

ARTICLE V.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD JESUS THE
CENTRAL FACT IN CHRISTIANITY.

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CHRISTIANITY in its last analysis consists of two elements, a person and a fact—Jesus and the resurrection. In this, it is in striking contrast with every other faith. To religious systems born of man any person or fact is unessential. The character of their founders or promulgators does not affect their truth or efficacy. But take away Jesus from Christianity, and you have rendered impossible a life which must begin with trust in a person, and whose every breath is love to a Saviour and obedience to a Master. If the resurrection of Jesus can be disproved, if it can be shown that he is dead and not living, Christian faith is completely destroyed. It knows no life but in a risen Lord.

As this feature of Christianity is unique, so the person and the fact are both unique. This assertion, so far as it relates to the character and person of Jesus, has so frequently been made and illustrated, history and fiction have been so often challenged to produce a character even approaching the one presented in the Gospels, marvelous in its identification with humanity, yet marvelously separate, that it needs only be mentioned. It is not always remembered that the resurrection is equally unique. All other religious teachers and leaders are dead; of Jesus alone can it be said that he is living. For the resurrection is not synonymous with a future existence. Belief in a life beyond the grave is a permanent conviction of the race. It

has prevailed always and everywhere. Mr. Buckle insists that it is a truth resting upon the universal instinct of mankind. No religion, however foolish, has ever fancied that the death of the body is the cessation of existence. It was not the immortality of Jesus that the apostles were forbidden by the Sanhedrin to preach, but his resurrection. The Athenians did not deride Paul's presentation of man's existence after the death of the body, for in that they believed; it was when they heard of a resurrection from the dead that they mocked.

The person and the fact are joined in the condition of our salvation: "If thou confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe with thine heart that God has raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." The resurrection is the basis of our acceptance: "It is imputed to us for righteousness if we believe on him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead." It is the ground for our justification: "He was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification." It is the source, as it is the standard, of all Christian living: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God." It is the highest Christian attainment: "I willingly suffer the loss of all things that I may know him and the power of his resurrection." It is the measure of God's power in the saints: "That ye may know what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead." Without it, there is no Christianity and no salvation: "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, ye are yet in your sins." The resurrection is the beginning, the sustentation, and the consummation of the Christian life. The birth, the earthly life, the death of Christ, are never spoken of as the objects of justifying faith; wherever any fact in the gospel history is mentioned in that

connection, it is always the resurrection. The birth, the life, the death, are indispensable to salvation, but they all would be inefficacious without the resurrection. Christ came into this world to die, and he died in order that he might live. "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again."

The central fact of Christianity, then, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. I need not say that this is by no means the universal faith of Christendom. The theology of all sacramental systems is the theology of the Incarnation. A large and increasing class of Christians sympathize with this theology, asserting that the human life of Christ is the gospel, and that preaching the gospel consists in rehearsing the story narrated by the Evangelists. They tell us that the religious glory of the nineteenth century is its rediscovery of Jesus Christ; that the emphasis is now rightly laid on what Jesus *began* to do and teach, and not on what he continued to do after his resurrection; that the watchwords of the Christian host are "Back to Christ," "Back to the Gospels." The systematic treatises of theology now received with the most favor teach us that the resurrection is not soteriological; its only value is evidential and confirmatory. It is asserted that when Christ resumed his place in the heavens he laid aside forever the relations which he assumed in coming to earth, "that God appeared for a time among men in the person of Christ, and that then Christ was re-absorbed into the infinite ocean of the divine peace and lost in the brightness of the divine glory." Of course, if this be true there is no such person now as Jesus Christ.

And if all we can say of Jesus is that he was born, that he lived, that he died, Christ must be to us, what it is to be feared he is to a great many Christians, only a memory—a sweet and blessed memory, but a memory only. The historic Christ cannot be the object of saving faith and

love; his memory may be tenderly and affectionately cherished, but this is all that can be done. It is not possible to love the dead with that affection with which the living are loved. If it were, it would be an awful sin, when the marriage relation has been sundered by death, for the survivor to love and marry another. If we can deny the contrast made by Peter on the day of Pentecost, if we must affirm that Jesus and David are now in the same condition, if all we can say of Jesus is what we must say of David, that he is dead, then Christ cannot fulfil the promise to his disciples that he would be with them. If Jesus is dead, he cannot answer prayer; if Jesus is dead, he cannot save us; we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son; but, being reconciled, we are saved by his life. Because he ever lives to make intercession for us, he is able to save to the uttermost.

