorable process of birth, Christians are rapidly losing the political and social leadership of society. Their very ethics are a disadvantage, for Christian graces curb the ruthlessness of conquest, while pagan or atheistic peoples have no restraining inhibitions.

Growing nationalism has reversed the trend of twentieth-century colonialism, and missionary activity is becoming a two-way street. From a Moslem mosque in Washington, D.C., capital of the largest "Christian" nation in the world, the call to prayer is sounded forth five times a day, summoning the faithful to their devotions. The Crescent is challenging the Cross on its own territory. Zen Buddhism is becoming a popular fad in American society. The change of religious and social trends is already so marked that the current era is being called "post-Christian," and its atmosphere is compared to the pre-Constantinian period of church history.

Against this menacing tide of resurgent paganism there is only one adequate defense. Military might is useless, for neither submarines, nor bombers, nor guided missiles are able to halt the slow infiltration of alien philosophies. No coalition of denominations can exercise sufficient political or social pressure to preserve Christian ideals and teaching if convictions crumble. Effective strategy for survival does not lie in devising new weapons for exterminating enemies but in a re-examination and reaffirmation of basic theology. Christianity dispelled the darkness of paganism in the first seven centuries of the present era and won its way in the chaos following the collapse of the Roman empire, not by lobbying or by fighting, but by the unique dynamic of its truth. As Paul said, "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to

the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor. 10:4-5, KJ).

The modern church suffers from an uncertainty that has almost paralyzed her ability to cope with this dilemma. Feeling her weakness because of division and schism, she has sought to remedy it by organizational union. Old rifts between Christian groups caused by differences of nationality, of polity, and of doctrine are being closed, and new unions are arising. Unity is commendable; but it cannot be achieved by arbitrarily ignoring all differences as inconsequential. The abandonment of essential doctrines may foster the kind of religious association which cultivates amiability at the expense of truth. No firm resistance to materialism and paganism can ever be offered by a Christianity which has bartered its convictions for an insipid geniality. Only a positive message, proclaimed unitedly and incisively, will make any impression on this tough-minded generation.

The formulation of a convincing message is difficult to achieve. The desire to perpetuate historic theological values may cause tensions among the adherents of evangelical Christianity. Each sect has inherited a viewpoint or an emphasis which may be Biblical in origin and amply warranted by the conditions that produced it. Reformed doctrine emphasized the sovereign grace of God to counteract the papal teaching of salvation by works; Methodist emphasis on experience stresses the necessity of personal regeneration. The individual teachings may be sound, but when they become causes of controversy rather than contributions to a balanced gospel, they may be obstacles to an effective witness. Some redefinition of creed is necessary if Christian soldiers are to be "one in hope and doctrine, one in charity."

Any reassessment of theology must begin with an affirmation of faith rather than with a denial. The question is not "How much can be abandoned for the sake of agreement?" but "What must be retained as unalterable and final?" The process of separating truth from error and the essential from the peripheral is serious business, for it affects the destiny of Christians both now and hereafter. A vague hypotheses or an unconfirmed legend is an insufficient foundation for building either a civilization or a personal hope; the doubts and conflicts of this generation cannot be resolved by abstractions.

The contrast between a vital faith and empty superstition is apparent in the New Testament. Paul, the best-known missionary of the first century, encountered widespread materialism and skepticism. The temples of false gods, in which flourished the furtive trickery of a grafting priesthood and the unblushing immorality of a depraved populace, stood in the marketplace of every city. Indulgence had become the highest good; futility was the predominant mood. Sex, sophistication, and success were the keynotes of the prevailing culture.

