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the message for yourself

Dare we believe?

THE NEED FOR BELIEF

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WE live in a disillusioned world. It has been described as "a world without standards". Because people have largely lost any basis of belief, they have nothing by which to measure values in life, and to estimate what is worth while beyond the indulgence of their desires. The result is inevitable; there is a lowering of standards and an acceptance of false standards. We see its effects in family life, in a lessened sense of responsibility in marriage, and of responsibility towards children, which is causing alarm to those who are concerned with the future of the nation. Mainly as a result of the weakening of the ties of family life there is a wave of juvenile crime.

These are only aspects which are familiar to everybody of a lowering of the quality of life in our time, which nearly everyone who thinks seriously recognizes as a fact. A great many people are beginning to think that in the ages of religion which have passed, when people had some belief by which to steer their course, they had a precious possession which the majority today have lost. Many, if they were asked, would say, "Yes, I agree; but what we want is something to make better men and women. We want something to change lives, not your fine spun theological arguments".

A HISTORIC EXAMPLE

Looking back in history we can find a time when men's lives were changed. It happened in the first century of the Christian era, when the Word of the Gospel of Christ went forth in the midst of the pagan world, and had an impact upon the lives of great numbers of people in that degenerate age. The community of Christian believers to whom Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians were written affords an example. Here we have people who lived in a port - and a port has always drawn to itself the worst of humanity; it draws many races and points of view, and often those who least live up even to the standards of their own race. Corinth was no exception; it was notorious for moral corruption. Yet here was a community of people to whom Paul could write, "**Ye are the temple of the living God**" - and the words meant something to them. Not that they were without fault; these very letters reveal grievous faults. Yet they set before themselves an ideal in life, and by that ideal they were being transformed. What was it that accomplished such a change in men? Not simply the belief that it is on the whole better to be decent and kindly people than to be the reverse; it was the belief that the Lord Jesus Christ had risen from the dead.

When we state that, we come to a certain difficulty in the light of a book recently written by the Bishop of Birmingham. We have to recognize that the picture of early Christianity which we may gather from reading the New Testament is very different from the picture given by the Bishop in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*. The reason for the difference is that the Bishop's picture is based not upon the documents as we know them, but upon those documents, radically recast; great parts of them are described as not belonging to the first century or to those writers to whom they were attributed. Even those which are recognized as having some association with the apostle Paul suffer severely at the Bishop's hands. The first epistle to the Corinthians he regards as being composed of parts of two different letters of different dates, the later being placed first; and between them there is a second century tract which is not Paul's work at all, which deals with the subject of resurrection and which now constitutes the fifteenth chapter, and another tract on the "Breaking of Bread" which now forms chapter eleven. According to the Bishop these two fragments of Pauline writings and other fragments of someone else's had by some accident been bound together and copied as one document, and so we have the Epistle to the Corinthians. It would be useless - especially in view of the fact that this course of lectures has a special bearing upon the subjects which are raised by the Bishop - to go on with the argument which is to be developed here without some reference to this initial difficulty. I do not, however, wish to enter now into the question of Biblical criticism generally; this will be the subject of a later lecture in the series. Suffice it to say there is not the slightest shred of textual evidence for the Bishop's view; he does not, of course, claim that there is. His contention is based entirely upon the internal character of the documents themselves. From this some critics have drawn conclusions on which by no means all the critics are agreed; indeed, there is the greatest diversity, and this form of literary criticism is based purely upon subjective judgments. It is very largely influenced by a certain prior point of view as to the possibility of any event occurring outside the normal run of nature. Denying the possibility of resurrection as a physical fact, the Bishop is compelled to reconstruct the documents in order to give a picture of the rise of Christianity which fits his theory. For present purposes we shall take these documents as they stand, convinced that there is no ground for the refashioning to which the Bishop submits them.

WHY DID CHRISTIANITY SURVIVE?

What then is the picture which we get of the early church? It is no wonder that the Bishop regards the survival of Christianity as a miracle. If we take from the history of the early church that central place which the doctrine of the resurrection has, then the survival of Christianity as we know it is not merely a miracle, it is incomprehensible. There can be no rational ground why Christianity should have survived at all. But the fact is that however we treat the documents we cannot get rid of this central theme that Christ rose from the dead; and that fact accounts for the survival of Christianity and for its power in the lives of the early Christians. Even in those writings which are admitted to be by the Apostle Paul we find this doctrine central. We find him writing to the Church of Thessalonica, which also had been called out of a pagan environment, and he recalls to them how they turned to God from idols **"to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead" Thess 1:9-10**; and there we have clearly the doctrine of the second coming of Christ, and therefore of necessity the doctrine that Christ rose from the dead - otherwise he could not be spoken of as coming again.

