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## A Cursory Examination of the Doctrine of the Resurrection from Paul to the Council of Nicea

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LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A Cursory Examination of the Doctrine of the Resurrection from  
Paul to the Council of Nicea

Submitted to the Evangelical Theological Society  
Eastern Region

by

Doug Taylor

January 12, 2016

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## Introduction

On the second page of his text, *How Jesus Became God*, Ehrman states that the early church believed Jesus to be God, but that since the late eighteenth century, historians have figured out that this is simply not correct.<sup>1</sup> The relevance to this point is that the whole of Christianity is hinged upon the reported resurrection event of Jesus. If Jesus was raised from the dead, Christianity obtains. If Jesus was not raised from the dead, then Christianity fails to obtain, at least in the form that is generally accepted by evangelical Christians. Indeed, challenges have been raised against Christianity for almost two thousand years, with varying responses by members of the Church.

One example of such a challenge may be found in *Dialogue with Trypho*. Specifically identified is the difficulty that was seen in delineating between the Christian faith and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Of this point González states the challenge to have been a lack of education on the part of Christians, a religion that only appeals to the bottom tier of society, involves an unworthy god, and that the “resurrection [was] no more than a gross misunderstanding of the Platonic

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<sup>1</sup> Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 2. What is conspicuously absent in Ehrman’s work is any explanation on how the Church was wrong for centuries, and then what specifically was it that surfaced from an historical perspective that justified dismissing that which the Church had held to over the centuries. In short, no evidence was offered that would refute the reports of the existence of Jesus of Nazareth, that he was an itinerant preacher who was reported to have done wondrous things labeled as miracles, that he died by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, that he was buried in a borrowed tomb, that there were reports of Jesus having been seen alive by many shortly following his death and burial, or that would explain the transformation of the disciples, as well as the conversion of the skeptic James and the enemy of the Church, Saul.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 197. Gonzalez affirms the same point. See *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, p. 108-109. Gonzalez finds this point in *Dialogue with Trypho*, 5.1, 3; 80.

doctrines of immortality and the transmigration of souls.”<sup>3</sup> Several centuries later David Hume would propose explicitly that only the ignorant and barbarous would subscribe to miracles happening, with the implicit statement that educated and intelligent people would not believe such reports.<sup>4</sup> Truly many more examples could be given, but the effort here shall be to identify the development of the Doctrine of the Resurrection.

#### Period of Interest

Christianity was established not based upon the reports of an empty tomb, rather Christianity obtained based on the disciples’ belief that they had encounters with the risen Jesus. While outside the scope of this paper, there is evidence to demonstrate that the concept of life after death was a concept ascribed to by both Jews and Gentiles prior to the reported resurrection event. Thus, there is nothing novel about the claim to life after death by Christians. What made this event unique was that a dead man reportedly returned to life, and it was this reported event that led to the institution known as the Christian Church. Based on this key point, the focus of this work shall be limited to the time of Paul’s writing, and shall have a *terminus ad quem* with the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

#### Defining Resurrection

Because Christians proclaimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, it shall be beneficial to look at the terminology used in the earliest apostolic writings. Few would argue that Paul is of great importance here. Beginning with 1 Cor 15, Paul used two words in particular in

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<sup>3</sup> Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 459-460.

pointing to what he believed happened in relation to Jesus' body following burial. First Paul uses ἐγείρω, which is to say that he affirmed belief that Jesus entered into a state of living after having been dead.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in just this one chapter Paul uses *egiero* sixteen times. The second word used is *anastasis*, meaning resurrection from the dead.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the former to be a verb, and the latter to be a noun, both convey the idea that what went down in burial, meaning specifically the body of Christ, was both acted upon by another and is also the same as what came up. Thus if one is to consider Paul's letters as the foundation for the doctrine of the resurrection, then it would appear that from the very earliest times in Christianity there was a belief in the idea that Jesus not only was seen alive following his death and burial, but also that what the disciples and others saw was nothing short of the same physical body which had been beaten, crucified, and buried that was once again alive. Recognizing that the twenty-seven texts comprising the New Testament lack any contradiction to this statement, the focus moving forward in this work shall be to examine how those who were not clearly delineated as being an Apostle sought to defend the concept of Jesus' resurrection account.

