The Case for Christianity

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

Dr. Stanford E. Murrell

As the church is too holy for a foundation of rottenness,
So she is too real for a foundation of mist.

Archbishop Alexander

I. First Proof: The Life of Jesus
   • The need for a fitting end to His life
   • Jesus anticipated His resurrection
   • The veracity of Christ is at stake if He did not rise

II. Second Proof: The Empty Grave
   • The theory of a swoon and a recovery in the tomb is impossible
   • There are only two alternatives
     ❖ His body must have been taken by human hands
       ➢ If friends how did they do it?
       ➢ If enemies, why did they do it?
     ❖ His body must have been taken by superhuman power
   • The position of the grave clothes prove the impossibility of the theft
   • The failure of the Jews to disprove the resurrection supports the same
   • The various forms of the Vision-theory are inadequate and impossible to explain the resurrection

III. Third Proof: Transformation of the Disciples
   • Devastation turned to delightful exaltation
   • The mere removal of the body could not have transformed them
   • Three days are not enough for a legend to spring up
   • Initially the disciples did NOT believe the first resurrection reports (Mark 16:11)
   • A hallucination involving 500 people at once and repeated several times over 40 days is unthinkable

IV. Fourth Proof: Existence of the Primitive Church
   • From the Book of Acts comes two simple facts
     ❖ The Christian society was gathered together by preaching
     ❖ The substance of the preaching was the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:41)
   • The early church knew its own history
V. Fifth Proof: The Witness of Paul
- Manifested in Paul’s personal testimony
- Manifested in Paul’s interviews with those who had seen the risen Christ
- Manifested in Paul’s own writings

VI. Sixth Proof: The Gospel Record
- Logically the final line of argument
- Two sets of appearances
  - Jerusalem
  - Galilee
- Two essential facts
  - The empty tomb
  - The appearance of Christ on the third day

VII. Summary and conclusion
- A miracle occurred
- A miracle is challenged

VIII. Theology of the Resurrection
- The resurrection is important as evidence of the validity of the work of Christ at Calvary (Rom. 1:14)
- The resurrection is important in evangelistic efforts (1 Cor 15:1-4; Rom 4:25)
- The resurrection of Christ is important to spiritual maturity (Rom 6)
- The resurrection of Christ becomes the basis for all future eschatology (1 Cor 15; Matt 27:52; Rom 8:11; Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:44)

Conclusion
The Case for Christianity

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

The Doctrine of the Resurrection has always been felt to be a vital part of the faith in Christianity. As a result, the most severe opponents have ultimately concentrated their attacks, and Christians have centered their defense, upon the resurrection. The subject of the resurrection is therefore of the greatest importance.

There are several converging lines of evidence proving the resurrection as it appears in the New Testament, and none can be overlooked. Each must have its place and weight. The issues at stake are so serious that nothing must be omitted. Consider then the Case for Christianity.

The first proof for the resurrection of Christ is the life of Jesus Himself. It is always a disappointment when a life, which begins well, finishes badly. We have a natural feeling for this concept when reading a story or watching a movie. Our heart’s desire is that a story should end well. This is especially true with Jesus Christ. A perfect life characterized by divine claims must not have it final end in a cruel and shameful death. It is not a fitting close. Surely death could not end everything after such a noble life.
The Gospels give the resurrection as the natural and logical completion of the story of Jesus Christ. There is no real doubt that Christ anticipated His own resurrection. At first Jesus used only words with hidden meaning such as, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." But later on He spoke plainly, and whenever He mentioned His death, He added, "The Son of man .... must be raised the third day."


The truthfulness of Christ is at stake if He did not rise from the dead. Surely the word of Christ must be given careful consideration. We are compelled to face the fact that the resurrection of which the Gospels speak is the resurrection of no ordinary man, but of Jesus—who is the Son of God.

A second proof for the resurrection of Christ is the empty grave and the disappearance of the body. That Jesus died and was buried, and that on the third morning the tomb was empty, cannot seriously be challenged. The theory of a swoon and a recovery in the tomb is impossible. The Roman soldiers who crucified Christ had stared death in the face too often. They would never have allowed the body to be taken from the Cross unless Christ was dead.