When Paul writes to the Galatians (and even the Bishop does not question that this epistle is by Paul), he bases his claim to write to them as he does on the fact that he is **"an apostle, not**

of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead". His authority rests on the fact that he was called and commissioned to apostleship by Him who raised Jesus from the dead and by Jesus who was raised. We might go on to the Epistle to the Romans, with its declaration that **"Christ died for our offences, and was raised again for our justification"**, and the wonderful sixth chapter which explains the significance of the resurrection of Christ in the life of the baptized Christian.

But we find the doctrine also in an earlier part of this Epistle to the Corinthians, the authenticity of which - so far as can be gathered from his book - the Bishop does not contest. Why was it these people changed their course of life from that sexual licentiousness which characterized the pagan world? In **1 Cor. 6:13-15** Paul writes: **"Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body. And God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by his own power. Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ?"** The very ground on which he calls them to change their life from that of the pagan world is the ground that God raised Christ from the dead. The fact that they are called to the living Christ changes the whole character and purpose of life: their bodies are sanctified by the destiny to which they are called, which is to be raised from the dead and changed as Christ's was changed, so that they may be **"fashioned like unto the body of his glory" Phil 3:21**. The end for which they are designed forbids that their bodies shall be put to the gross uses of fleshly indulgence.

THE GROUNDS OF BELIEF

It is this belief in the fact of the resurrection of Christ which transformed men and women in the midst of the ancient world. Why did they believe it? They held it as a belief based on evidence - on the collective testimony of personal witnesses, who were ready to lay down their lives for the truth which they testified. Further, they believed in it as a fact with a meaning: it was not an isolated event in history; it was bound up with the whole history of Israel, with the whole of God's revelation through the prophets in the past, and with the whole purpose of God with mankind. It was, therefore, a fact which cast its light right back over the pages of human history to the beginning of man's life upon earth; and forward into the future to the ultimate purpose of God in the redemption of man. **"Christ died "**, as the Apostle says, **"for our sins according to the Scriptures; he was buried; and he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."** **1 Cor 15:3-4**. The resurrection of Christ meant so much for men precisely because it was **"according to the Scriptures"**; it was central to the whole of God's revelation in the past, and it meant that God had brought to perfection His revelation of Himself among men by revealing Himself in Jesus Christ. He who had spoken in the past in many parts and in many ways through the prophets, had now spoken in a Son Heb 1:1-2. More even than that, for these early believers it was a belief with a consequence: because Christ had risen from the dead, there was a hope of resurrection from the dead for others.

Why could they build such a hope upon it? Could any man have died in similar circumstances and brought the same result? By no means. He alone could so die, because he alone could die as the servant of God, offering himself as a sacrifice for sins, going as a lamb to the slaughter; and therefore he alone could be raised from the dead for men's justification. But if he alone could so die and rise **"according to the Scriptures"**, then he died as the appointed representative of men, and there must have been a profound need for this unique act in human history. Why was it needed? Because men are mortal, death-stricken through sin, and because sin is a reality and death its consequence. **"By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."** **Rom 5:12**. All

men are in bondage through sin and its consequences; this is the fact which is declared by Christ through his death, and this is the only adequate explanation of man's situation in the world today. These are the consequences which follow from this fact that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and these were the consequences which were perceived by early believers, because they are very clearly included in the teaching of the apostle.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

But there is a further consequence: not only does his death illuminate man's need, but it opens up hope; there is forgiveness and promise of life through Christ Jesus ; there is a promise of deliverance because he rose. How is that to be effected? How are we to be sharers in this consequence of the resurrection of Christ? **Rom. 6:17** says: "**But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness**". And Paul goes on to say that one service, the service of sin, brings wages which is death; but the service of righteousness - which is the service of God leads to God's gift of eternal life. What then effects the change in man's relationship to God, and in his own life? It was the obedience to a form of teaching: "**Now ye have obeyed from the heart that form of teaching which was delivered to you**". What was the teaching about? We are shown by this sixth chapter of Romans, and by the whole letter: it was about Christ, about his life, his death, his resurrection, his coming again. Obedience to this "**form of teaching**" involves belief in the fullest sense of the term; and this brings deliverance from the bondservice of sin, so that we become bondservants of Him who gives freedom. This is what belief meant to those believers in the early church. And it was a belief which rested upon the conviction that the resurrection of Christ was a fact. That, as we have said, is central to all the teaching of the Apostle Paul. It is a fascinating study to go through the Epistles of the Apostle and find not only direct and explicit references to the resurrection of Christ and its significance, but to find what a place it holds in his mind so that it influences his language, his thought, his imagery; how it is constantly welling up and is made the ground of his reasoning on faith and conduct.

