

The Impropriety of Evidentially Arguing for the Resurrection

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

It is indubitable that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has paramount significance for the history of redemption and for Christian theology (cf. Rom. 4:25; 1 Peter 1:3). It is also clear that this resurrection must be held by the Biblical Christian as one which took place in calendar time and involved Jesus' empirical body (cf. Luke. 24:39; 1 Cor. 15:4). Moreover, a decisive refutation of the resurrection would shatter the validity of the Christian faith (cf. 1 Cor. 15:14, 17). Hence the Christian's affirmation of Christ's resurrection is not an empty assumption, dreamy speculation, or a timeless axiom. The Biblical faith is not indifferent to God's acts in history, nor is it pessimistic about evidences. The dead bones of Jesus will never be found, and the believer need never fear investigation into the facts. All facts are created facts which can be properly understood only when given the interpretation the Creator intends; as such, all facts demonstrate the truth of Christianity. So any and all relevant evidence pertaining to Jesus Christ's resurrection in history will be significant for the believer. And such evidence can have a role in his apologetical efforts.

However, a serious difficulty arises when the epistemological significance of the resurrection is separated from its soteriological function. It is correct to hold that God's raising of Jesus from the dead saves us both from sin and agnosticism, but it would be mistaken to understand by this that the epistemological problem could be handled independently of the (broader) moral problem which is at its base. It is with regret that one notices neo-evangelicals severing the justifying efficacy of Christ's resurrection from its truth-accrediting function. In reality, the latter is dependent upon the former. Only as Christ's resurrection (with its ensuing regeneration by the Holy Spirit of Christ) saves a sinner from his rebellion against God and God's word can it properly function to exhibit evidence for God's truthfulness.

Evangelicals are often prone to generate inductive arguments for the veracity of Christianity based on the historical resurrection of Christ, and such arguments occupy central importance in this apologetic. It is felt that if a man would simply consider the "facts" presented and use his common reasoning sense he would be rationally compelled to believe the truth of scripture. In such a case the evidences for Christ's resurrection are foundational to apologetical witnessing, whereas their only *proper* place is confirmatory of the believer's presupposed faith. There is a certain impropriety about attempting to move an opponent from his own circle into the circle of Christian belief by appealing to evidence for the resurrection, and there are many reasons why the evidentialist's building a case for Christianity upon neutral ground with the unbeliever ought to be avoided.

The first is the *Lordship* of Christ over the whole of the Christian's life, even his intellectual endeavors. Our every thought must be obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), and only when He is set apart as Lord in our thinking will we be able to offer a reason for the hope in us (1 Peter 3:15). The Christian cannot relinquish his submission to God's authority in order to reason upon some alleged neutral ground. God makes a radical demand on the believer's life which involves never demanding proof of God or trying Him. Even the Incarnate Son would not put God to the test, but rather relied upon the inscripturated word (cf. Matt. 4). The Christian does not look at the evidence impartially, standing on neutral ground with the unbeliever, waiting to see if the evidence warrants trust in God's truthfulness or not. Rather, he begins by submitting to the truth of God, preferring to view every man as a liar if he contradicts God's truthfulness or not. Rather, he begins by submitting to the truth of God, preferring to view every man as a liar if he contradicts God's word (cf. Rom. 3:4). No one can demand proof from God, and the servant of the Lord should never give in to any such demand (and obviously, neither should he suggest that such a demand be made by the unbeliever). The apostles were certainly not afraid of evidence; yet we notice that they never *argued* on the basis of it. They preached the resurrection without feeling any need to prove it to the skeptics; they unashamably appealed to it as fact. They explained the meaning of the resurrection, its significance, its fulfillment of prophecy, its centrality in theology, its redemptive power, its promise and assuring function - but they did not attempt to prove it by appealing to the "facts" which any "rational man" could use as satisfying scholarly requirements of credibility. By trying to build up a proof of the resurrection from unbiased grounds the Christian allows his witness to be absorbed into a pagan framework and reduces the antithesis between himself and the skeptic to a matter of a few particulars. The Christian world-view differs from that of unbelief at every point (when the skeptic is consistent with his avowed principles), and it is the only outlook which can account for factuality at all. The Christian apologete must present the full message of Christ with all of its challenge and not water it down in order to meet the unbeliever on his own faulty grounds.

Secondly there is a myriad of *methodological* problems which afflict an evidential argument for the resurrection which is foundational rather than confirmatory of a presupposition. We note immediately that an inductive (historical) argument rests for its validity on the premise of uniformity (past and present) in nature; this makes possible a consideration of an analogy of circumstance. Yet the very point which the evidentialist is trying to prove is that of miracle, i.e. discontinuity. So he is enmeshed in using a principle of continuity to establish the truth of discontinuity! When the evidentialist seeks to exhibit that the resurrection very *probably occurred* as a *unique* truth-attesting sign he is divided against himself. Furthermore, since inductive argumentation is dependent upon the premise of uniformity, and since this premise can only be established by a Christian presupposing the truth of scripture (for Hume's skepticism has yet to be countered on anything but presuppositional grounds), the "evidentialist's" argument is really presuppositional at base anyway. The non-Christian has no right to expect regularity in nature and the honest skeptic knows it; so an inductive argument for the historical resurrection could only have been probative force for one who granted the truth of Christianity already. Next, we observe that probability is statistically predicated of a *series* in which an event reoccurs on a regular basis; that is, *general* probability might be proven for a reoccurring event, *but* the resurrection of Christ is a one-time event. Can probability be predicated of a particular occurrence? Not normally. Again,

