

# The Doctrine of the Resurrection of Jesus in the Writings of the Fathers of the Early Centuries of the Church

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## I. The Scope of the Paper.

The question of the resurrection of the body was a very live issue in the first centuries of the Christian era.<sup>1</sup> The many treaties on the subject give testimony to this.<sup>2</sup> The early writers give clear indication also that they understood the practical value of this doctrine in the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Nygren, in his *Agape and Eros*, considers the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh one of the chief characteristics of the Agape type of Christianity, while the denial of the resurrection, according to him, is one of the marks by which the Eros motif can be recognized, since one of the chief tendencies of this type of Christianity is the longing of the soul to be freed from the body.<sup>4</sup>

However, the scope of this paper is not the doctrine of the resurrection as such, but it is our intention to limit ourselves to the doctrine of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus in the writings of the fathers of the early centuries of the Church.

## II. Importance of the Subject.

The importance of the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus in the life and teaching of the Church ought to be apparent to every Christian. It ought therefore to be of vital interest to us to learn the attitude of the early Church to this doctrine. How important it is we often fail to realize until we read a book such as Schweitzer's *Quest* and see that the last paragraph of the book proper speaks in a deeply sympathetic way of the death of Jesus and then comes to an abrupt end. The feeling of hopelessness and despair that such an approach to the life of Christ leaves in the heart of a child of God is one of the clearest indications that one can have of the necessity of the resurrection of our Lord. What Schweitzer says in his epilog does not serve to dispel the gloom.

The study of this particular doctrine is of special interest also in view of the treatment of this doctrine in the modern Church. If you will bear with the opinion of one who stands apart from the stream of liberalism and fundamentalism, it seems to me that liberalism has for all practical purposes made the resurrection of little value by spiritualizing it away.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, to one who looks at fundamentalism from the outside with great sympathy, it seems that the fundamentalist's emphasis on the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus on the blood of the Lamb, (and I do not believe that this can be overemphasized) has sometimes at least been at the expense of emphasis on the victory of the King of kings over sin and death and the devil by his glorious resurrection from the dead, the foundation-stone of the Christian hope.

## III. The Bibliography.

It became quite clear to me at the outset of this study that it would be necessary to go to the writings of the Fathers themselves for adequate information on the subject. The histories of dogma that were available to me do not treat this subject in any detail. Hagenbach in his analysis of the early patristic treatment of the work of Christ does not even mention the resurrection.<sup>6</sup> Loofs and Seeberg mention it, as does Klotsche, but usually the references are incidental and for the most part consist of nothing more than an indication that the resurrection of the Lord is mentioned by the writer under discussion.<sup>7</sup> The only writer in the field whose work I read who treats the subject with any regularity and seeks to evaluate the evidence is McGiffert.<sup>8</sup> But McGiffert's treatment is unsatisfactory from another angle. A man who insists that Paul's view of the resurrection was completely spiritual has surely not understood 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>9</sup> A man who insists that the resurrection was not very important to the apostles (with the exception of Paul) has certainly misread the Gospels.<sup>10</sup> A man who states that the resurrection of Christ is mentioned only four times in the Apostolic Fathers is careless with the evidence.<sup>11</sup>

## IV. The Doctrine of the Resurrection in the New Testament.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the Savior is central in the teaching of the New Testament. Every one of the four Gospels ends with an account of the resurrection and the evidences of its reality. It would be difficult to imagine the Gospels without those last chapters in Matthew and Mark and Luke and John. Without it the only message left in the Church would have been, "We trusted that it should have been He, which should have redeemed Israel."

And it seems that the Gospel account anticipates all the objections which are raised against the truth and, reality of the resurrection, or which seek to spiritualize it completely. They touched him, they felt him, they saw him in the flesh, they laid their fingers into the print of the nails, they saw him eat and drink before them. There can be no question that the fact of the resurrection is one of the emphases of the Gospel account.

This doctrine was also central in the preaching of the apostolic Church. The reader of the book of Acts cannot fall to notice that in the preaching of the apostles it is the resurrection which holds the position of greatest prominence. It is mentioned just as often as the death of Christ and often at greater length. The sermon of Peter on Pentecost is a case in point. The emphasis here is certainly on the resurrection. It is true, of course, that every time the resurrection is mentioned, the death is assumed. It may not be so clear to us that every time the death is mentioned, the resurrection should also be connected with it in the New Testament presentation of the subject.

It would be impossible, of course, in the time at our disposal to go into a detailed analysis of the number of times that the resurrection is mentioned in the New Testament. Even a very cursory reading of the inspired writings will bring the conviction that the preaching of the crucified Christ always included also the preaching of the victorious, risen, and reigning Christ. It might also be said that it would be a mistake to count the number of times that the word is mentioned directly and to take this as the measure of the importance of the subject. Behind the thought of the whole New Testament there stands the image of the living Lord.