PAUL'S REASONING

Did the resurrection happen? If it did, there is no escaping the conclusions which the Apostle Paul puts forward with such powerful logic in I Cor. 15. He was writing to some who denied that there was a future resurrection for believers who had died. If that be so, says Paul, then there cannot have been a resurrection of Christ, for the two events are bound up together. "**If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen; and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.**" **1 Cor 15:13-14**. If, that is, Christ has not in fact risen from the dead, then both the preaching and the faith based on it are empty - are so much wind. To have faith is not enough; the faith must be based on fact, or it is void ; and an empty faith is a powerless faith. For Paul says again in verse 17, "**If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain**"; but this time he uses a different word which means " fruitless, without result". What sort of fruit might faith have been expected to bear? Paul shows when he continues: "**Ye are yet in your sins**"; the result which faith might have been hoped to produce was forgiveness of sins, but if the faith rests upon a delusion then it cannot bear the fruit. Sins could only be forgiven through a living Christ. But if believers are "**yet in their sins**", what is the consequence? "**Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.**" If people die with sins unforgiven, there is no future for them; they have perished like sheep. That is what Paul is saying.

Then he reverses the whole of his argument with one splendid assertion: **"Now is Christ risen from the dead "**. With that we can turn every step in his reasoning from the negative to the positive; this faith is not empty, it is not powerless or without result, because it is true. Sins can be forgiven because Christ has risen and is living; and if those who have their sins forgiven die, they are not perished, they only sleep; there is for them the hope of resurrection from the dead: **"For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order; Christ the firstfruits; afterwards they that are Christ's at his coming"**. Then he looks beyond that to the ultimate harvest: **"Then cometh the end " 1 Cor 15:21-24** These are the consequences of the fact of the resurrection of Christ.

Now that was the faith of the early Christians, who rested upon the assurance of the historical fact that Christ rose from the dead. And that was the faith which could transform men in this life. We have then to face the issue: Did Christ rise from the dead? Indeed, we must go a step further back; does it matter to us whether he rose from the dead or not? To the immense majority of people it does not; they do not care. And when the subject is treated as it is by the Bishop of Birmingham, we may find it difficult to blame them. The idea of the resurrection of Christ becomes evaporated in the Bishop's teaching into some vague belief in the living spirit of Christ of which somehow men became conscious. We cannot be surprised that such a tenuous belief as that proves powerless to work reformation in men. There may be men - as I have no doubt the Bishop himself - who live noble and fine lives without the basic belief in the gospel; but they are living on the moral capital of the past. Unbelievers with high ethical standards are reaping the benefit of Christianity; those standards would have been unknown had the Christian faith never existed. But whatever may be true of the exceptional men, the only thing which can change ordinary men and women is the belief in the resurrection and the Gospel of God. It did that in the past, and it can do it today; but it can only do it where the resurrection is held as a fact with all its consequences.

THE SUPREME ISSUE

When we ask ourselves, Is the resurrection a fact? then we are facing one of the most fundamental questions in life. We are not facing some particular theological doctrine, or some religious mystery which only interests people of a particular cast of mind. What we have to ask ourselves is this: Does it matter whether facts are facts, and things are real? Does it matter whether our thinking on the facts is straight or crooked thinking, or whether we do not think at all? To Paul it mattered vitally whether or not he was **"found a false witness of God"** and whether his conclusions from the facts were sound 1 Cor 15:15. And those two questions lead to a third. Does it matter whether we live in a real world, or a world of sentimental illusion? The question whether Christ rose from the dead confronts us with the most fundamental issues in life, because it challenges us to face life as a reality, and not as something which we can drift through like a dream merely following our own desires, sentiments, or feelings. If the resurrection of Christ is a fact, then we live in a real world of significant events, and we must adjust our lives to the reality which is outside ourselves. Everything in life, therefore, depends on whether we reckon the resurrection of Christ to be a fact or a myth. We must face that issue, and determine it for ourselves. All belief in Christ as the Anointed of God turns upon the assurance that he rose; and to believe in him as the Christ means to believe that he is the centre and pivot of all man's history, that man's only hope of future life is through him. **"Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept."** Paul rests everything upon the historical evidence that Christ was seen

after he rose from the dead by a number of witnesses whose collective testimony cannot be overturned. **"He was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve; 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. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time" 1 Cor 15:5-8.** But these things are not merely facts like dates in a history book; they mean everything in human life because they mean the possibility of forgiveness of sins. And that brings us face to face with other facts, and first of all with the fact of God who raised Jesus from the dead, and who forgives sins. Without a God who is a personal reality there can neither be sin in a true sense of the word, nor forgiveness; for there will be neither a God to sin against nor a God to forgive. Without these the Gospel becomes meaningless; and it is noteworthy that there is scarcely a mention of the subjects of sin and salvation in the book by the Bishop of Birmingham: they are not even to be found in the index. Not only do Christ's death or resurrection bring us to face God as a personal reality, but to face also the fact of sin as disobedience to God - that which would deny the reality and integrity of God, and rebels against Him. It brings us, moreover, to face the reality of death as the consequence of sin, a reality which we cannot escape or gloss over. Death is death, and the only deliverance from it is through Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE CHALLENGE TO BELIEF