So that the most important event in the history of the world is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The most important fact now is the existence of Jesus Christ a living Saviour, at the right hand of the Father, the Head of the church, and the Ruler over all things.

It may not be amiss to glance at some considerations which give the resurrection the place which it occupies in the Christian faith, and which it ought to occupy in the preaching of the gospel.

Christianity in its experience and realization is life, spiritual life, eternal life. "I am come," says Christ, "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." "I am the resurrection and the life." In that wonderful chapter which may be called our Lord's report to his Father of his earthly work, the foundation sentence is, "Thou gavest him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him." On the day of Pentecost—the birthday of the church—the resurrection life was imparted. Its first, most

natural, and most appropriate manifestation was the expression in ecstatic utterance of spiritual emotion and spiritual thought. The personality of the new life, its divinity, its sphere and purpose, are all shown in the employment of speech, the highest endowment and noblest characteristic of the rational nature, to utter, in all the languages of earth, the wonderful works of God. Devout men out of every nation under heaven listened in amazement to the outpourings of this new life. Well they might. What wonderful transformation is here! Transformation, mental, moral, spiritual. To these Galileans a new nature has been imparted. They are new creatures in Christ Jesus. The old indecision, ignorance, timidity, weakness, have vanished. Spiritual illumination, fearlessness, strength, have taken possession, and these men have suddenly become aggressive and triumphant. They have been lifted at once and permanently to a higher plane and into a loftier sphere. What spiritual grasp is theirs! How clear their vision of divine things! They open the Old Testament Scriptures and expound the dealings of God with clear comprehension. They look forward to the future as it glows in the light of the purposes of God, and unfold them to their hearers.

The new life creates a love as new as itself; ties more powerful than all former affections find appropriate expression in associations and unions heretofore unknown to earth. It asserts its connection with the living Lord to be so vital, continuous, and intimate, that it must interpret for itself his commandments and obey them in spite of all other religious authority. It triumphs over opposition, draws support from every hindrance, transmutes all things into nutriment, defends itself against internal corruption and external foes. It creates its own forms of action, and provides for the permanent exercise of its functions. There is no sign of life which you will not find in the first twelve

chapters of the book of the Acts; in the Epistles, that life develops in every direction, pervading heaven and earth, availing itself of all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus, adapting itself to every earthly emergency, and providing for every possible need. Life, life, abounding life, life hid with Christ in God, life eternal, incorruptible, undefiled, is the essence of Christianity.

There is no sadder proof of the departure of much that is called Christianity from the faith of the gospel than its dethronement of life and its enthronement of death. It would be incredible, were it not so common, that some who love Christ have put death in his place, and made death,—the last enemy, the penalty of sin, the symbol of all that is repugnant to the nature of God,—synonymous with the Saviour. It is needless to say that the farther one goes from spiritual Christianity the more is death exalted. The Roman Church, whose conception of Christ practically begins and ends with his earthly life, has covered Europe with images of the dead or dying Christ. Alike in painting and sculpture, in the matchless picture of Rubens or the rude workmanship of the village artist, you look upon the limp and lifeless limbs of the Lord Jesus; always Christ under the power of death. In church, in chapel, and in cathedral, death is canonized. On the high altar, holding the place of honor, is the grinning and ghastly skeleton. The bones of the dead underlie the slab on which you tread; they are builded into the walls; they meet your gaze in every direction; Rome's mightiest miracles are wrought by them. And yet under the old dispensation, the touch of the dead excluded from the public worship of Jehovah; the high priest must not come into the divine presence wearing a badge of mourning even for the wife of his bosom. Oh, when the church has mastered the last of the ten words of the gospel, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life"; when men have entered into the fullness of

“the Life” as they have into “the Way”; when this last great verity has been experienced as has been the first; when, like that, it pervades every exhortation, is sung in song, and breathed in prayer,—then will the Lord of life come to his church who has clothed herself in life, for the bride will be adorned for her husband! The Lord hasten the day!

In the resurrection are contained all the doctrines of Christianity; it holds in its grasp every distinctive Christian verity.

