

## V *An Emergent Creed*

The close of the first century introduced a critical stage in the life of the Christian church. The death of the apostles removed any possibility of adding firsthand testimony to the record of teaching that had constituted the gospel message, and the pioneering assemblies began to assume the organizational form foreshadowed in the Pastoral and Johannine Epistles. Beginning as a sect of Judaism, and developing as an independent movement that received increasing support from Gentiles, Christianity finally emerged at the end of the second century as a world religion and as a potent social factor in the Roman empire. During the time of missionary expansion under Paul in the reigns of Claudius and Nero (A.D. 41-68), the church had been largely underground. Its adherents were either Jews, who were protected by law, or a low class of Gentiles whose cult was patronizingly considered to be irrational but harmless. The Neronian persecution, being confined to Rome, was local in scope and was the result of a desire to find a scapegoat for the burning of the city, rather than of a studied attempt to exterminate a religious minority. The reputed persecution under Domitian was a reaction to the Christians' refusal to worship the emperor as Lord and God, for the Roman public objected to their practice rather than to their theory. Not until the Antonine emperors (A.D. 170) was Christianity openly declared inimical to the state and persecuted because of its inherent character.

By the end of the second century the infant church had grown to a powerful minority. Tertullian (A.D. 200) was able to boast, "There is no nation indeed which is not Christian."<sup>1</sup> "We are but of yesterday," he said, "and we have filled every place among you--cities, islands, fortresses, town, marketplaces, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum--we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods."<sup>2</sup>

Despite some rhetorical exaggeration, Tertullian's claim was undoubtedly substantiated by the facts. The empire would not have been alarmed by a feeble and insignificant sect, but when a large proportion of the population became Christian, and when the protagonists of the new message proved to be keen debaters and persuasive preachers, the pagan world feared revolution. Christian belief and Christian ethics had made serious inroads into the old religions of the gods and had changed drastically many of the social customs.

The process by which this development took place is not well known, for the Christians were not voluminous writers, and they paid scant attention to recording their own accomplishments. War, persecution, and the inevitable decay of time have left few vestiges of the literature of this period, so that the progress of Christianity in the second century can be traced only imperfectly. It is, however, amply certain that the resurrection was an essential element in Christian theology and a leading topic in apologetic preaching.

The earliest noncanonical writing surviving from the sub-apostolic age is the *Epistle of Clement*, written from Rome to the church of Corinth about A.D. 95. The writer was attempting to correct certain abuses which had entered the Corinthian church, and he appealed to the purity of the apostolic message for his authority. "The apostles have preached the gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. . . . Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God

1 Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* VIII.

2 Tertullian, *Apologia* XXXVIII.

was at hand."<sup>3</sup> According to Clement, the resurrection was the foundation and confirmation of the apostolic commission and message. He proclaimed it as an unquestioned verity accepted by the apostles and their successors.

The historical fact is also the pledge of hope for the future, since it guarantees that believers will be raised from death.

Let us consider, beloved, how the Lord continually proves to us that there shall be a future resurrection, of which he has rendered the Lord Jesus Christ the first-fruits by raising him from the dead. Let us contemplate, beloved, the resurrection which is at all times taking place. Day and night declare to us a resurrection. The night sinks to sleep, and the day arises; the day [again] departs, and the night comes on. Let us behold the fruits [of the earth], how the sowing of grain takes place . . . the seed being . . . scattered, though dry and naked when it fell upon the earth, is gradually dissolved. Then out of its dissolution the mighty power of the providence of the Lord raises it up again, and from one seed many arise and bring forth fruit.<sup>4</sup>

Clement cited as another illustration the example of the phoenix, a fabled Arabian bird, which reputedly died and was reborn every five hundred years.

