

The Missiological Implications of the Resurrection of Jesus Among an Increasingly Secularized World

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Abstract

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is profoundly the cornerstone of the Christian faith. However, its missiological implications have widely been ignored by the average churchgoer. While many will attest to the resurrection as an integral part of one's salvation, applying the resurrection to mission efforts has, unfortunately, been lacking. Secularism has been on the increase in Europe for some time and has now rapidly begun to influence even one of the most churched areas in the United States presenting new challenges for mission and evangelism. With secularism's pretense for science and historical facts, utilizing the established historical evidence for the resurrection as a missiological springboard affords even the average churchgoer a common epistemological ground for which to engage an increasingly secularized world with the gospel. This article briefly examines the established historical evidence for the resurrection and illustrates how these evidences can be used missiologically in evangelistic outreach efforts as well as illustrate the power of the resurrection in more holistic mission endeavors.

The Established Historical Evidences for the Resurrection

The historicity of the resurrection has been well established by scholars such as Gary Habermas, William Lane Craig, N. T. Wright, and Michael Licona. Their work has had a profound impact on the topic of the resurrection for both apologetics and mission. Habermas, in particular, outlines what he calls the minimal facts of the resurrection. These minimal facts are "so strongly attested historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject, even the rather skeptical ones" (Habermas and Licona 2004, 44) and they provide the necessary epistemological framework for which to engage our increasing secularized world. The practice of historiography

demonstrates the historian's process for concluding whether certain facts or events did or did not in fact occur in history. Habermas summarizes this process as follows:

After the historian gathers his materials, organizes them, and applies external and internal criticism, he is ready to prepare and formulate his conclusions. The results should conform to all the known data and provide the most comprehensive and probable judgment on the issues. The outcome is then open to careful scrutiny from other scholars, which should prompt the cautious historian to be able to defend the results, based on the factual data available (Habermas 1996, 197).

Because the study of the relevant data concerning the resurrection is attained through historiographical means, such historical data and conclusions can be used to engage a skeptical and secular world that holds science in high regard.

Many skeptics and philosophers through the ages have denounced the use of historiographical means to study or attest to events that are miraculous. Scholars such as David Hume, C. Behan McCullagh, John P. Meier, and Bart Ehrman made this objection (Licona 2010, 135-189). Michael Licona's analysis of these objections thoroughly refutes them to where he concludes, "There are no sound reasons, a priori or posteriori, for prohibiting historians from investigating a miracle-claim" (Licona 2010, 189). As such, utilizing historiographical techniques to study and draw historical conclusions from the evidence for the resurrection is not only possible, but a sound means of engaging with secular individuals and discussing the facts of the resurrection. The historical evidence for the resurrection can allow for dialogue to commence that can lead to evangelistic encounters with the truth of Christianity. More information on historiographical criteria and utilizing this method in evangelism will be addressed momentarily.

Habermas has compiled an impressive amount of data concerning the facts for the historicity of the resurrection. Among this data is a list of facts that attest to the historicity of the event. These include: Jesus died by crucifixion; He was buried; Jesus's death caused the disciples to despair and lose hope, believing that His life was ended; the tomb was empty; the disciples had experiences which they believed were literal appearances of the risen Jesus; the disciples were transformed from doubters to bold proclaimers of His death and resurrection; the message of the death and resurrection was the central message of the early church; the message was proclaimed in Jerusalem; the church was born and grew as a result of this proclamation; Sunday became the

primary day of worship; James, Jesus's brother who was a skeptic, was converted; and Paul was converted (Habermas 1996, 112).

