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The Resurrection of Christ and the Missional Church:

What can dull the spread of the Gospel?

The question of the vibrancy of missions is at hand when we exasperatingly proclaim "So much changed since Christ!" Certainly new ideas have come, new scholarly approaches to religion, new philosophies. All of these gather to increase the cultural distance from Jesus, to increase the foreignness of the Gospel, to make the verve of spreading the Good News a miniscule flow of the "good idea" impelling us to put the brakes on missions. Or perhaps all of these developments are mere literary *asides*, a panoply of *extras*, by which the eternal Gospel message remains unperturbed. But surely something has changed since Jesus? Perhaps time and only time, the generations since he walked among us and now, which, in the bucket of time is yet a drop. *The missional church has evolved only in as much as the temporal distance from Christ is amalgamated into human society.*

What has changed since the Resurrection?

What is the point of spreading the news of the Resurrection in modern times? Why tell anyone that the historical event on a random first day of the week in one particular part of the world has meaning to their life right now? Why not say that the Gospel is both a great timeless philosophy that can help your spiritual life, and simultaneously, a great historical event that was pivotal as one of the many of the great anecdotes that changed the course of civilization.[1] Asked another way, how is it that the Resurrection of Christ is not just history plus a great idea? How

[1] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 66.

could it be relevant now, with all the *events* since then and all the *ideas* since then, and still be vibrant, fresh, exciting, invigorating, causing a person to want to share with everyone she meets?

In order to untangle the intricacies and implications of these questions, I must first spend time on delving into the theology of the Resurrection of Christ and then take a look through the ages of its perception and utilization in the church. From that vantage point I will be able to help resolve these inquiries and unpack the implications for modern missions.

The Resurrection of Christ

A singularity, a point in the fabric of space and time so isolated that no approach to, nor egress from, bridges the chasm. That is the Resurrection of Christ as it pertains to the church. No hope in life, neither individually nor corporately, can be imagined without the fundamental evidence of Death's death, and Life's lease. By way of the Resurrection, the church not only clings to hope of her existence, but also her sustained growth.[2] In essence, the church could not grow without the evidence of the Resurrection.

First I claim that in the Doctrine of Christ, several loci are critical to our understanding of the current vibrancy of missions. One is the knowledge of the physical resurrection of Jesus that makes us proclaim to those around us[3], the other his command given through the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, the third the sense of urgency in Christ's message that pervaded both his pre-resurrection ministry as well as his post-resurrection appearances, and finally his ascension and promise of return. These aspects of Christology are fundamentally critical to how modern missional churches understand their purpose, and their connection to the earliest growth and spread of the church to its expansion in this current millennium.

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[2] Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, apocalyptic prophet of the new millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 231.
[3] Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology, A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 503.

The Resurrection of Christ is rooted in historical events, facts to be examined, studied researched, and claimed to be truth upon the basis of evidential scrutiny and not mere logic. When interpreting how the Doctrine of the Resurrection can affect the history of human civilization, those investigating must elevate it to greater status than other breakthroughs and monumental ideas for which the world could never be the same. That is to say, the Resurrection of Christ, the inaugural act of the New Creation, holds a place in the scope of human history above any other game-changer: it is both a historical event of cosmological proportions as well as a spirit-powered theological show-stopper. When questioning the relative power of the "idea" of the Resurrection of Jesus against the backdrop of all the events in history since then, or the philosophies of humankind before and after, the empty tomb makes all the front-page news items and all the market of good ideas pale in comparison.[4]

When a believer is "made alive by the power of Christ's Resurrection" – or *Anastasity* as Bird calls it[5] – we experience what is evidenced in Paul's powerful emphasis on the new life. The Resurrection of Christ infuses hope and vibrancy of purpose, a telos, and fullness of life in the mind the believer. The paradigm of a new believer's outlook on the structures of humanity from past to present to future is wholly altered. Even Augustine recalls vividly when he was given the books to re-read by the Platonists[6], which contained a glaring concept of a new life, a mindset and paradigm shift, brought on by an escape from a cave. Even the determined shadow-dwellers saw the mindboggling change in the redeemed, to the point that their response to the man who brought people into the light...why they would want to kill him![7]

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[4] Lesslie Newbigin, 31.
[5] Michael F. Bird, 501.
[6] Augustine, *Confessions,* (New York: The Modern Library, 2017), 184.
[7] Plato, *The Republic*, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 517.

Calvin captured the connection correctly when he strung together the two endpoints of the Resurrection of Christ and the current rumination of our minds.

> Finally, he was raised that he might be "the resurrection and the life". As we have said that in this mirror the living image of the resurrection is visible to us, so is it a firm foundation to support our minds, provided we are not wearied or irked with a longer delay; for our task is not to measure minutes of time as we please but patiently to wait until God in his own good time restores his Kingdom.[8]

Salvation as understood in the Ordo Salutis gives way to renewed hope both individually and collectively. The Resurrection of Christ is a communal historical event of national restoration and a personal religious notion in the ransom of the believer. Thus the message of the Gospel is both public and private, competes with history and competes with philosophies. Nothing that has come since Christ holds a better claim on humans. The vibrancy of spreading this good news can never be dulled.