Moreover, at Christ's burial a stone was rolled before the tomb, the tomb was sealed, and a Roman guard was placed before it. Yet, on the third morning
the body had disappeared, and the tomb was empty. There are only two alternatives.

First, His body might have been taken out of the grave by human hands.

Second, His body might have been released by superhuman power.

If the hands were human hands, they must have been those of His friends or of His enemies.

If His friends had wished to take out His body, the question at once arises whether they could have done so in the face of the stone, the official seal, and the Roman guard.

If the enemies of Christ took the body, the immediate question would be, “Why?”

Why should His enemies do the very thing that would spread the report of His resurrection? As Chrysostom said, "If the body had been stolen, they could not have stolen it naked, because of the delay in stripping it of the burial clothes and the trouble caused by the drugs adhering to it" (Evidence for the Resurrection). The position of the grave-clothes proves the impossibility of the theft of the body for they were neatly folded and laid to one side.

Who could have done that?

Who would have done that?

How, too, is it possible to account for the failure of the Jews to disprove
the resurrection?

Not more than seven weeks after the great event, Peter preached in the city of Jerusalem the fact that Jesus had been raised. What would have been easier or more conclusive than for the Jews to have produced the dead body and silenced Peter forever? "The silence of the Jews is as significant as the speech of the Christians" (Fairbairn, *Studies in the Life of Christ*, 357).

The fact of the empty tomb with the disappearance of the body remains a problem to be faced.

The evidence for the empty tomb is sufficient to silence skeptics, and to prove that it was part of the basic belief of the first century.

It is important to realize the force of this evidence because it is a testimony to Paul's use of the term "third day" and to the Christian observance of the first day of the week. And yet in spite of this we are told that a belief in the empty tomb is impossible.

Some people try to argue that the resurrection was spiritual not physical. The argument is made that a spiritual resurrection would have given hope to the disciples whose hope died at Calvary. Furthermore, in a spiritual resurrection value is given to the life of Christ, while the belief in His bodily rising from the grave need not be insisted upon.
But how can anyone believe in a spiritual resurrection if the original belief in a literal resurrection was a mistake, not to say a fraud? The disciples found the tomb empty, and on the strength of the empty tomb they believed He had risen from the dead. How can the belief in a spiritual resurrection be true if the foundation of that belief, a literal physical resurrection, is false?

There is something else. The various forms of the Vision-Theory are now gradually but surely being regarded as inadequate and impossible. The Vision Theory of the resurrection says that the disciples of Jesus wanted to see the Lord again so badly they had a vision He was alive, but it was only a vision.

In order to embrace the Vision-Theory of the resurrection, almost every fact in the Gospel history must be changed, and new scenes and conditions be invented. Why should the disciples of Christ suddenly be given to visions? And why should they suddenly cease?

As devout Jews and students of the Old Testament Scripture, the disciples were familiar with the apparition or appearance of a spirit, like Samuel's. They were also familiar with the resuscitation of a body, like Lazarus.

However, what the disciples had not experienced or imagined was the fact of a spiritual body, the combination of a fleshly body and spirit in an entirely new form. In Christ they found a permanent resurrection.
The Vision Theory must be set aside along with the idea that the resurrection of Christ was only a spiritual influence upon the disciple to give them hope, and nothing more.

While the attempts continue to avoid belief in a literal and bodily resurrection of Christ, we come again to the insurmountable barrier of the empty tomb. The empty tomb, alongside the apostolic witness, withstands all the attacks of the Spiritual Influence and Vision Theories.

It is becoming more evident that these theories are entirely inadequate to account for the records in the Gospels, as well as for the place and power of those Gospels in the early church and in all subsequent ages.

There is a third proof for the resurrection of Christ and that is the transformation of the Disciples. The disciples had seen their Master die, and through that death they lost all hope. Yet hope returned three days after. On the day of the crucifixion twelve men were filled with sadness; on the first day of the week with gladness. At the crucifixion they were hopeless; on the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty.

When the message of the resurrection first came the disciples were unbelieving and hard to be convinced, but when once they became assured, they never doubted again. What could account for the astonishing change in these men in so short a time?
The mere removal of the body from the grave could never have transformed their spirits and characters. And three days are not enough for a legend to spring up which should so affect them. Time is needed for a process of legendary growth.