### The Challenge

Christianity was challenged from a very early time. González points to the following:

The more sophisticated accusations – known to us mostly from the Octavius of Minucius Felix and Origen's *Contra Celsum* – consisted mostly in showing the ignorance and incompetence of Christian teachers. Much was made of the fact that the so-called teachers of the Christians were really ignorant people belonging to the lowest strata of society. This is why Christians approach only those who are ignorant – that is, women, children, and slaves – for they know that their “science” would not resist a solid refutation. These Christians, although perhaps not atheists in the strict sense, at least adore an unworthy god, who is constantly getting involved in insignificant human matters. Their gospels themselves are full of contradictions, and the little good that can be

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<sup>5</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 272. See 1 Cor 15:15, 29, 32, 35, and 52. This is also the same word used in relation to the event with Lazarus in John 11:12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

found in their doctrines they have taken from Plato and other Greek philosophers, although even that they have corrupted. Such is the case with the absurd doctrine of resurrection, which is no more than a gross misunderstanding of the Platonic doctrines of immortality and the transmigration of souls. Besides, Christians are subversive people, opposed to the state, for they do not accept the divinity of Caesar nor do they respond to their civil and military responsibilities.<sup>7</sup>

González continues and suggests that part of the issue for the Christians was that there was a significant difference that began to be taught in relation to the final disposition of the soul. The Gnostics taught that the ultimate goal was to separate the divine immortal spirit from the material body, which was consistent with Greek thought, while the Christians were advocating for ultimately a permanent union of the two.<sup>8</sup> It would then appear that in reviewing the historical progression of the Christian understanding of the resurrection, earlier writings could perhaps be viewed more as mere statements of what was believed and accepted by the Church, then moved to offensive apologetics, and finally to defensive apologetics.

### **To AD 100**

#### Scripture

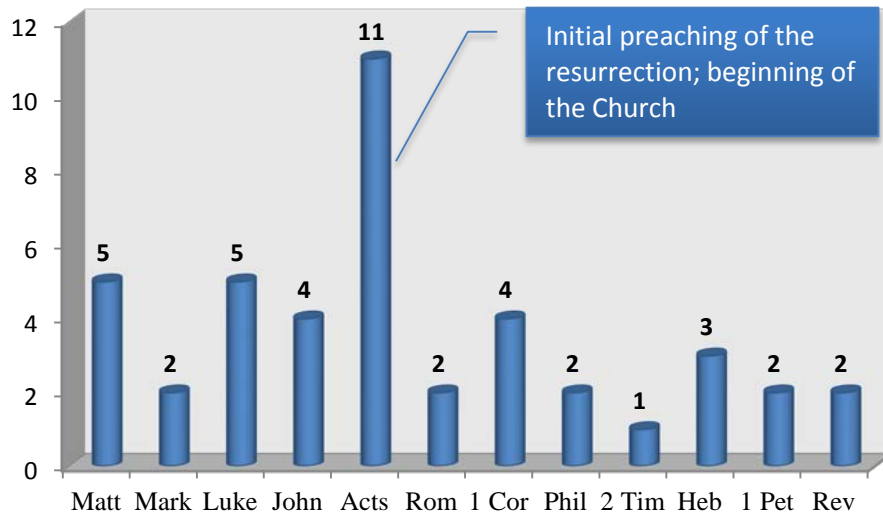
The term “resurrection” occurs forty-three times in forty-one verses in the New Testament (see Figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 98-99.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Nestle, Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger. *The Greek New Testament*. 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).



**Figure 1: "Resurrection" count by book using the lemma ἀνάστασις**

Figure 1 above reveals that about sixty-three percent of the time the term “resurrection” is used in Scripture, it is found in the Gospels and Acts, and as a writer Luke uses the term thirty-seven percent of the total in the New Testament. The significance of this cannot be overstated, as it may be shown that the concept of a physical resurrection from the dead, as was the reported case of Jesus, was already a firmly held belief by the Church in the first century. Further, according to Henry, there was already established opinions regarding the resurrection even before the birth of Jesus, with Sadducees denying, Pharisees affirming, and all recognizing that by resurrection one meant the physical body returning to life.<sup>10</sup> In light of this fact, and recognizing that it was Jewish people that were the first members of the Church, it is reasonable to conclude that the new Christians also meant by resurrection that a dead person would physically return to life in the same body which was previously physically dead. This is not to dismiss the Sadducees’ view, rather the terminology used would appear to preclude the inclusion of their understanding.