Before Jesus uttered the words of the Great Commission, the spread of the news of the Risen Christ was already well underway. The women at the tomb were arguably the first missionaries, telling the other disciples the announcement. From that day and ever more, believers proclaim that Jesus is both the Lord of the universe and the Lord of Israel, that is, he is exalted in a religious ideological sense as well as a historical sense.

For no greater urgency have we than the need to tell a dying world of this saving truth. Most missionary work in the years after Jesus' Resurrection was not done in a public forum, rather, the detailed explanations from those who knew, to those who did not know of the Resurrection, was done person to person.[9]

[8] John Calvin, Book 3 Chapter 25.
[9] Bart D. Ehrman, 49.

Even Julian the Apostate and Porphyry, both pagan Romans, identified the distinctive characteristics of Christianity in their time period as those who "believe in a historical revelation that occurred at a particular place and time," those who believe in a God with aseity, and those who have "a reluctance, at least initially, to relate the new faith to the public life of society and the political realm." And yet the claim is that the vast spread of the faith was due less to what Christians believed than to the way the lived.[10] In some sense, the church is outward reaching and missional when the people inside it, live in such as a way – in the reality and newness of the Resurrection event – that others notice.

In the final moments of Christ's walk on earth, indeed up to and including his Ascension, he exuded as a sense of urgency. To know that he ascended is to know he will come again. Indeed, as we hear him say in the penultimate verse of the Bible, "Surely I come quickly."[11]

The Missional Church

How has the Triune God been building his church? The council in Nicaea said the church is one holy catholic and apostolic church, but how universal is it in modern times?

Now I will examine the ecclesial missionary movements throughout the ages and take particular notice of what fundamental philosophical, religious, and cultural changes were taking place, and how those had an impact on missions throughout the ages. Many of the causes were more fundamental than any novel ideas, and rather, it was certain basic principles – such as persecution, truth seeking, the general accessibility of geography – that influenced the vibrancy during those times. Did these missionaries over the ages think themselves as "far removed from the day of Resurrection" and "far removed from the sense of urgency of Jesus"? Was the newness of ideas particularly relevant or useful to the spread of the Gospel during those times?

[10] Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans saw them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 198.
[11] Revelation 22:20, KJV

The first few generations of believers bumped egregiously into the opposing Romans.[12] Unlike Pliny the Younger who just dismissive of Christians, the 2nd century physician Galen of Pergamum was highly critical, mainly because he lumped in the Gospel with any and every idea: Platonists, Peripatetics, Stoics, Epicureans, Pythagoreans, Cynics, and Skeptics.[13] The evolution of ideas in Late Antiquity was merely the background noise of missions. Two centuries later, Augustine battled forgotten philosophies, Manichean mystics, and liberal literature. If Christ is old, then conversion is new. The Resurrection of Christ became a "Reality Now" to him, moreover a reality transmitted by living people: Bishop Ambrose, his Mom, and others.[14]

Times changed drastically in Europe after the Sack of Rome in 410, a downward drift blamed on Christianization; and yet Procopius and Agathias in Justinian's time in the 500s, when writing secular history "left religion out of it, so dominated were they still by pagan theory"[15]

Enter the so-called Dark Age, with emperors from Charlemagne to Frederick Barbarossa. The church remained in Europe, apparently never far in thought from the days of Jesus, only in time. Charlemagne himself advocated for discipleship along educated terms. The continuity of Christ and his church never faltered even when society shattering evens and developments took place. Neither Mohammad's ideas, nor Viking raids, nor dual popes, nor Black Death.[16] Nothing kept Christ and the power of the Resurrection, by the Providence of the Triune God, from being considered too ancient or outdated. Sure, time passed, the millennium ticked – which even gave birth to midlife-like crisis of the Crusades – but this never made the Gospel untenably old.

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[12] John Dominic Crossan, *The birth of Christianity: discovering what happened in the years immediately after the execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 4.
[13] Robert Louis Wilken, 73.
[14] Augustine, 133.
[15] Paul Johnson, *A history of Christianity*, (New York: Atheneum, 1976). 112.
[16] Paul Johnson, 243-244.

What then shall we say of the Reformation? 1517. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli. The Bible in the hands of the people. If ever there was a time of civilization's collective anastasity! Even Luther was "cast as the angel of the Book of Revelation" signaling newness in apocalyptic-proportions.[17] Roll forward a century and still we have John Owen considering the vibrancy of Reformed theology as if Jesus were shaking England back to life.[18]

Nevertheless, the Enlightenment arose with science as hope for humanity, appearing to have had a deep effect on the church. Did Newton beat out Jesus? Then later, Postmodernism seems to have gripped Christians. The church had responded with Bultmann, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, with Karl Barth and Neo-orthodoxy, and even with Paul Tillich who desired to "embrace modern science and Biblical criticism while still holding on to the essentials of the Gospel" in Christian Realism.[19]