There is nothing more striking in the history of early Christianity than this marvelous change produced in the disciples by a belief in the resurrection of their Master. It is a psychological fact that demands a full explanation.

A fourth Proof for the resurrection of Christ is the very existence of the early Church. "There is no doubt that the church of the apostles believed in the resurrection of their Lord" (Burkitt, The Gospel History and Its Transmission, 74). The church of Christ came into existence as the result of a belief in the resurrection of Christ. When we consider its beginnings as recorded in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we see two simple and incontrovertible facts.

First, the Christian society was gathered together by preaching.

Second, the substance of the preaching was the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was put to death on a cross, and would therefore be rejected by Jews as accursed of God (Deut 21:23). Yet multitudes of Jews were led to worship Him (Acts 2:41), and a great company of priests to obey Him (Acts 6:7).
The only explanation of these facts is God's act of resurrection (Acts 2:36), for nothing short of it could have led to the Jewish acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Messiah. The apostolic church is therefore a result of a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The poet has written:

“If Easter be not true,
Then faith must mount on broken wings;
Then hope no more immortal spring;
Then love must lose her mighty urge;
Life prove a phantom, death a dirge—
(A hymn of sorrow)
If Easter be not true.

If Easter be not true.
‘Twere foolishness the cross to bear;
He died in vain Who suffered there;
What matter though we laugh or cry,
Be good or evil, live or die,
If Easter be not true?

If Easter be not true—
But it is true, and Christ is risen!
And mortal spirit from its prison
Of sin and death with Him may rise!
Worth while the struggle, sure the prize,
Since Easter, aye, is true!”

Henry H. Barstow
The conversion and work of Saul of Tarsus is a fifth line of proof for the resurrection of Christ. As a member of the Sanhedrin, as a Pharisee of the Pharisees, Saul was hostile to Christ—until he met the Majestic Master and his heart was changed (Acts 9). He who persecuted the faith began to preach and then to publish the gospel abroad through the power of the pen for all men to read.

Some years ago an article appeared (E. Medley, _The Expositor_, V, iv, 359) which raised an interesting rhetorical question as to what might be suggested to the mind of a non-Christian who examined Paul's earliest writing (1 Thessalonians). It was concluded that two points at least would stand out clearly—that Jesus Christ was killed (2:15) and that He was raised from the dead (4:14).

1 Thessalonians 2:15 _Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men:_

1 Thessalonians 4:14 _For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him._

Because First Thessalonians is usually dated about 51 AD—which is only about 22 years after the resurrection—there is force in this testimony. Had the resurrection not taken place, Paul’s writings would have been
challenged from the outset. But they were not challenged.

A few years later, in another epistle, there is a much fuller reference to the most glorious of all events which is the resurrection of the dead. Christ had taught this same concept.

Jesus said in John 5:28-29

“Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, 29 And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”

In the well-known chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle is concerned to prove the resurrection of all Christians in particular. Paul naturally points to the resurrection of Christ as his greatest evidence that one-day all the graves will split open and men shall live again.

To argue his case Paul provides a list of the various appearances of Christ, ending with one to himself 1 Corinthians 15:5-7. And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: 6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. 7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. Last of all he was seen of me also, as one born out of due time. ”

“Many people have seen the resurrected Christ,” said Paul.
“And I have seen him too.”

“Christ the Lord is risen today,  
   Alleluia!  
Sons of men and angels say  
   Alleluia!  
Raise your joys and triumphs high;  
   Alleluia!  
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply,  
   Alleluia!”

Charles Wesley

It is essential to give special attention to the nature and precise wording of Paul’s testimony. Listen again as he writes to the church of Corinth. "I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3 f).

With these words Paul is affirming that “within five years of the crucifixion of Jesus he was taught that ‘Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures’ " (Kennett, Interpreter, V, 267).

If we seek to appreciate the full importance of this testimony we have a right to draw the conclusion
"That within a very few years of the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus was, in the mind of at least one man of education, absolutely irrefutable" (Kennett, op.cit., V, 267).

Now notice next that Paul’s narrative includes one small but significant statement that reflects a very definite feature of the Gospel story—the mention of "the third day" (1 Cor. 15:4). When Jesus spoke of His resurrection the time element was very prominent.

Matthew 12:38 Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. 39 But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: 40 For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth .

Matthew 16:21 From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.

Matthew 17:23 And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry.
Matthew 20:19 And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.

Matthew 27:63 Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again.

It is obvious that when Christ taught about the resurrection He spoke of the third day and when His enemies spoke of the same event they mentioned the time element of the third day. And Paul spoke of it in His writings. Why? The answer is simply this. Paul believed the story of the empty tomb.

At a date when the recollection was fresh, when he could examine all the evidence for himself, when he could make the fullest possible inquiry of others, and when the fears and opposition of enemies would have made it impossible for the adherents of Jesus Christ to make any statement that was not absolutely true Paul believed in the story of the resurrection.

In view, therefore, of Paul's personal testimony to his own conversion, of his interviews with those who had seen Jesus Christ on earth before and after His resurrection, of the prominence given to the resurrection in the apostle's own teaching, the Church today may challenge afresh any attempts to disprove the resurrection.
The sixth line of proof of the resurrection is the record in the Gospels of the appearances of the risen Christ.

The Christian church believed in the resurrection for many years before the Gospels were written. Therefore, it is impossible for the Gospel records to be the church’s primary and most important evidence, but they are important.

According to the Gospel narratives there are two sets of appearances, one in Jerusalem and the other in Galilee. While we cannot examine each appearance in detail, it is profitable to call attention to two of them.

The first is the story of the walk to Emmaus as set forth in Luke 24:13-33.

The second is the visit of Peter and John to the tomb John 20:1-10. It is impossible to read these narratives and not be convinced of the literal truthfulness of the resurrection.

Either the resurrection is true or Luke was “a greater poet, a more creative genius, than Shakespeare” (Bishop Moule, *Meditations for the Church's Year*, 108). In both narratives there is the uniform testimony to the two facts: the empty grave, and the appearances of Christ on the third day.
Summary and Conclusion

When we examine carefully all the uniting lines of evidence, when we endeavor to give weight to all the facts of the case, it seems impossible to escape the truth that a physical miracle of a resurrection took place more than 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem. It was this miracle which the apostles believed in—and for which they died.

Tragically, much present-day thought refuses to accept the miraculous. Natural reasoning bars the way of religious belief for many by contending that miracles are impossible.

And even within the professing Church, Christians are told that they are not required to believe in the reanimation of a dead body.

One reason for such blatant unbelief is failure to comprehend that God can make new things. The Christian faith teaches that Christ Himself was a "new thing," (Luke 1:35) and that His coming as "God manifest in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16) was something absolutely unique.

Why then, are we surprised to discover that one day there will be a new body, physical but spiritual and suited for eternity?

Here is the conclusion of the matter. The bodily resurrection of Christ proves to be no difficulty when the believer is willing to let God be God—a sovereign Worker of miracles.
Theology of the Resurrection

The theology of the resurrection is very important in light of the high place of honor it is given it in the New Testament.

First, the resurrection is important as a testimony to the truthfulness of the work of Christ at Calvary. The resurrection is the proof of the atoning character of the death of Christ, and of His Deity and divine exaltation.

Romans 1:4 4 And [He, Jesus, is] declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:

Second, the resurrection is important in evangelistic efforts. The New Testament Church included testimony to the resurrection as one of its characteristic features, thereby proving to those who would listen the assurance of the divine redemption (1 Cor 15:1-4; Rom 4:25). The church offers hope to others.

Third, the resurrection of Christ is important to spiritual maturity. The resurrection is regarded as the source and standard of the holiness of the believer. Every aspect of the Christian life, from the beginning to the end, is somehow associated with the resurrection as per Romans 6.

Fourth, the resurrection of Christ becomes the basis for all future eschatology or hopes of heaven as well as a new earth. The resurrection of Christ guarantees the believer's resurrection (1 Cor 15).
As the bodies of the saints arose (Matt 27:52), so ours are to be quickened (Rom 8:11), and made like Christ's glorified body (Phil 3:21), thereby becoming spiritual bodies (1 Cor 15:44), that is, bodies ruled by their spirits and yet bodies.

These points offer only the barest outline of the fullness of New Testament teaching concerning the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ. We invite you to continue to study and then set before others the case for Christianity. Let us go forth saying,

“Lives again our glorious King;
   Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
   Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave?
   Alleluia!”