The question remains, though, as to how exactly one arrives at the formula found related to the resurrection by AD 325. It was at this point when the Church stated as part of the creed

<sup>10</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 149.



that “he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.”<sup>11</sup> At this point it shall be beneficial to draw upon a sampling of works from Christians who followed the Apostles and other relevant sources that led up to the Council of Nicea.<sup>12</sup>

### The Nazareth Decree

Elwell and Comfort date the Nazareth Decree to the time of Claudius (AD 41-54), noting that it was Claudius who took an interest in Jewish affairs in other lands.<sup>13</sup> Habermas would concur with the dating, noting three key historical facts that can be known as a result of the inscription: 1) there must have been reports in Palestine that were such that they warranted the emperor to take stern action, 2) burials in Palestine often involved sealing tombs or using stones, and 3) penalties for disturbing a tomb were increased from financial to a capital offense.<sup>14</sup> The Nazareth Decree, therefore, and from an historical perspective alone, would appear to corroborate not only Justin Martyr’s claim that the Jews were spreading word that the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb<sup>15</sup> but also that of the writer of Matthew.

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 40–41.

<sup>12</sup> While not possible to examine all that was written by each of these, the primary investigation into the development of the Doctrine of the Resurrection included readings from the following: Clement of Rome (ca. AD 30-100); Papias (ca. 60-130); Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 50-107); Polycarp (ca. 69-155); Quadratus of Athens (d. 129); Aristides of Athens (d. 134); Irenaeus (ca. 130-202); Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165); Athenagoras (ca. 177); Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215); Hippolytus (ca. 160-236); Tertullian (ca. 160-230); Minucius Felix (ca. 210); Cyprian (ca. 200-258); Athanasius (ca. 269-373); Eusebeus (ca. 260-340); and Constantine (ca. 272-337).

<sup>13</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 939.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 155-156.

<sup>15</sup> Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 253.

If the Nazareth Decree is correctly dated to Claudius, then the tablet could be within eight to twelve years of the crucifixion event at earliest, depending on the year one believes Jesus died, and as late as twenty-four years. It would appear reasonable to believe that tombs had been disturbed in history prior to the Nazareth Decree, but here there is a significant difference because the Decree focuses on Palestine, and second, it makes what had been an offense punished financially now an offense that carried the death penalty. Grave robbing is wrong, to be sure, but the world is not turned upside down when a peasant's grave is found empty. The empty tomb was not the source of faith, rather it was the disciples' belief that they had encounters with the risen Christ. If Jesus was buried, and if the tomb were found to be empty, both claims found in the New Testament, then it would seem to provide supporting reasons for why Claudius would have issued the Nazareth Decree and for why Christians claimed a bodily resurrection.

#### The First Four

Recognizing the reality that dates of birth and death are seldom clean enough to allow for placing an individual in a single century, the decision has been made to first examine four men who were known to have been alive during the first century and from whom information is better known. To this end, it shall be beneficial to examine how the resurrection was viewed by Clement of Rome, Papias, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp.

Clement, in his letter to the Corinthian church, made appeal to the resurrection by way of analogy, but did not exclude pointing back to Scripture in building his point. Equally important in understanding Clement is that the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* was a letter from church to church and not from an individual to a church. This could reasonably be understood to mean that the concepts appealed to by Clement were not exclusively his, rather they were ideas consistently held by the church in Rome. In looking at the analogies, Clement pointed to how nature is a

picture of the resurrection. Here he points to the concept that day and night, as well as the process involved when seeds fall to the ground, what once exists ceases to be, and yet it returns after having ceased to be.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in using the stories from the East, he pointed to the concept as taught in Arabia of the way the phoenix lives, dies, and returns.<sup>17</sup> It is important here to both recognize and concede the point that all analogies break down at some point, thus they are only meant as literary devices to help convey the message. The key to Clement's understanding of the resurrection is to be found in the locus of his faith. He pointed the Corinthians to the formula that first, the apostles had preached the Gospel; second, that message had been received by a multitude of people, including both Rome and Corinth; third, the message was from Jesus; fourth, the disciples were assured of the resurrection event; and fifth, that it was in light of this resurrection event that the apostles were commanded to set out spreading the message of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

Papias has been preserved through quotation by other Christians, and went so far as to proclaim in this same time that, "Amongst these he says that there will be a millennium after the resurrection from the dead, when the personal reign of Christ will be established on this earth."<sup>19</sup> Thus, not only was there an early belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus, but also that there would be a resurrection of humanity which would include the physical reign of Christ. Since

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<sup>16</sup> Clement of Rome, "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 11–12.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Papias, "Fragments of Papias," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 154.