The gospel of Christ, which infused a new dynamic into that bewildered and corrupt world, was not without rivals. Mithraism proclaimed a god of virtue and light, who had overcome the power of evil by sacrifice and could confer everlasting life upon his worshipers. The mystery religions promised participation in divine secrets to their initiates. The philosophers who scorned the trivial legends of the gods offered the religion of reason--for a price--on every street corner. Christianity was not unique because it insured salvation by a sacrifice for sins, nor because it stressed personal ethics, nor even because it guaranteed immortality to believers. Its distinctive attribute was the supernatural power of the living God, manifested historically by the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Although there have always been skeptics who have rejected the concept of resurrection, a more open attitude has recently become apparent. Physical science has gradually begun to acknowledge the existence of spiritual being. Sir James Jeans, an eminent physicist, once remarked that the universe was more like a great thought than like a machine. Psychology has realized the necessity of a new vocabulary to explain the action of the human mind. The intricacy of nervous reactions and the amazing power of the will demand the recognition of personality as a force distinct from the mechanical processes of the cosmos. Progress in physics and psychology has revealed how vast and complicated are the external world of matter and the internal world of mind. Though many riddles have been resolved by investigation, the numerous mysteries still unexplored enhance the credibility of God's creative intervention.

In the light of modern physics the resurrection of Christ seems less improbable than it did a century ago, since new properties and types of matter have been discovered. Recent psychology, in contrast to an older mechanistic behaviorism, has tended to show that the human mind may possess powers that transcend matter. The historical evidence supporting the resurrection is still valid, just as the physical phenomena of bygone generations demonstrate the latest discoveries in physical law; and the theology of the resurrection is still applicable because death and life have not ceased to be vital issues.

The gospel of Christ began with the message of the resurrection, for its foundation was an event, not a web of arguments. The creative life of God was manifested in human history, located definitely in space and time. Christ, the incarnate God, experienced the tensions and frustrations to which humanity is subject, and even endured the agonizing and humiliating death of the cross, yet He was not overcome. The bonds of death could not confine Him; in the words of Peter, "it was not possible that he should be holden of it [death]" (Acts 2:24). Because this divine act is a part of recorded experience, it is proof in understandable terms that God can transcend death by life and that He has opened a new dimension of existence to believers in Christ.

Without participating in the resurrection life of Christ, existence is progress to doom. Sin, like chain fission, produces continuing and cumulative effects. Each evil act, conscious or unconscious, brings in its wake misery and bondage. Seeking to escape from the consequence of his own deeds, man finds that he becomes involved in other evils which further complicate his fate. The inexorable law that "whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap" fosters extreme pessimism. If man must inevitably reap the evil that he sows, his end will assuredly be destruction. Only the interposition of another power strong enough to arrest the downward trend can effect a permanent deliverance. The resurrection is not only the proof of divine ability to save man but the unmistakable demonstration that God has already acted. Whereas death is the penalty and result of sin, the risen Christ has made it the gateway to a new life. "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold they are become new" (II Cor. 5:17). Salvation was accomplished and a new era was introduced by Christ's resurrection.

The interpretations of historical events may differ with the knowledge or prejudices of scholars, and the importance assigned to them may change with the perspective from which they are viewed, but the events themselves are irrevocable. For example, the Yalta conference of World War II may be evaluated from varying viewpoints and with widely differing conclusions, but its historical reality and its effect upon the political fate of Europe remain undisputed. Future historians may disagree with current interpretation, but they cannot ignore the fact. Similarly, the resurrection demands the attention of those who contemplate the basic problems of death and

life, for it has thrust into them a new factor which must be included in evaluating the whole of human experience. Any attempt to explain the process of history will be incomplete without it. The resurrection is permanently relevant to any scheme of thought.

The troubled world of the present century is perplexed by the paradox of its own progress. Through the application of scientific principles, unlimited comforts and resources are available; yet more people live on the brink of starvation than ever before. The secrets of the universe are being unriddled one by one, yet they have become a menacing means for self-destruction. With vastly increased facilities for understanding and enjoying life, few people possess a sense of security and purpose, for they have no concept of the meaning of life, nor any certainty of its continuance. The resurrection is relevant to the human need for purpose and assurance. Though it occurred nineteen centuries ago, its inherent nature of continuing life and its constant applicability to recurring problems make it timeless. The event is fixed in history; the dynamic is potent for eternity.