Let us consider that wonderful sign [of the resurrection] which takes place in Eastern lands, that is, in Arabia and the countries round about. There is a certain bird which is called a phoenix. This is the only one of its kind, and lives five hundred years. And when the time of its dissolution draws near that it must die, it builds itself a nest of frankincense, and myrrh, and other spices, into which, when the time is fulfilled, it enters and dies. But as the flesh decays a certain kind of worm is produced, which, being nourished by the juices of the dead bird, brings forth feathers. Then, when it has acquired strength, it takes up that nest in which are the bones of its parent, and bearing these it passes from the land of Arabia into Egypt, to the city called Heliopolis. And, in open day, flying in the sight of all men, it places them on the altar of the sun, and having done this, hastens back to its former abode. The priests then inspect the registers of the dates, and find that it has returned exactly as the five hundredth year was completed.<sup>5</sup>

Clement's method of argument was necessarily that of his own time and was consequently quite unscientific, but his convictions imply a firm belief in the physical resurrection of Christ. He followed the fable of the phoenix by an appeal to the Scriptures, quoting Psalms 28:7 and 3:6 and Job 19:25,26. The first quotation is so loose that the reference is only probable; the second and third are unmistakable.<sup>6</sup> Clement undoubtedly believed that the words of the Old Testament foreshadowed Christ's personal victory over death, and that they should be applied literally.

In the first decade of the second century, immediately following Clement, Ignatius of Antioch wrote a short series of letters to individual friends and churches. Fifteen in all have been

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3 *I Clement* XLII.

4 *Ibid.*, XXIV.

5 *Ibid.*, XXV.

6 *Ibid.*, XXVI. Compare also Ch. XLII where Clement asserts that the resurrection is a confirmation of apostolic authority.

attributed to him, but only seven are acknowledged to be genuine: the epistles to the Ephesians, to the Magnesians, to the Trallians, to the Romans, to the Philadelphians, to the Smyrneans, and to Polycarp. The first three exist only in Latin; the rest are known also in Greek. There are two editions of the seven letters, one shorter and one longer. It is generally agreed that the longer edition was amplified by later editors, and that the shorter edition is the one that Ignatius actually wrote.<sup>7</sup>

The correspondence of Ignatius affords a fair index of the teaching at Antioch in the closing years of the first century and the beginning of the second century when he resided there. Sixty years had passed since that church had been founded during Paul's initial ministry to the Gentiles. The leadership of Antioch had increasingly become a superintendence over other churches, and Ignatius, the senior pastor, was attempting to fortify his fellow Christians elsewhere against the impending persecution of Trajan (A.D. 110-117), in which he himself died a martyr at Rome. His writing and preaching illustrate the doctrinal growth of the church as it began to resist the moral and philosophical pressures of the pagan world.

In his opening letter to the church at Smyrna, Ignatius defined his creed. Christ ". . . was truly born of a virgin, was baptized by John, in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him; and was truly, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch, nailed [to the cross] for us in His flesh. Of this fruit we are by His divinely-blessed passion, that He might set up a standard for all ages, through His resurrection, to all His holy and faithful [followers], whether among Jews or Gentiles, in the one body of His Church."<sup>8</sup> Because of persecution, Ignatius was especially desirous of promoting unity. The creed afforded a platform for a united faith; the resurrection was the power that produced a unity of spirit.

In contrast to the Docetists, who held that Christ was only an apparition, Ignatius insisted on physical reality. He disposed of the "apparition" or "vision" theory by saying, "He truly raised up himself, not, as certain unbelievers maintain, that he only appeared to suffer. . . ." <sup>9</sup> After the resurrection, Jesus still existed in flesh, and Ignatius alluded to the scriptural affirmations that Jesus could be touched and could eat.<sup>10</sup> In a reference to the Lord's Supper he spoke of "the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father . . . raised."<sup>11</sup>

The Epistle to the Trallians contained another creedal statement quite similar to that in the Epistle to the Smyrneans. Ignatius linked the resurrection of Christ definitely with that of the believer. "And truly he was raised from the dead, since his Father raised him. In similar fashion the Father will raise up us who believe in him, by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we have no real life."<sup>12</sup>

Writing to the Philadelphians, Ignatius argued with those who refused to believe the gospel unless it were substantiated by the ancient Scriptures. "As far as I am concerned," he replied,

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7 See R. Travers Smith, "St. Ignatius," in *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, William Smith and Henry Wace, editors (London: John Murray, 1882), III, 210a, 212a, b; G. Uhlhorn, "Ignatius of Antioch," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), V, 445, 446. See also R. M. Grant, "Ignatius of Antioch," in *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Lefferts A. Loetscher, editor (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1935), I, 546, 547.