The thoughtful reader of the book of the Acts will see that the sermons and addresses of the first Christian preachers, so far as the record goes, are restricted to a single truth. In Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, in his subsequent addresses to the Jews, in his sermon in the house of Cornelius, in Paul’s addresses at Antioch, in Thessalonica, one fact is pressed on the heart and conscience—“God has made Jesus, who was crucified, both Lord and Christ, and has exalted him to be a Prince and Saviour, to give repentance and remission of sins. And we are witnesses of these things, and so is also the Holy Ghost, which God has given to those who obey him.” “With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” Their work—the work of the church—our work—is threefold: first, to bear testimony to the fact of the resurrection; second, to know its power; third, to develop and expound its meaning. In the resurrection inheres every truth, every gift, every spiritual endowment, every exhortation, every hope, every promise, every threatening. The Epistles develop and expand the resurrection. In their profoundest depths, in their loftiest flights, in their widest sweep, there is nothing which is not contained in the primal apostolic statement. Let us look at this for a moment.

Christianity, as it is finally formulated in the Epistles, may be succinctly stated thus:—

The experience of the world has proved that man cannot, by any act of his, attain righteousness. He is under law, and by law righteousness is impossible. All human history, a history which makes one shudder to read, attests this. It is attested by the painful struggles, so ineffectual, of every soul that has felt its own moral condition and has striven to change it. Such a struggle ends always in absolute despair. Its dying shriek is, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Unless God interpose, there is no deliverance. The flesh must die and be succeeded by the spirit. Over the great chasm between the flesh and the spirit must some one go, able himself to cross it, and able to bear also the helpless soul to the realms of life and love and grace. Whoever does this must be sinless and divine. His death must be substituted for the death of those whom he would save. For them he must close the old life, and begin the new. "So Christ once suffered for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit." On the one side are nature, law, death; on the other grace, spirit, life. Closed forever, the natural, the earthly, the fleshly; opened forever, the gracious, the heavenly, the spiritual. Need I say that just this, and all this, is in the doctrine of the resurrection?

Or the articles of our faith may be taken in detail. How clearly is taught here a man's state by nature,—depraved, ruined, helpless, incapable of reformation, demanding absolutely a new creation. How clearly appears the nature of Christ—God and man, the last Adam, a life-giving spirit, possessed of a divine nature, and able to impart it. How clearly appears his work as the sinner's substitute, redemption by his blood. How clearly is shown the nature of regeneration and the radical change wrought in it; the personality and divinity of the Holy Spirit, his work and his relation to the new life.

The nature of the church is no less emphatically declared. It is not the continuation of the Old Dispensation; it is the resurrection body which the Holy Spirit has prepared for Christ, a body in whose heart is written the will of its divine head. The distinctive ordinance of the church—the Communion—by its very name declares its character and purpose. It is primarily a communion, then a commemoration and a covenant. We cannot hold communion with the dead. All attempts at this are forbidden by the word of God. We show the Lord's death, not his dying; a fact, and not an act; consequently we commune, not by gazing on a spectacular scene, but by eating and drinking, drawing our life from him who died that we might live. Just as Paul preached a crucified Christ, by which he meant not the crucifixion, but a living Messiah who had been crucified,—so we partake of him, who, through his death for us, now gives a life to us. That life imparted and nourished is not the Bethlehem life, but the risen life; not the life begun in the flesh, but that begun in the Spirit; not that life which closed in darkness on Calvary, but that life which is incorruptible, undefiled, and which fadeth not away.

The resurrection determines the whole Christian life. It answers every question of duty as well as doctrine. Read the Epistles, and see how every practical difficulty finds its solution in the fact that the Christian is in the sphere of the heavenlies, his citizenship is above, he lives in the Spirit and walks by the Spirit, with his only law that which is of the very essence of God—the law of love.

The Christian future no less clearly grows out of the resurrection. A new heart demands a new body; and "if the Spirit of him who raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also make alive your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." A new heart and a new body demand a

new environment; and "we, according to his promise, look for a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness."

The resurrection refutes all the theories which deny Christianity and all those which pervert Christianity.

The manifestations of error are multiform, but the root is one. In the first chapter of the Romans, Paul states the great, primal, all-pervading sin of men, "they worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator." Trace back sin through all its ramifications, and this will be found always at the source. Pantheism, polytheism, nature, law, whatever be the face or the voice, the animating principle is the same. It pervades every system, it finds expression in the forms of speech, it shapes the thought and discourse of the world, philosophic or barbarian. Or to put it in a slightly different form; there is but one truth and but one falsehood. The truth is the personality of God. The falsehood is the denial of this personality. The voices which fill the air now, the continual cry of "nature," "the laws of nature," "the teachings of nature," "the life according to nature," "the action of law," "process," "tendency,"—these are only the names of the sin which entered the world at the fall, homage paid to that which is made and denied to the Maker. Only two philosophies are possible—the Christian and the pantheistic. These are in deadly conflict, and the whole earth is the battle-field.