Very briefly then we should like to list the applications which are made of the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ in the New Testament for it is here that we can see clearly how great a role this doctrine played in the early apostolic Church.

- 1) It is a proof of the Authority of Jesus (John 2:18-22), establishes him as the Lord of the Church (Acts 2:36), and proves him to be the mighty Son of God (Ro1: 4).
- 2) It is a fulfillment of prophecy and thus is one of the proofs for the Messiahship of Jesus. (Lk 24:48; 1 Co 15:4; Mt 12:38-40; Ac 2:24-36; 13:30-37).
- 3) The risen Lord is the source of the Church's power, (Acts 4:13-16) for it is He who sends the Holy Spirit to the Church (Jn 16:7; Ac 1:4-8).
- 4) It is the actual declaration of acquittal pronounced upon us, for he was raised for our justification (Ro 4:25) and as such it is the source of our assurance of forgiveness (1 Co 15:17). It is the risen Lord who speaks peace to his disciples (Jn 20:21-23). The forgiveness of sins is proclaimed on the basis of the resurrection (Lk 24:46.47; Ac 13:37.38).
- 5) The resurrection is the source of the Church's hope (1 Pe 1:3).
- 6) It is the basis of our Christian faith (1 Co 15:14; Ro 10:9) and the evidence of the truth of the Christian religion, that is, the truth of Christianity stands and falls with the resurrection of Christ (1 Co 15:15).
- 7) It is the source of sanctifying power in the lives of God's people (Ro 6:4-11; Php 3:8-16; Gal 2: 20; Eph 2:5).
- 8) It is a constant call to otherworldliness (Col 3: 1,2).
- 9) It is the proof of the Savior's power over death and the grave (Rev. 1:1.8; Ac 2:24). And therefore the pledge and seal of our own resurrection (Ro 8:11-9 2 Co 4; 14; 1 Co 6:14; Jn 14:19; 1 Th 4:13-18; 1 Co 15:20).
- 10) It is, finally, one of the great stumbling-blocks, along with the crucifixion, in the Christian Gospel (Ac 17:32).

## **V. The Resurrection of Christ in the Early Fathers.**

It would be a mistake if, in considering the subject of the resurrection of the Savior in the writings of the early Church Fathers, we would simply scan the writings of these men for references which make specific mention of the event, and then on the basis of the number of times that an author alludes to the doctrine, evaluate the importance laid on this doctrine by the father in question. McGiffert make a double mistake therefore when he seems to imply that in very early times the doctrine was not of primary importance by saying that the resurrection of Christ is referred to only four times in the apostolic fathers. Nevertheless it may be of some interest to list the various writings of the post-apostolic period and record the number of times the resurrection is alluded to in these writings.

Clement mentions	2 times
The Shepherd Of Hermas	0 times
The Letters of Ignatius	
Ephesians	1 (2) times
Trallians	2 (3) times
Magnesians	2 times
Philadelphians	2 (3) times
Smyrnaeans	5 times
Romans	2 times
Polycarp	0 times
The Letter of Polycarp	5 times
The Letter of Barnabas	2 times
II Clement	0 times
The Didache	0 times
The Epistle of Diognetus	0 times
The First Apology of Justin	5 times
The Second Apology of Justin	0 times
The Dialogue with Trypho	19 times

It is necessary to read these works, however, to realize that these figures do not tell the whole story. Throughout these early writings there is displayed a consciousness of the fact that Christ is risen and alive. Though the resurrection lay not be mentioned in so many words, yet he is constantly thought of as the living Lord, who reigns eternally in the heavens and who will come again to judge the quick and the dead.

About the fact of the resurrection there is no question. The earliest form of the Apostle's Creed, which goes back at least to the beginning of the second century,<sup>12</sup> if not before, almost certainly contained a confession in regard to the resurrection of the Lord.<sup>13</sup> One cannot fail to notice that often in the writings of the earliest fathers there is a reference to the events in sequence as we find them mentioned in the Creed. Especially is this noticeable when there seems to be no reason in the context for mentioning all the events. It would almost seem at times that the mere mention of the name of Jesus was occasion enough to call forth a reference to his mighty acts. Psychologically such would be the case if the writers were used to repeating the phrases in sequence. The following examples will help to make this clear:

Jesus Christ, our Teacher, was crucified and dead, and rose again and ascended into heaven.<sup>14</sup>

Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified and rose again and ascended into heaven, and will come again to judge all men.<sup>15</sup>

Who became man by the Virgin, who suffered, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate by your nation, who died who rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.<sup>16</sup>

Who was truly born ... He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and died... He was also truly raised from the dead.<sup>17</sup>