8 *Smyrneans* I.

9 *Ibid.*, II.

10 *Ibid.*, III.

11 *Ibid.*, VII.

12 *Trallians* IX.

"Jesus Christ stands for the ancient things: His cross, His death, His resurrection, and the faith which comes through Him are the sacred heritage of antiquity."<sup>13</sup> "The Gospel possesses a certain distinctive feature, the appearance of the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, His sufferings and His death. For the beloved prophets proclaimed Him, but the gospel is the completion of immortality."<sup>14</sup>

The objection which Ignatius' opponents had raised sprang from Judaism, and possibly from the Sadducean tradition. Because the resurrection had not been predicted in detail, they refused to accept it. Ignatius contended that the life of Christ was self-authenticating. He did not deny that predictions might be found in the Scriptures, or that they contained truth, but he was insisting upon the authority of the gospel as the product of God's revelation in Christ.

Ignatius' use of the word "gospel" is slightly ambiguous. Did he mean the general content of the Christian revelation, or was he referring to the narrative tradition of the life of Christ? In either case the resurrection was one of the distinguishing marks of the new message that differentiated it from all other cults and teaching of his time and formed the basis for the development of Christian theology.

The cardinal truths which he stressed in these three epistles were reiterated in the letter to the Magnesians. "These things, my beloved, [I write unto you] not because I know that any of you are in such an error [Judaizing], but because I want the very least of you to guard yourselves lest you be caught like a fish on the hooks of false doctrine, and that you may have full assurance regarding the birth and suffering and the resurrection which occurred in the time of the governorship of Pontius Pilate. . . ."<sup>15</sup> The repeated identification of doctrine with historical fact substantiates the principle that the church's faith was built on the person of Christ rather than upon speculation.

Polycarp, a younger contemporary of the apostles and an associate of Ignatius, who died a martyr in A.D. 155, wrote an epistle to the Philippian church. In alluding to some of his predecessors, like Ignatius, he said, "For they did not 'love this present world' but him who died on our behalf, and was raised by God for our sakes."<sup>16</sup> The hope of personal resurrection appeared also in his writing, for he said, "He has promised that he will raise us again from the dead . . . provided only we believe."<sup>17</sup>

A somewhat different application appears in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, dated in the first half of the second century<sup>18</sup> and written as an apologetic against Judaism. Explaining Jesus' relation to prophecy, the author declared that the resurrection was a necessary factor in salvation. "And He (since it behoved Him to appear in flesh), that He might abolish death and reveal the resurrection from the dead, endured [what and as He did], in order that He might fulfill the promise made unto the father, and by preparing a new people for Himself, might show, while He dwelt on earth, that He, when He has raised mankind, will also judge them."<sup>19</sup>

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13 *Philadelphians* VIII.

14 *Ibid.*, IX.

15 *Magnesians* XI.

16 Polycarp, *To the Philipians* IX, 2.

17 *Ibid.*, V, 1.

18 K. Lake, *Apostolic Fathers* (London: Heinemann, 1919), 339, says: "The document no doubt belongs to the end of the first or beginning of the second century." It was treated as canonical by some churches, being included among the New Testament books in Codex Aleph, with no indication that it belonged to a secondary classification.

19 *Epistle of Barnabas* V.