With the exception of the empty tomb, these facts hold nearly unanimous acceptance among critical scholars. Such a list of twelve facts is impressive and valuable for a wider discussion on the topic, however limited in its usage for practical mission and evangelistic encounters. Because of this, Habermas and Licona pared down the list to four minimal facts plus the empty tomb. These five minimal facts are: Jesus died by crucifixion; Jesus's disciples believed he rose from the dead and appeared to them; the church persecutor Paul was changed; Jesus's skeptic brother James was converted; and the tomb was empty (Habermas and Licona 2004, 48-78). From Habermas's list above, William Lane Craig argues for the use of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances of Jesus, and the origin of the Christian faith (Craig 2010, 277) in his analysis of the historicity of the resurrection event. Whether one attests to or utilizes three, five, or all twelve of these facts the issue is certain—the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact and holds great missiological implications especially now in an age of increased secularism.

These historical evidences are found primarily among early Christian creeds and the writings of the church fathers. The earliest of these creeds is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. This creed is very early and “recognized by virtually all critical scholars across a very wide theological spectrum” (Habermas 1996, 109). In fact, Habermas (1996) states, “It is very popular to date this creed in the mid AD 30s. More specifically, numerous critical theologians date it from three to eight years after Jesus' crucifixion” (p. 110). For historical events, eyewitness data from a date of three to eight years from the event itself is very early and credible. An early report significantly reduces fabrication or legendary elements from creeping into the authentic account of the event. The evidences originated from a variety of sources both Christian and non-Christian. The biblical accounts from the Apostle Paul, the Gospels, and even sources that pre-date the New Testament literature, such as oral creeds, provide the most abundant evidence. Writings from the early apostolic church fathers such as Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, and others also attest to the eyewitness accounts. Other than Christian sources, there are historical sources from non-Christians as well. Among these are the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, the Jewish historian Josephus, Lucian of Samosata, Mara Bar-Serapion, Thallus, Pliny the Younger, and the Jewish Talmud. These sources attest to Jesus's death and the subsequent growth of the early church (Licona 2010; Habermas 1996). The historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is well attested and allows for missiological engagement through the power of the historical resurrection.

Utilizing the Evidences Missiologically in Evangelism

With the rising population of religious *nones* throughout the United States and even in areas of the country where evangelical Christianity still holds widespread acceptance, missiological engagement of these increasingly secular and irreligious *nones* is more important than ever. Evangelistic outreach must be taken more seriously in order to stave off the growth of the irreligious *nones*. These areas, including the North Texas area, contain many evangelical churches that proclaim the gospel and seek to see people come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. However, their success or lack thereof, is evidenced by the trend of rising irreligious *nones*. Evangelism is clearly lacking among the average evangelical churchgoer or merely being relegated to professional ministers. If the trend of secularism and the rising of the *nones* is ever to be turned, then evangelistic outreach must increase. Utilizing the historical fact of the resurrection as an apologetic means to begin conversations provides even the average evangelical churchgoer with the tools necessary to engage an increasingly secular world.

Habermas and Licona proposed twelve ways in which believers, armed with the historical evidences for Jesus's resurrection, can engage people with the truth of these evidences (Habermas and Licona 2004, 191-204). Among these ways, two stand out as especially important. First, they suggested staying on the subject of Jesus's resurrection (Habermas and Licona 2004, 194). Many times, whenever a discussion turns toward the topic of Jesus, the person tries to turn the conversation to secondary issues or raise other objections. Often this occurs due to conviction from the Spirit or simply possessing an argumentative attitude. Habermas and Licona (2004) demonstrated that, "If you elect to switch course in the discussion and now go with the [secondary issue or other objection], you may be treading on ground on which you are not as familiar and, most importantly, you move away from your central subject. Stay on the subject of Jesus' resurrection" (195). This is critical because the goal is not to engage in discussion on every topic related to God or Christianity, but to present the evidence for Jesus's resurrection and bring the person to repentance and faith. Following red herrings distracts from the task of utilizing the historical evidences in a positive and meaningful way. One must tread carefully when engaging with either secular skeptics or irreligious *nones* and remain on topic to allow for strong missiological engagement.