Shall we keep Neo-orthodoxy and Christian Realism? We did not *need* them! They are okay, but as the missional church becomes more Eastern and more Southern, more indigenous, dare I say more "universal", and the spectrum of cultural ideas of the whole planet, a Westerner's way of enzymatically "digesting" Christianity and the Gospel, seems somewhat parochial. The historical event of the Resurrection of Christ on the first Easter is always new. Time marches on, and the vicissitudes of society's paradigmatic ideas are merely the backdrop and faded fluff around the relentless path of the one true shining light and truth. Put in another way, churches survive best when diversity is on global proportions.[20]

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[17] Peter Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the invention of the reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 103.
[18] Michael P.Winship, *Hot Protestants: a history of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 91.
[19] Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: the faith that made the modern world* (New York: Viking, 2017), 296.
[20] Philip Jenkins, *The lost history of Christianity: the thousand-year golden age of the church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia and how it died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 244.

To this day in the Middle East – the historical and geographic setting for the Bible – the church stands strong, closely upheld by the diaspora of believers praying for them. The daily reminder of living in a world where faith can be costly proves to be a more tenacious inspiration then the opposing ideas from other religious groups. It seems remarkable that Lebanon still exists with its multitude of Christians; even the tides of heavy Islam with its Springs and autumns do not shake Christ's message.[21]

When considering the population-packed Far East, with its multitudinous swings in ideology over the last century, the church has apparently never needed to adapt its message for any cultural campaign, dialectical development, nor technological trend. Chinese Christians have not only held fast to their faith, but have been missional in mindset, desiring to pay it forward, owing the sown seed of hope in the Resurrection to the missionaries who came centuries ago. Will this fervor fade in the future? One anecdote proves helpful: a disillusioned Missionary Kid of the previous generation, John Paton Davies Jr. (1908-1999) claimed in 1972 that the Protestant efforts in China had been a complete failure, going so far as to compare his dad to the pagan Stoic philosopher Epictetus, a person of moral intensity but of only secular scope.[22] Chinese Christians today would marvel at this premature pronouncement of failure.

How Does This Inform Modern Missions?

How can the church continue to remain missional and diaconal, and how can Christians have a serving mindset that is rooted in the relevancy of the Resurrection of Christ, rather than an ever changing socio-political mindset? Steeped in the trend-tantalizing culture in which we live, we might as well convince ourselves that we can have all of *marks of the church* without the

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[21] Klaus Wivel, *The last supper: the plight of Christians in Arab lands* (New York: New Vessel Press, 2016), 155.
[22] David A. Hollinger, *Protestants abroad: how missionaries tried to change the world but changed America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 175.

historical event of Christ. Would Schleiermacher be happy that we have been able to use religion to better humanity? Do we dismiss Descartes and nullify Nietzsche and can we ignore Newton-infused Enlightenment and Sartre-saturated Existentialism by saying that nothing has happened to humanity since Christ? Can we nix Marx, stifle Stalin and mod Mao and say that over a century of communism-crumped civilization, shaping half the world's population, was nothing to the Gospel message? Why not! For all such humanity-shaping "good ideas" are frequently worse than good, leading Henry Louis Gates – in reference to the horrific abuse and systemic subjugation of Blacks throughout the last the few centuries – to acknowledge that "aesthetic thought, as put forth by Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, connoted something terrifying."[23]

Let all developments, all trends, all ideas, and all philosophies since Christ's Resurrection pale in comparison to the work of the Triune God, that of Christ on the cross and then the gaping empty tomb. The only thing the past 2,000 years has given civilization is more years of generations. And with those more generations, come more people, who write more books, with more ideas about the things that they did. To this, the Bible responds: "Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."[24]

When rooted in the Christological underpinnings of Christ's resurrection, the urgency of missions is unabated. Time does indeed march forward, and the generations since Christ is acknowledged. But brand new movements, cultural philosophical, scientific, or otherwise hold no sway on the missional church. We are not to be ashamed of the paradigm of spreading the Gospel with urgency in the modern world because the Gospel stands on its own. We do not need to reconstruct or tidy-up the theology of missions in order to keep the missionary movement

[23] Henry Louis Gates, *The Black church: this is our story, this is our song* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 216.
[24] John 21:25, ESV

vibrant. The church is committed to the continuation of the spread of the Good News ushered in by Christ at his Resurrection and inaugurated during his Great Commission.

New ideas since that first Resurrection Sunday do not change Christ's inceptions of the church, only time increments her forward. Missions will remain vibrant when the church acknowledges this! Missions is the same now as it was in Paul's time, in Augustine's time, in Calvin's time, and in our time. Christ lived and inaugurated the church and its spread. We have only had to grapple with the metrics of time, not the metric of new ideas.

I leave with this sentiment from the late Lesslie Newbigin, missionary and theologian, one undeterred by the swells of society over time:

> I have tried to describe mission in terms of the proclamation, the presence, and the prevenience of the reign of God. The reign concerns the whole history of the human family and of the cosmos. At the heart of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples is the petition: "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven." God's will is to be done on earth. The call of Jesus to believe the good news of the impending kingdom leads at once to the call "Follow me." There can be no separation between believing and following, between faith and obedience.[25]

[25] Lesslie Newbigin, 91.

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