Now if these things be true they are vital truths. They cannot be something which we may or may not believe as we choose. What we are, and what we may become, depend upon the truth of Christ's death and resurrection and whether we base our lives upon it. In Christ, life; out of Christ, death: these are the alternatives which the message of the Gospel brings us. **"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16.** There in that very message of love are the stark alternatives - perishing or life eternal. Can we wonder when such is the message of the love of God that Paul writes as he does to the Galatians: **"If any man (or an angel from heaven) preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" Gal 1:8-9.** People think this the harshness of a theological zealot, but if these things are true then the alternative is not one belief or another as we may choose; the alternative is between the Gospel which gives life and the substitute which deceives and brings destruction. The alternative is life or death, because there is only one form of teaching which can deliver us from the bondage of sin and bring us in the way of eternal life-that form of teaching which rests upon the reality of the resurrection of Christ.

What then is our position? Does it matter? Is this merely a matter of interest which may have afforded you some intellectual exercise? Does it end there?

Only belief in the whole Gospel of God can be effective in this world in transforming men **"by the renewing of their minds" Rom 12:1,** as it transformed those in the pagan world of the first century; and if only we realized it, our world today is becoming more and more like that of old. We cannot say, *"I can believe this, and you can believe that, and it will all come to the same thing in the end"*. That is not belief but fancy. People often talk today of *"outworn creeds"*, misapplying words from Wordsworth. A *"creed"* is simply a statement of belief. There are creedal statements which we as Christadelphians believe to be fundamentally untrue and in conflict with Scripture, but that is not what people mean when they use this phrase. They seem to think that a creed can become worn out like a coat, or can be put on and off like a coat; that it is something superficial which belongs to the fashion of an age, and not

something essential to the man's own being. In so thinking they are not denying this or that statement of belief, they are denying belief. It is not that they disbelieve in a particular creed, such as the Athanasian or Nicene Creed; they are disbelieving in belief itself. They are denying the act of belief, and implying that no belief matters.

This is not living in a real world. Any belief is the equivalent of no belief; and whatever power belief may have in men's lives, that will not have it. There is a belief which did transform men; but it was a belief in the historical reality of Christ's rising from the dead. It changed their lives because it gave them a new measuring line for life, and carried their thoughts beyond the limits of this life up to the highest and the holiest place, where they believe their Lord sits. He was their pattern. And in giving them at the same time belief in a future life, it gave a sense of proportion to this life which we now live, setting it in its right place in relation to eternity. That is what we want today.

THE MARK OF REALITY

We have tried to draw out the basic beliefs which transformed the lives of men in the first century; we have tried to draw out the implications of that belief in Christ risen. They have drawn us on to consider doctrine relating to God, to Christ, to man, to atonement, to redemption, and to the future life. That is the mark of reality; fundamental truth must always be joined with every other truth to form one whole, living system. Because this truth is central to the purpose of God with man, every other part of Divine truth is interdependent with it; and this in itself bears witness to its reality. To be confronted with such reality brings home to us our responsibility for facing the facts and their consequences, - those consequences which are clearly drawn out in the sublime logic of the Scriptures. We cannot escape from reality; and we hide from it at our peril.

It is a truism to say that the belief which can mould men's lives must be that in which they believe; but it is a way of saying that it must have the force of conviction and not of mere opinion. To have this force it must carry the assurance that it rests on fact. The Gospel of Christ carries that assurance for those who will investigate it. Further, to have transforming power their belief must relate men to a reality outside themselves, so that they discipline their lives to conform to its demands. The Gospel of Christ brings men into relation to the supreme reality: through faith in it they are offered relationship to God and His Son - and nothing is better fitted than that to bring in subjection man's natural egotism. Finally, an effective belief must set men's little lives in a wider context, so that they see themselves as parts of a whole and their mortal lives against the background of eternity. Then only will they get a true measure of themselves and their acts. This again the Gospel of Christ does; it alone can meet the needs of present life because it alone can give the well grounded assurance of a life to come.

We have, then, to ask ourselves: Are we as individuals facing life in a real world, or living in a world of illusion? Are we prepared to be mentally adult men and women facing facts and their consequences? Or are we content to go on in a dream - world of our own? There can be no doubt which will regenerate men and women in this life, because there can be no doubt which alternative can open up the prospect of life to come and of eternal fellowship with God and His Christ.

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