we note that in recent years the crucial role of paradigms for factual argumentation has become evident (cf. T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*). Facts are "facts" for particular theories in which they function; hence the fact of Christ's resurrection can be granted and understood only within the Christian paradigm or presupposition. The rules of evidence and argumentation are not the same for a Christian and non-Christian; they will have different authorities for final appeals, different standards of proof, different sets of considerations which are assumed to be crucially relevant, etc. Hence a step by step argument from the supposition of the historical reliability in the resurrection accounts and its denial is not possible. Another brief indication of difficulty in the evidentialist's attempt to establish the resurrection of Christ is found in the logic of the argument if it be taken as intending to prove the possibility of indeterminacy and oddity in the universe or history; such an argument would point to a world dominated by chance, whereas the scriptures clearly present God as sovereignly controlling everything by the word of His power. If oddity and chance become the crux of one's apologetic, then he has forfeited the orthodoxy of his witness. Finally, once the evidentialist has failed to maintain that Christianity is the *only* adequate basis for a meaningful interpretation of historical facts and not simply a working hypothesis which is "as plausible" as the next with respect to isolated facts, and once he has lowered his sights by appealing to the *probability* of scripture's truth, then he has left the door open for the skeptic's escape to considerations of *possibility*. If Christ only probably arose, then it is possible that the evidence adduced has a completely different interpretation; even if certain facts seem to point to the probable resurrection of Jesus, it is admitted that other evidence points to the *disconfirmation* of the gospel records! But this is not the Christian position, for according to it there is *no possibility* that Christ did not arise; this is a foundational, incorrigible fact as revealed in God's authoritative word.

Now even if the above considerations were put aside for a moment we would still have to see that the evidential argument for Christ's resurrection is unsuitable as the crux for our apologetic. Under cross-examination most of the considerations brought forth by evidentialists can be dismissed as overstated, gratuitous, or inconclusive. There is little if any basis for holding to a resurrection as probably taking place in the past and arguing that the *witnesses* are probably reliable is a completely different matter. It is also unsuitable for the intended aim of the argument, for the very place that the witnesses could be mistaken, deceptive, or distorted might be the very event under question! But even putting aside these things, the evidentialist may prove the historical resurrection of Christ, but he proves that it is simply an isolated and uninterpreted "freak" event in a contingent universe. He is still stranded on the far side of Lessing's ditch (i.e. the skeptic can grant that Christ arose and then simply ask what that odd, ancient fact has to do with his own present life and experience). The fact that Christ rose from the dead does not prove anything within the neutral framework of an evidentialist's argument. Christ's resurrection does not entail his deity, just as our future resurrection does not entail our divinity! And one could not argue that the *first* person to rise from the dead is God, for on that basis Lazarus would have greater claim to deity than Christ! The evidentialist may prove the resurrection of Jesus, but until he proves *every other* point of Christianity, then resurrection is an isolated, irrelevant, "brute" fact which is no aid to our apologetical efforts. Only within the system of Christian logic does the resurrection of Christ have meaning and implication; and that system of logical entailment and premises can only be used on a presuppositional basis - you do not argue into it. In terms of the evidentialist's approach to the

unbeliever, that skeptic can accept the resurrection without flinching, for the resurrection is simply a random fact until a Christian foundation has been placed under it. Furthermore, in the past men like Reimarus and Paulus have utilized the same enlightened, scientific methodology as that of evidentialism and have concluded that Christ could not have rose from the dead. It is terribly unwise for the Christian to stake his apologetic on the shifting sands of "scientific" scholarship.

Scripture itself should be enough to dissuade a person from depending upon evidential arguments for Christ's resurrection. God's word makes clear that man's rebellion against the truth is morally, not intellectually, rooted. The sinner needs a changed heart and Spiritually opened eyes, not more facts and reasons. Moreover, proving the resurrection as a historical fact would have no effect as far as engendering belief in God's word. The only tool an apologete needs is the word of God, for the sinner will either presuppose its truth and find Christianity to be coherent and convincing (given his spiritual condition and past experience) or he will reject it and never be able to come to a knowledge of the truth. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31). God's word is sufficient in giving the sinner the necessary witness which can lead him to conversion; if he will not hear the inspired word of God, neither will he be moved by a human argument for the resurrection. A proof of the resurrection is certainly no more powerful than the living and bodily presence of the resurrected Savior before one's own eyes; yet we learn from Matthew 28:17 that even some of the eleven disciples of Christ *doubted* while in His resurrected presence! When one is not ready to submit to God's self-attesting word, no amount of evidence can persuade him - even compelling evidence for Christ's resurrection. When Christ met with two travelers on the road to Emmaus and found them doubtful about the resurrection, He rebuked them for being slow of heart to believe all that the *prophets* have spoken (Luke 24:25). Rather than offering them compelling evidence for His resurrection (by immediately opening their eyes to recognize Him), He made their hearts burn within them by expounding to them *the Scriptures*.

Therefore, for moral, methodological, material, and pragmatic reasons we should see the impropriety of arguing for the resurrection of Christ in an evidentialist fashion. Although evidence has a part in the Christian apologetic, it is not the pivotal and foundational part. While we may momentarily silence the belligerent claim of the skeptic by showing that even on his tacit assumptions the resurrection is not a sheer impossibility (as evidence would indicate), our central defense of the faith had better be made of stronger stuff. As Paul at Athens, we must demand a *complete*, change of world-outlook and presupposition (based on the authority of God's word) and not just a mere addition of a few *facts*.

(For further reading on evidences in apologetics see C. Van Til's *Christian-Theistic Evidences*)