The testimony of this author connects the victory of Christ over death with present and future salvation. Ignatius had said that the gospel was final authority,<sup>20</sup> but the *Epistle of Barnabas* extended the principle by accepting the resurrection as a necessary part of Christ's incarnation and as a pledge of future judgment. The discussion is not detailed, but its implications are broad, and afford latitude for further expansion.

The first extant treatise on the general doctrine was written by Justin Martyr, a Syrian Greek philosopher, about A.D. 150. He was familiar with many of the objections that are still current today, and he attempted to answer them. His chief argument against his opponents was the resurrection of Christ.

If the resurrection was only spiritual it was requisite that he, in raising the dead, should show the body lying apart by itself and the soul living apart by itself. . . . Why did he rise in the flesh in which he suffered, unless to show the resurrection of the flesh? And wishing to confirm this, when his disciples did not know whether to believe he had truly risen in the body and were looking upon him and doubting, he said to them, "Ye have not yet faith, see that it is I;" and he let them handle him and showed them the print of the nails in his hands.<sup>21</sup>

By "spiritual resurrection" Justin referred to the concept held by many Greek thinkers that there would be no reconstitution of the flesh. They were quite modern in their contention that Jesus Himself appeared only in a subjective vision, and not in tangible bodily form.

In his *Apology*<sup>22</sup> Justin had contended for the renewal of the material body, arguing that the natural development of bones and sinews from a small drop of semen is not more likely than the reconstitution of that same structure in the resurrection. Although the argument from comparative probability may not seem cogent because concepts of the constitution and presentation of matter have changed, his method of reasoning introduced a new approach to the material world. He anticipated the scientific method by recognizing the importance of the material world without surrendering to materialism. At the same time he stressed the spiritual significance of the resurrection without making it illusory or subjective by depriving it of historical reality. Justin discovered the starting point for a new Christian realism.

During the last third of the second century, between the persecutions under Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 177) and Severus (A.D. 202), Christianity was confronted with the danger of Gnosticism, a fusion of Oriental mysticism and Greek idealism which invaded the Christian community and threatened to pervert its theology. There was a consequent increase in the polemic literature of the church, whose leaders undertook to combat the insidious heresy. Chief among the writers was Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in France from A.D. 177 to 190, whose major work, *Against Heresies*, in five volumes is the primary source for knowledge of his teaching.

Irenaeus wrestled with the same problems that had vexed Justin Martyr: the nature of the resurrection body and the method of its reconstruction from the decayed remnants of the present body. His chief attack, however, was directed toward the Gnostic contention that since the body was inherently corrupt and was not worth preserving, a bodily resurrection not only would be an

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20 See fn. 14.

21 Justin Martyr, *Fragments of the Lost Work on the Resurrection* IX.

22 Justin Martyr, *Apology* I, xix.

impossibility but would be undesirable. In his counterarguments Irenaeus followed generally the same procedure as Justin Martyr, except that he made much fuller use of the New Testament.<sup>23</sup>

Irenaeus reasoned that since it must be more difficult to create man out of nothing than to reintegrate the material that has decomposed, the resurrection is less incredible than the original creation. If God made man's flesh capable of life, He can recreate it capable of eternal life. There is no inherent impossibility in resurrection; it depends on the creative power of God, who has already demonstrated that power by raising Christ from the dead. If the flesh was capable of corruption, it was also capable of incorruption. Corruptible life was imparted by the breath of God; incorruptible life, by the Spirit of God.<sup>24</sup> The breath is transient; the spirit is eternal.

In contrast to the Gnostic theory that the material body is too gross and carnal to become the vehicle of eternal life, Irenaeus argued that the raising of Jairus' daughter, the young man at Cana, and Lazarus prefigured the final resurrection. He insisted on the identify of the body interred with the body resurrected. "What then is this 'body of humiliation' which the Lord shall transfigure, [making it] conformed to 'the body of his glory'?" Plainly it is the body composed of flesh, which is indeed humbled when it falls into the earth. Now its transformation [takes place there], that while it is mortal and corruptible, it becomes immortal and incorruptible . . . after the mighty working of the Lord, who is able to invest the mortal with immortality and the corruptible with incorruption."<sup>25</sup> Although Irenaeus' conclusions are the result of emergency reasoning rather than the systematic development of a doctrine, they show that the topic was a vital issue in the theological debates of the second century.