The second way that is important that Habermas and Licona (2004) gave is resisting the temptation to overstate one's case (202). While the evidences for Jesus's resurrection are compelling and convincing, believers must be careful not to present the evidences arrogantly. For example, it would be unwise to state, "I can prove to you beyond all doubt that Jesus rose historically from the dead." Such a claim is dangerous

for the average churchgoer to say in evangelistic encounters much less the seasoned missiologist to a hardened skeptic. Habermas and Licona (2004) noted, “Virtually nothing can be proved with that degree of certainty” (202). Even attorneys when trying court cases seek to prove the innocence or guilt beyond a reasonable doubt and not beyond all doubt. When presenting the evidence for the historical resurrection, the task of the believer is to present the weight of the evidence that proves the event beyond a reasonable doubt. This does not mean that the secular skeptic or irreligious *none* will not have any doubts or further questions, but their doubts should be lessened to the point of acceptance of the relevant historical data. Rather than claiming that one can prove the resurrection beyond all doubt, the average churchgoer could claim that they could present strong historical evidence for the resurrection and refrain from making any absolutist claims of proof that could present difficulties. Approaching the task in this manner affords the believer the opportunity to present the evidence and even debunk opposing theories that the skeptic may pose (cf. Craig 2010, 308-324).

Sharing the historical evidence for the resurrection with average “secular” irreligious *nones* who typically possesses little knowledge of any historical evidences for the resurrection or any opposing naturalistic theories, is a relatively easier task than sharing with the secular skeptic who holds science in high regard over any miracle claims and perhaps has previously studied the topic. In order to effectively respond to the secular skeptic, a more historiographical approach is warranted. Many of these secular skeptics hold to the scientific method as the only means of accurately verifying scientific claims and hold to Hume’s argument regarding miracles. The problem with this premise is that firstly, the scientific method is limited in its usefulness even in other sciences such as archaeology, paleontology, or geology due to their inherent ability to recreate or observe findings in these disciplines. History falls within this category as well as events in history are unobservable or able to be experimented upon. Secondly, philosophers have illustrated that Hume, in his argument against miracles, oversteps his bounds by a priori dismissing the possibility of miracles. Habermas concluded, “It would appear, then, that the Humean backdrop for rejecting miracles must be discarded (Habermas 2003, 13). Historiography demonstrates the historian’s means of scientific inquiry and provides a missiological tool to sharing the historical evidences for the resurrection.

In order for an event to be deemed historically accurate, it must meet five historiographical criteria: explanatory scope, explanatory power, plausibility, less ad hoc, and illumination (Licona 2010, 109-111). Of all of the various alternative theories including the hallucination hypothesis, swoon theory, conspiracy theory, and displaced body theory, only the resurrection hypothesis which states that Jesus historically rose

from the dead, meets all of these five criteria. When utilizing the evidences of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith (the evidences Craig utilizes), the resurrection has great explanatory scope. It properly accounts for each of these evidences. It also has great explanatory power by explaining why the body was gone, and why people saw Jesus alive despite his death. The resurrection hypothesis is plausible. Craig stated, “Given the historical context of Jesus’ own unparalleled life and claims, the resurrection serves as divine confirmation of those radical claims” (Copan and Tacelli 2000, 37). The evidence for the resurrection is also less ad hoc than these competing hypotheses. For instance, when analyzing the hallucination hypothesis, it fails the less ad hoc criteria because “it posits many psychological conditions in so many different people, in friend and in foe, in different situations, within individuals and groups, and all without an ounce of solid evidence” (Licona 2010, 518). Many ad hoc constructions must be made in order to create a tenable explanation utilizing this hypothesis. The resurrection evidence does not and is much less ad hoc. Finally, the resurrection hypothesis possesses illumination. Licona (2010) stated, “A hypothesis fulfills this criterion when it provides a possible solution to other problems while not confusing other areas held with confidence” (605). Fulfilling this criterion illustrates that other issues such as the early Christian’s devotion to Jesus can be explained through the resurrection event.