Jesus clearly was not physically ruling the earth at the time of Papias' writing, his intent could only have been in reference to the future, where resurrection continued to mean a body which had once lived but since died would once again live.

Polycarp was more direct in his assessment of the resurrection of Christ and how to handle those who would disagree or bring alternative gospels. ““For whosoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist;” and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the cross, is of the devil; and whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, he is the first-born of Satan.”<sup>20</sup> Here one sees that while the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus is affirmed, that affirmation is concomitant with the incarnation and the crucifixion. Because crucifixion was widely known in the time of Polycarp, it is reasonable to believe that the audience would have understood this to mean that Jesus suffered crucifixion leading to death.

Ignatius expressed to the Trallians how there were those who would see a difference between Jesus and the Father, denying their being of the same essence, a denial of the Spirit, rejecting the virgin birth, and rebuffing the idea of the resurrection.<sup>21</sup> Because the message of the Gospel included and culminated in the resurrection, one could not deny the resurrection without at the same time and in the same sense rejecting the balance of the Gospel message, and yet there was to be found great difficulty in denying that which had been seen and reported by the

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<sup>20</sup> Polycarp of Smyrna, “The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippian,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 68.

eyewitnesses.<sup>22</sup> Such affirmation was lived out by Ignatius as seen in his view toward his own death at the hands of Rome where he believed himself to be a martyr, that he would be resurrected, and that he would attain life everlasting as a result of his faith in Christ.<sup>23</sup>

For I know that after His resurrection also He was still possessed of flesh, and I believe that He is so now. When, for instance, He came to those who were with Peter, He said to them, “Lay hold, handle Me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit.” And immediately they touched Him, and believed, being convinced both by His flesh and spirit. For this cause also they despised death, and were found its conquerors. And after his resurrection He did eat and drink with them, as being possessed of flesh, although spiritually He was united to the Father.<sup>24</sup>

What must not be missed here is that Ignatius was in both the right time historically, and the right location geographically, to have been influenced by those who had seen the risen Christ. With the letter to the Smyrnæans having been written on his way to his own death, Ignatius continued to affirm with complete confidence the belief that Jesus’ resurrection was a literal event in history, that it was this same body of Jesus that died which returned to life, and that even with death being imminent, that such an event in his own life was nothing to be feared since there was already confirmation that one could and would return from the dead.

From this it is not difficult to see that the earliest followers of Christ, even after the departure of the Apostles, had a firm belief in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Reading strong passages such as those from Polycarp condemning those who would preach

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<sup>22</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 54.

<sup>24</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnæans,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 87.

a different gospel or who would deny the physical resurrection further supports the idea that there was a firm conviction in the church that the resurrection of Jesus, as well as what was to happen for the Christians, was to be a physical, bodily event with eternal implications.

### **Those Who Followed**

#### Fragments as Additions

Recognizing the value of what has been left behind, it shall be beneficial to turn to bits remaining through the citation of others. One such piece of information comes from Quadratus, who, according to Eusebius, makes clear that the persecution of the Christians at the time of Quadratus, was the result of individuals rather than necessarily coming from the Emperors of Rome. Moving to the most relevant bit in relation to this work, one sees that around the year AD 124-125, Quadratus made appeal that there were reports of individuals who had been healed or brought back from the dead during the time of Jesus' life, and then claimed that many of those were still alive to his day.<sup>25</sup> While the factuality of this report may initially be less probable than the reports of Clement, Polycarp, one cannot dismiss the point that Quadratus is believed to have died ca. AD 129, which means it is highly probable that he was alive during the life of John the Apostle, and given that the straight line distance from Athens to Ephesus was only two hundred miles, it would seem highly plausible that Quadratus would have known of the miracles and if any of those who had been healed or raised were still alive. The key point here is that Quadratus' text at a minimum infers the physical resurrection. It is in this same vein that one finds Aristides,