The controversy over the nature of the glorified body continued for a century after Irenaeus. Tertullian (A.D. 200), a lawyer who became a leader of the North African church after his conversion, wrote extensively on this theme in his polemic *Against Marcion*, and in a separate treatise *Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh*. Following the lead of Irenaeus, he contended vigorously for the reconstitution of the material body on the premise that only the body could die, and that consequently only the body could be resurrected.<sup>26</sup> His interpretation was strictly literal, rejecting any suggestion that figures of speech might have been used in the Scripture.<sup>27</sup>

Tertullian's teaching was somewhat confused. In treating Paul's illustration of the grain in I Corinthians 15:37, 38, he insisted on the continuity of a *body*. "Does he [Paul] not also guarantee that the resurrection shall be accomplished by that God from whom proceed all the (creatures which have served him for) examples? 'So also,' says he, 'is the resurrection of the dead.' How? Just as the grain, which is sown a body, springs up a body. This sowing of the body he called the dissolving thereof in the ground. . . . Now, just as in the case of the grain, so here: to Him will belong the work in the revival of the body, who ordered the process in the dissolution thereof."<sup>28</sup>

Tertullian seemed to be troubled by the statement "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50), for he attempted twice to explain it, but did not make a very convincing case for his contentions. In one passage he asserted that Paul was not referring to the body itself but to the works of flesh and blood which debar men from the kingdom of God.<sup>29</sup> In addition, he

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23 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V, iii, 2.

24 *Ibid.*, V, xii, 1, 2.

25 *Ibid.*, V, xiii, 3.

26 Tertullian, *Against Marcion* V, ix.

27 Tertullian, *Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh* XX.

28 *Against Marcion* V, x.

29 *Ibid.*

claimed that the resurrection and the kingdom of God were different. "Not that we indeed claim the kingdom of God for the flesh: all we do is, to assert a resurrection for the substance thereof, as the gate of the kingdom through which it is entered. But the resurrection is one thing and the kingdom is another. The resurrection is first, and afterwards the kingdom. We say, therefore, that the flesh rises again, but that when changed it obtains the kingdom."<sup>30</sup>

The meaning of Tertullian's language is not clear. Did he intend to distinguish the resurrection from the kingdom as a state, or was he attempting to grapple with the problem of a spiritual body? Irenaeus had referred to the same passage in I Corinthians but had not drawn the same conclusion.<sup>31</sup> He was concerned chiefly with proving the continuity of the body, but Tertullian seems to have grasped the idea that the present body cannot enter the new state of the kingdom, and that consequently transformation must accompany or follow resurrection. He does not explain whether he thought that a lapse of time intervened between the believer's resurrection and entrance into the kingdom, or whether the sequence was logical rather than chronological. Perhaps the confusion was due to the fact that he did not comprehend the nature of the problem. In his eagerness to refute the Gnostics' position he failed to define the nature of the spiritual body, and his concept was too materialistic. It is doubtful whether he could, with his limited knowledge of the constitution of matter, have formed a definition of the "spiritual body" that would not have divested it of all semblance of reality for his own thinking and have caused him to dismiss the resurrection as an illusion.

Notwithstanding this deficiency, Tertullian performed an invaluable service in dispelling certain objections to the doctrine. He refuted the allegations that the resurrection was only a symbol of moral change, or that it was purely figurative, or that it was the entrance into heaven at the moment of death.<sup>32</sup> Such attempts to explain away the literal significance of the Biblical teaching are not new; Tertullian met most of them seventeen centuries ago. He was impatient with the fancies and allegories of the mystics, and if he was more rigidly literal than even Scripture warranted, he erred on the side of coherence.