Utilizing a historiographical approach when explaining the evidence of the resurrection to secular skeptics provides scientific ground on which missiological engagement can occur. The historical evidences of the resurrection provide a strong epistemological tool that even the average evangelical churchgoer can employ when engaging in mission especially among “secular” irreligious *nones*. An example of this can be seen in Paul’s message in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13. He concluded his message with a call to repentance and faith following a declaration of the historical resurrection of Jesus. Habermas noted that this “formed the heart of the message [and]...was the basis of Paul’s plea for his hearers to seek the forgiveness of sins and exercise faith in Jesus for salvation” (Habermas 2003, xi). Therefore, in evangelistic encounters, presenting the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is a powerful apologetic/evangelistic tool that the Christian can utilize. While no apologetic tool can, in and of itself, cause any type of conversion (that is the work of the Holy Spirit), it does allow for conversations to begin and for new avenues to be pursued that even the most skeptical secularist may not have even considered.

Power of the Resurrection in Holistic Mission Efforts

Another major aspect of the missiological implications of the resurrection of Jesus other than utilizing the historical evidence in evangelistic encounters is that the resurrection provides a deeper understanding of the historical fact of Jesus's command to make disciples and engage in mission. If, according to the historical evidence, Jesus rose from the dead in space and time, then His command to make disciples, be witnesses, and proclaim the gospel to all nations must also be taken historically and given in space and time. As such, the command to be on mission continues to apply to all believers that claim the name of Jesus. In baptism, we identify with His death and subsequent resurrection. This public identification with Jesus not only identifies us with His death and resurrection, but with His mission as well. The resurrection event compels even the most average churchgoer to missiological engagement. N. T. Wright (2008) observed:

The mission of the church is nothing more or less than the outworking, in the power of the Spirit, of Jesus's bodily resurrection and thus the anticipation of the time when God will fill the earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new, and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over the redeemed world he has made (264-265).

While the ultimate goal of mission is to bring people into a saving faith with Jesus Christ and the worship of the one true God through evangelistic engagement, holistic mission efforts provide a means of connecting with an increasingly secular world.

Much has been debated over the years regarding the priority of evangelism versus a more holistic approach as the thrust of mission (cf. Little 2016, 27). While such a discussion and debate is outside of the scope of this paper, the historicity of the resurrection empowers mission and provides the essential foundation for both evangelism and holistic mission efforts. John Stott argued that the relationship between evangelism and social action is best described as a partnership. He stated, "Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself. Both are expressions of unfeigned love. Evangelism and compassionate service belong together in the mission of God" (Stott and Wright 2015, 27). With the rise of secularism among millennials and Generation Z, holistic efforts, especially service-based approaches, can be a vital component in engaging the secular world. Stott came to the same conclusion stating, "Jesus Christ calls all his disciples to 'ministry,' that is, to service. He himself is the Servant par excellence, and he calls us to be servants too.

This much then is certain: if we are Christians, we must spend our lives in the service of God and others” (Stott and Wright 2015, 31). Stott’s point is poignant and condemning given the pervasive rise of secular *nones*, especially in regions of the country where many evangelical churches exist and profess to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Millennials and Generation Z, who make up the largest portion of secular irreligious *nones* in America, possess a great desire to want to serve their communities and leave their mark on the world. David Stark (2016) noted, “There is a service revolution happening in our culture today with the younger generations that provides a great bridge to outsiders around us” (p. 143). Engaging in service opportunities in the community demonstrates the kingdom of God and takes seriously Jesus’s command to love one another (John 13:34-35). Stark (2016) further stated, “Outsiders want to see the kingdom and gospel in action before they discuss the words and truth claims of Jesus” (p. 152) including any historical truth claims regarding the resurrection. The old adage, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care,” is especially relevant in utilizing holistic service options for missiological engagement. By showing secular *nones* that they are loved and cared for through service opportunities and care ministries such as hospital visits or providing care for underprivileged families, believers then gain the evangelistic opportunity to share the evidences for the resurrection of Jesus and lead them closer to repentance and faith.