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<sup>25</sup> Eusebius of Caesaria, "The Church History of Eusebius," in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 175.

who in his apology to Hadrian, proffered that the Christians are the ones who look forward to the resurrection of the dead and life in a world yet to come.<sup>26</sup>

### The Difference

A significant difference is here seen from the concept the Greeks brought in relation to life after death and that of the Christian. Truly, differences also existed between the Christian view and that of the Jew. “Instead of a doctrine of resurrection, the Greeks developed a doctrine of the immortality of the soul. The body was thought to be a disposable physical outer garment, whereas the soul was related to the immortal forms and sustained from age to age.”<sup>27</sup> Based on this line of thinking, the Greek – or at least one influenced by the Greek thinking – would have had no difficulty in believing in a spiritual change, but denied the necessity of the physical.

Justin Martyr pointed to Plato in attempting to explain the need for a physical resurrection.

Here Plato seems to me to have learnt from the prophets not only the doctrine of the judgment, but also of the resurrection, which the Greeks refuse to believe. For his saying that the soul is judged along with the body, proves nothing more clearly than that he believed the doctrine of the resurrection. Since how could Ardiæus and the rest have undergone such punishment in Hades, had they left on earth the body, with its head, hands, feet, and skin? For certainly they will never say that the soul has a head and hands, and feet and skin. But Plato, having fallen in with the testimonies of the prophets in Egypt, and having accepted what they teach concerning the resurrection of the body, teaches that the soul is judged in company with the body.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Aristides of Athens, “The Apology of Aristides,” in *The Gospel of Peter, the Diatessaron of Tatian, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Visio Pauli, the Apocalypses of the Virgil and Sedrach, the Testament of Abraham, the Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, the Narrative of Zosimus, the Apology of Aristides, the Epistles of Clement (Complete Text), Origen’s Commentary on John, Books I-X, and Commentary on Matthew, Books I, II, and X-XIV*, ed. Allan Menzies, trans. D. M. Kay, vol. 9, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897), 276–277.

<sup>27</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1124.

<sup>28</sup> Justin Martyr, “Justin’s Hortatory Address to the Greeks,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. M. Dods, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 284.

The difference for the Christian was that their view of the resurrection was rooted in the Old Testament and not in a dualistic Platonic view of matter versus spirit. Likewise, according to Murray Harris, one cannot bring the charge that the Christians developed a physical resurrection by way of syncretism, where the body came from Jewish lore and immortality from the Greek. Harris says,

The rootage of the Christian view of the hereafter, however, is securely in Old Testament soil, as the dispute between Jesus and the Sadducees indicates (see Mk. 12:18–27; especially verses 26f. ‘As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.’) It is indefensible to assert that Christianity owes its doctrine of resurrection to Jewish thought but its concept of immortality to Greek philosophy. In a splendidly comprehensive analysis of the Jewish background of 1 Corinthians 15, H. C. C. Cavallin has recently (1974) shown that in Jewish literature between c. 200 BC and AD 100, statements on an immortality of the soul which excludes the resurrection of the body are almost as common as those which explicitly state the resurrection of the body, and the same proportions can be asserted for statements on the soul’s life after death without exclusion of the body and texts which state the resurrection without explicit reference to the body.”<sup>29</sup>

Based on the above, there is no reason to believe Christians attempted to create a view of resurrection by way of picking and choosing favorable pieces from other systems of thought. To claim that one speaks of immortality without speaking of the body, while another does the reverse, lacks force of argument.

### **Irenaeus to Tertullian**

One of the earliest creedal formulas may be found in the writings of Irenaeus. The following citation is at length, but demonstrates that while Irenaeus held to a physical bodily resurrection, this resurrection was by necessity tied to Theology Proper, Christology,

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<sup>29</sup> Murray Harris, “Resurrection and Immortality: Eight Theses,” *Themelios: Volume 1, No. 2, Spring 1976* (1976): 52.



Pneumatology, Hamartiology, Anthropology, Eschatology, Angelology and Demonology, and Soteriology.