It may be pointed out that the repetition of "truly" in this last example is significant. It indicates that there were those who cast doubt upon the resurrection, but in the opinion of Ignatius, such people are no Christians, for he says:

He suffered truly, even as also He truly raised up Himself, not as certain unbelievers maintain, that He only seemed to suffer, as they themselves only seem to be (Christians)."<sup>18</sup>

As far as Ignatius was concerned, the resurrection was "fully proved".<sup>19</sup> The same may also safely be asserted of all the other post-apostolic fathers. Justin even insists that the Jews know that he was risen.<sup>20</sup>

But when all this has been said, it is, nevertheless, true that the resurrection does not occupy as important a place in the thinking of the post-apostolic fathers as it had in the theology of the New Testament. For the most part the references to the resurrection seem to be more or less incidentals sometimes even formal, and the doctrine does not seem to have a vital significance for the Christian. It often seems to be little more than a fact which is believed and its significance for the Christian hope and the Christian life is not as clearly outlined as it is in the writings of the apostles.

Yet, in a general way, the outlines of the apostolic preaching are for the most part preserved. As in the preaching of Peter, the resurrection is viewed as a fulfillment of prophecy and therefore as proof of the Messiahship of the Lord. This is done particularly, in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*,<sup>21</sup> in which the apologist quotes one Old Testament passage after another to show that the resurrection was foretold and that therefore the risen Jesus must be indeed the Messiah promised by God through the ancient prophets. The quotations are sometimes far-fetched, and he makes the weirdest allegorical interpretations, as for example, when he speaks of the eight people saved in the ark as an indication that Christ would rise on the eighth day,<sup>22</sup> but the New Testament emphasis is clear.

This stress on the resurrection as a proof of the Messiahship of Jesus, which is not found in any of the other fathers covered in this study, may help us understand why some of the emphases and applications of the resurrection found in the New Testament are not found in the apostolic and post-apostolic fathers. The *Dialogue* of Justin was intended to convince the Jews of the truth of Christianity, while most of the other writings of this period are addressed to Gentile Christians, to whom the resurrection as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy would not have the same vital significance that it would have for a Jew, who needed to be convinced that Jesus is the Messiah if he was to be convinced that he was the Redeemer.

If this conclusion is correct and valid, it may help us to understand some of the more glaring gaps in this subject in the post-apostolic writings. If the *Dialogue* of Justin had been lost we would have no reference to this aspect of the resurrection in post-apostolic times. This serves once more to underscore the warning that we must always remember that the literature is extremely limited and that we must always be on our guard against drawing either positive or negative conclusions from the silence of the fathers.

But to continue. The resurrection is also viewed as an evidence of the truth of the Christian religion and as a source of conviction and assurance for the Christian faith. Clement, speaking of the preaching of the apostles, states that they were fully assured by the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> Ignatius has an interesting passage which is difficult to interpret but which seems to say that the authority for the Christian faith lies in the cross and death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>24</sup> The resurrection was also the source and fountain of the courage and conviction with which the disciples carried on their work and faced persecution and death.<sup>25</sup>

The fathers also looked upon the resurrection as a proof of the future resurrection of the Christians. Clement wrote: "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 firstfruits by raising him from the dead."<sup>26</sup> The same thought, namely that the resurrection of Christ is the pledge of our resurrection is expressed in Barnabas,<sup>27</sup> Polycarp,<sup>28</sup> Ignatius,<sup>29</sup> Justin,<sup>30</sup> and in Irenaeus.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that this use is made of the doctrine so often is not surprising when we remember that in the Greek world in which matter had become almost synonymous with evil through the influence of Plato, the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh was one of the chief stumbling-blocks in the Gospel which the Church preached.

One of the more common uses made in the early fathers of the resurrection of Christ was to give an explanation of the practice of celebrating Sunday as a holy day. The letter of Barnabas says, "We keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose from the dead."<sup>32</sup> Justin in his *First Apology* writes, "Sunday is the day on which we hold our common assembly because.... Jesus Christ, our Savior, on the same day arose from the dead."<sup>33</sup> Interesting in this connection is the fact that by Ignatius Sunday is called the Lord's Day, as in the book of Revelation, and it is specifically distinguished from the Sabbath, as the day on which the Lord rose from the dead.<sup>34</sup>

These would seem to be the chief emphases on the resurrection of Jesus as found in the early fathers. There are isolated passages in which, the resurrection is looked upon as the source of Christian joy<sup>35</sup> and of Christian hope,<sup>36</sup> and as an indication of the superiority of the New Testament over the Old Testament.<sup>37</sup> It may be also that in some instances a connection is made between the resurrection and the sanctified life of the believer, although the connection is not very clear. We append several quotations in which this may seem to be the case, so that the individual may draw his own conclusions. Polycarp writes:

Serve the Lord in fear and truth, as those who have forsaken the vain, empty talk and error of the multitude, and believed in Him who raised up our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory, and a throne at His right hand. To Him all things in heaven and earth are subject. Him every spirit serves. He comes to the Judge of the living and the dead. His blood will God require of those who do not believe in Him. But He who raised Him up from the dead will raise up us also, if we do His will, and walk in His commandments, and love what He loved, keeping us from all unrighteousness.<sup>38</sup>

Ignatius writes to the Magnesians:

If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death.... how shall we be able to live apart from Him, whose disciples the prophets themselves in the Spirit did wait for Him as their Teacher?<sup>39</sup>

It will be seen that if there is indeed a connection between the resurrection and the sanctified life of the believer it is rather vague.

There are certain notes which are not sounded in these writings and which we are used to hearing in the New Testament. McGiffert makes special mention of the fact that Justin does not use the resurrection to prove the divine Sonship of Jesus nor to do away with the shame of the cross.<sup>40</sup> The same may be said about the other writers of the period. We miss also the teaching of Paul that there is a close relation between the power operating in the Church and in the life of the individual Christian on the one hand and the risen Christ on the other although, as we said, there may be vague indications of such a connection.

But most of all do we miss the stress on the resurrection of Christ as the validation of the work of Christ and as the pledge and assurance of our justification before God. Time and time again in the New Testament, the resurrection is closely associated with the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins and with the justification of the sinner in the sight of God. We can only hope that these early writers, at least many of them, understood the doctrine of justification by faith on account of the vicarious work of Jesus Christ more clearly than they indicate in their writings.

Just one more remark. While this paper covers only the writings of the very early fathers, it seems to me, from previous acquaintance with some of the later fathers, especially in the east, that as time went on, the incarnation of Christ became far more significant in the thought of the Church than the resurrection, but this may well serve as a topic for future study.

#### **ENDNOTES:**

- 1 Seeberg, p. 117.
- 2 Justin is said to have written a treatise on the subject (Tixeront-Raemers, p. 39). So did Athenagoras, Origen, Peter of Alexandria, Methodius, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Gregory of Nyssa, Diodorus of Tarsus.
- 3 Seeberg, p. 139.
- 4 Op. cit., p. 217ff.
- 5 See e. g. W. M. Horton: *A Psychological Approach to Theology*, Harper, N. Y., 1943, pp.7161f. Also *Our Eternal Contemporary*, Harper, N. Y., 1942, chapter II. Also Wieman's treatment of the resurrection in his *Source of Human Good*.
- 6 Hagenbach, pp, 136-156.
- 7 Seeberg, pp. 64; 66; 69; 70; 73; 84; 125; 129; 134; 153. Loofs pp. 19; 21; 31; 49; 57. Klotsche, pp. 19; 21;27. .
- 8 McGiffert, pp.10f; 18f; 20; 23; 33; 34; 39; 40; 94; 107; 118f; 120; 136; 146; 154; 157; 159; 201; 244; 262; 273.
- 9 Ibid. pp. 16-29.
- 10 Ibid. p. 10
- 11 Ibid. p. 94.
- 12 Loofs, p, 17.
- 13 McGiffert, p, 157.
- 14 Justin, First Apology, xxi.
- 15 Justin, Dial. Trypho, cxxxii.

- 16 Ibid. lxxxv
- 17 Ignatius, Trallians, ix
- 18 Ignatius, Smyrnaeans, ii; cp. also Trallians, vi.
- 19 Ignatius, Smyrnaeans, vii.
- 20 Dial. Tryp. xvii
- 21 op. cit. xvii; xxxi; xxxii; xxxvi; li; liii; lxxiii; lxxv; lxxxv; xcvi; c; cvi; cvii; cviii; cxviii.
- 22 Ibid. cxxxviii
- 23 I Clement, xiii
- 24 Ignatius, Philadelphians, viii.
- 25 Ignatius, Smyrnaeans, iii. Justin, Dial. Tryp. cvi.
- 26 I Clement, xxiv.
- 27 Op. cit., v.
- 28 Philippians, ii.
- 29 Trallians, ix.
- 30 First Apology, xlii.
- 31 McGiffert, p. 136.
- 32 Op. cit., xv.
- 33 Op. cit., lxvii; Cp. also Dial. Tryph. xli; cxxxviii,
- 34 Magnesians, ix.
- 35 Justin, First Apology, xlii.
- 36 Ignatius, Magn., xi.
- 37 Ignatius, Philad. ix.
- 38 Op. cit., ii
- 39 Op. cit., ix.

40 McGiffert, p. 107.