Further holistic efforts such as caring for the poor, bereavement ministries for those grieving, and ministering to those who are suffering at the hands of political oppressors all find their empowerment in the historical resurrection event. Habermas (2003) stated:

In the New Testament, even practicing the Christian life, in such ways as preaching and ministering to the grieving, followed from Jesus’s resurrection. Assurance of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, living victoriously, as well as one’s commitment to both the Lord and the poor, are related to this truth. Even the final victory over suffering and evil, our future hope, finds its ultimate meaning in Jesus’s victory over the grave (p. xii).

It is evident that the resurrection event of history continues to grant the believer the power to not simply live the Christian life or hold to a hope for a future resurrection, but also grants the privilege of engaging a lost and dying secular world with the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit further attests to not only the significance of the resurrection in the lives of believers but instills that resurrection power inside to demonstrate the love of Jesus to an increasingly secular world. The

ministry of the Holy Spirit is directly corollary to the resurrection event. Jesus promised the coming of the Spirit following His resurrection (cf. John 14-16). Through the evidence for the resurrection, believers can have hope that the resurrection event actually happened and that the Holy Spirit does indeed indwell them to live the Christian life, serve their neighbors, and engage in mission.

The lack of missiological engagement by average evangelical churchgoers speaks to the rise of the secular *nones* and to a growth of secular thought. A lack of service-oriented outreach in lieu of a church-centered focus has led to an exodus from evangelical churches from those who would, at best, be classified as moderately religious. A research study by Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock (2017) found that “The rise of the unaffiliated [or secular *nones*] is due solely to a dramatic decline of the moderately religious. As a larger proportion of the population disaffiliates, a larger share of the remaining religionists identify [sic] as more intensely religious” (p. 689). So, while the rise of the unaffiliated is due to the moderately religious withdrawing from the church, the remaining portion, who is the more intensely religious and most likely true believers, must be engaged in serving their community in an effort to not only proclaim the gospel message, but to demonstrate the gospel message by living out the command to make disciples and love one another. This holistic approach with service at the fore empowered by the historical resurrection grants evangelical believers the means, method, and power to engage their secular world particularly among the moderately religious. This demographic, that at minimum has at least some religious background, would tend to be the most receptive to a service-based approach accompanied by sharing the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. This missiological engagement, however, can only be accomplished through the group of intensely religious fully understanding the missiological implications of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus and its power in their lives. Without such an understanding, missiological engagement will continue to decline and secular *nones* will continue to rise even in areas of the country where a strong evangelical base is present.

Conclusion

The evidences for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus holds considerable historiographical weight. The explanatory scope, explanatory power, plausibility, ad hoc-ness, and illumination of the resurrection evidence far outweighs any competing naturalistic theory or explanation of the event. As such, the historicity of the resurrection and its missiological implications demonstrate that every born-again believer must be on mission especially in light of an increasingly secular world. The lack

of missiological engagement by even the most average evangelical churchgoer attests to this fact and to the subsequent withdraw of the nominally/moderately religious. The evidences for the resurrection provide a powerful means of engaging with this secular world and places the engagement not solely on theological grounds, but on a historiographical one as well. This strategy allows for a common epistemological ground between the believer and either the secular skeptic or secular *none* on which to engage. Evangelistic proclamation utilizing the evidence for the historical resurrection can lead even the most average evangelical to share the truth of the gospel. Further holistic efforts such as serving the community in various ministries allows for the power of the resurrection to be illustrated by the believer to a lost and dying world. Taking seriously the command to love one another as Jesus has spoken, the believer utilizes the resurrection power within and can engage people more effectively with the gospel. Fully understanding the missiological implications of the historicity of the resurrection affords the believer with the means, method, and power to engage an increasingly secularized world.

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