Contemporary with Tertullian was the Greek school of Alexandria, of which Origen was the chief representative. Like Tertullian he was a controversialist, who engaged in debate with the pagan opposition. He was nurtured in conflict, for when he was seventeen years old his father died a martyr in the persecutions of Severus (A.D. 202). Two years later he became the head of the catechetical school at Alexandria. His intellectual brilliance made him the leading scholar of his day. Six thousand written publications, of which only a fraction are known, have been attributed to his pen. Despite a few theological irregularities, Origen is classed as a defender of Christianity and as an expositor of the faith.

Origen's teaching on the resurrection appeared in his work against Celsus, a pagan, who ridiculed the supernatural element in the gospel. "Neither we, then, nor the Holy Scriptures, assert that with the same bodies, without a change to a higher condition, shall those who were long dead arise from the earth and live again; for in so speaking, Celsus makes a false charge against us."<sup>33</sup> "We do *not* assert, however, that God will raise men from the dead with the same flesh and blood, as has been shown in the preceding pages; for we do not maintain that the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V, vii, 1, 2. See Sparrow-Simpson's excellent discussion of this point in *The Resurrection and Modern Thought* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1911), pp. 343-347. Simpson makes Tertullian more of a materialist than he probably was.

<sup>32</sup> Tertullian, *Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh* XIX, XX, XXII.

<sup>33</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* V, xviii.

natural body, which is sown in corruption, and in dishonor, and in weakness, will rise again such as it was sown."<sup>34</sup>

Origen did not agree with Tertullian's literal interpretation of the resurrection, for he did not insist on the continuity of the identical bodily substance; nevertheless, he did not deny the physical nature of the resurrection body. "If it is certain that we are to make use of bodies, and if the bodies which have fallen are declared to rise again . . . , it can be a matter of doubt to one that they rise again, in order that we may be clothed with them a second time at the resurrection."<sup>35</sup> Origen was more careful to stress the "spiritual" nature of the body than Tertullian had been. He stipulated that it would not be entangled with the passions of flesh and blood, but that it would be "capable of inhabiting the heavens."<sup>36</sup> The nature of this body, however, would be essentially corporeal, not ethereal.

We consider a spiritual body to be of such a nature as ought to be inhabited not only by all perfect souls, but also by all of those creatures which will be liberated from the slavery of corruption.

. . . the one [body] which we now make use of in a state of meanness, and corruption, and weakness, is not a different body from that which we shall possess in incorruption, and in power, and in glory; but that the same body, when it has cast away the infirmities in which it is now entangled, shall be transmuted into a condition of glory, being rendered spiritual. . . .<sup>37</sup>

While Tertullian stressed the material continuity of the resurrection body and Origen emphasized the transformation into a spiritual body, both agreed on the reality of the resurrection. Origen did not dismiss it as illusory, though his concept was somewhat less mechanical. Both of these men proclaimed a guarantee of hope beyond the present life and a material transformation which all Christians would ultimately experience. Sparrow-Simpson points out that neither Tertullian nor Origen owed his belief to speculation, but that each based it on the interpretation of Paul's words in I Corinthians 15.<sup>38</sup> Although they differed in conclusions, they acknowledged the authority of Scripture, and both appealed to the same source.

The formulations of the doctrine which they produced in answer to the pressures of heretical perversion and of pagan denial have persisted to the present day. Among those who believe in the corporeal resurrection the Fathers' emphases on the material and spiritual aspects are still traceable, as are the objections of their opponents. The affirmation that Jesus rose bodily from the dead on the third day and that consequently all believers will rise when He appears, is written into the major Christian creeds. It has been the faith of martyrs and missionaries and is the core of evangelical preaching.

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34 *Ibid.*, VI, xxix.

35 Origen, *De Principiis* II, x, 1, 2.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*, III, vi, 4, 6.

38 *Op.cit.*, pp. 343-353.