One of the most popular theories at the present time is what is called the theory of evolution. I do not now speak of all theories which may be called by that name, but of that whose "cardinal principle is but the development of ideas and tendencies inherent in human nature—human nature in the strict sense of the word, a nature not influenced nor disturbed by any alien or supernatural forces." This is an absolute denial of the possibility of any supernatural interposition in man's behalf; every religious result

must be produced by the natural workings of causes inherent in human nature, and is to be explained by the religious and social condition of the people where the result appeared. Miracles are incredible; prayer has, and can have, only subjective influence; and God, if there be a God, is the only being in the universe he made, if he did make it, who cannot answer the petition of a suppliant. All other beings, even to the brute, can use established physical laws to accomplish their purposes; he is the only one, who must look and listen and be absolutely impotent; more helpless than the Pharisees of old, he cannot lift a finger to help the most burdened of men.

The subtle influence of this poison is the cause why some pulpits are preaching a religion without a God, and a salvation without a Saviour. Forgiveness of sins is impossible, for there is no penalty to sin but the natural results of sin, the work of an inviolable and invariable law with which it would be wrong for God to interfere. Public prayer becomes a religious soliloquy,—graceful, pathetic, beautiful,—drawing us into communion with him who prays, and not with Him to whom the prayer is addressed. Preaching portrays human emotions, struggles, aspirations, and is valued in proportion as it confines itself to earthly relations. The hymns are the counterparts of the prayers, human and subjective. If there be a cross in them, it is a cross of natural sorrow, of asceticism and not of death, it bears on its outstretched arms no atoning Christ.

Now before the face of the resurrection throne all such soulless theories flee away, and there is found no place for them. The resurrection is a miracle, the mightiest of miracles. It is a supernatural interposition, accomplishing a result which no worshiper of nature ever fancied possible. It is the intensest assertion of personality and of will. It is a prophecy as well as a miracle. It not only declares every great truth, but it refutes and demolishes every error.

He who holds this doctrine in its due proportion and relations will be armed at all points; his armor of righteousness will be on the right hand and on the left; he has the Ithuriel spear by which the true character of every plausible system of falsehood will be at once revealed.

We have glanced at the theories avowedly antagonistic to a supernatural revelation. Let us look at some which nestle within the pale of the Christian church. The garb is changed, but the voice is still the same. Out from behind every mask beam the features of our old foe. "Nature" is still the cry. "Law" continues to be the watchword. Grace is acknowledged, but still "law" reigns. Redemption is preached, but it is the redemption of our "nature." So the incarnation becomes the center of faith. This is the root error of our modern theology. In one form or another the ruinous dogma that the incarnation redeems man, is advocated in the majority of nominal Christian pulpits—pulpits that in other respects are as wide apart as the poles. From whole communions, we hear that Christ came to redeem human nature, that he took our nature upon him, with all its exposures and liabilities, that he might redeem it and unite it to God. The sin and guilt of humanity is put away. The second Adam is the new head of the race; the first Adam brought the race under condemnation; the other brought it into a state of reconciliation and justification. Every soul, ere it has reached a free personal life, is lost in the one and saved in the other. To use the words of one of the advocates of this faith, "Christ, the new beginning of redeemed humanity, imparted his exalted nature just as effectually and universally as the first Adam had imparted his corrupt nature to the whole of his descendants."

The resurrection sweeps all this away. Of all things it is preëminently personal and objective. In it we become partakers of Christ's nature; he does not become a partaker

of ours. By it he is not united to us; we are united to him. We are members of his body, and of his flesh, and of his bones. Christ redeems persons, not a nature. Nowhere in the Scripture is Christ said to have assumed our nature, nowhere is it said that he was the race, or that he was organically united to the race, or that he redeemed the race, or that he redeemed humanity. The theory of the Incarnation makes the *birth* of Christ the redeeming act. All that follows is accidental, incidental, not essential. Incarnation and death is its order; birth, life, death. The order of Scripture is otherwise; the resurrection and the life; death, burial, resurrection. The Christ of the Epistles, the Christ who is our life, our model and example, is he whom God hath highly exalted and given a name above every name. Upon this risen and living Lord, the eye of the Epistles is ever fixed. They know no Christ after the flesh. Their theme is not the wonderful manifestations of God in the past, when heaven was much nearer to earth than it is now; they present a living, loving, working Saviour; a Christ nearer and more real than any living object.