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father “to gather all things in one,” and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord, and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the invisible Father, “every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess” to Him, and that He should execute just judgment towards all; that He may send “spiritual wickednesses,” and the angels who transgressed and became apostates, together with the ungodly, and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men, into everlasting fire; but may, in the exercise of His grace, confer immortality on the righteous, and holy, and those who have kept His commandments, and have persevered in His love, some from the beginning [of their Christian course], and others from [the date of] their repentance, and may surround them with everlasting glory.<sup>30</sup>

Justin Martyr, a philosopher and contemporary of Irenaeus, would point not only to the Old Testament for a basis upon which to claim a physical resurrection, but also advised that one could not be considered a Christian if they denied the physical resurrection of the dead, that when one dies their soul is immediately taken to Heaven to await this resurrection, or that there will be a literal thousand year reign from Jerusalem by Jesus.<sup>31</sup> In this vein Justin points to the work of Christ while on earth and how it impacted the physical. “For if on earth He healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection,

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<sup>30</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, “Irenæus against Heresies,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 330–331.

<sup>31</sup> Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 239.

so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire. In this manner, then, shall those dreaded difficulties of theirs be healed.”<sup>32</sup>

During the same period as Irenaeus and Justin, Athenagoras was presenting perhaps one of the most polished apologetics in support of the physical resurrection. Of his work *Embassy*, Grant notes “Athenagoras explains that many philosophers teach that bodies will rise (again) and that nothing in Pythagoras or Plato opposes such a notion; he proposes to discuss the subject later. It is no surprise, then, that the manuscripts of the *Embassy* also contain an apologetic treatise *On the Resurrection of Corpses*, whether by Athenagoras or not....”<sup>33</sup> With an estimated dating of this work being placed ca. AD 177, over one hundred years had passed since Paul wrote of *anastasis* and *egiero* to the Corinthians. The persecutions of Nero and Domitian had not altered the core beliefs of the Church, and history shows that the same physical bodily resurrection was still being preached.

Some in the line of Kuyper and Van Til, might conclude that Athenagoras’ arguments were based on Christian presuppositions. If such were proven to be the case, the Doctrine of Resurrection might suffer. Of Athenagoras, Van Til notes,

Athenagoras was not aware of the fact that in the two types of argument that he employed, the one based upon and the other not based upon the idea of creation, he was making use of two mutually exclusive notions of possibility. The Christian doctrine of resurrection fits in with and presupposes the Christian doctrine of creation and providence. The Christian doctrine of resurrection does not fit in with and would indeed not be “possible” without these doctrines as its presupposition.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Justin Martyr, “Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. M. Dods, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 295.

<sup>33</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 109.

<sup>34</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*. (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1969).

However, such may not easily be the case and greatly oversimplifies the historical evidence. When Van Til makes the argument that one could not come to the idea of resurrection without presupposing Christian doctrines, two errors are committed. First, when Van Til admits these two doctrines, he admits evidences to his argument, which means his reasoning is no longer a presuppositional apologetic, rather it is an evidentiary method. Second, and necessarily tied to the first, it has already been shown that the Greeks believed that there would be a resurrection, even if bifurcated between physical and spiritual. Because of the differences between Jewish and Greek thought in relation to the existence of God or gods, Van Til overstates his case in relation to Athenagoras.

Irenaeus and Justin both taught that the resurrection from the dead must, by necessity, include the same physical body as that which was buried. Justin is believed to have proffered the argument that the body dies, but not the soul, thus intimating in line with the Greek belief that when one dies, there is not an extinction of consciousness.<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus took the argument further, claiming that because any act of righteousness or unrighteousness was committed while in the body, it would be inappropriate for the soul to either gain or suffer without also including that vessel which held the soul and was part of either goodness or offense.<sup>36</sup>

In pointing to the resurrection as a physical event, Clement of Alexandria drew a sharp distinction between time and eternity.

There is nothing intermediate between light and darkness. But the end is reserved till the resurrection of those who believe; and it is not the reception of some other thing, but the obtaining of the promise previously made. For we do not say that both take place together

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<sup>35</sup> Justin Martyr, "Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. M. Dods, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 298.

<sup>36</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, "Irenæus against Heresies," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 403.

at the same time—both the arrival at the end, and the anticipation of that arrival. For eternity and time are not the same, neither is the attempt and the final result; but both have reference to the same thing, and one and the same person is concerned in both. Faith, so to speak, is the attempt generated in time; the final result is the attainment of the promise, secured for eternity. Now the Lord Himself has most clearly revealed the equality of salvation, when He said: “For this is the will of my Father, that every one that seeth the Son, and believeth on Him, should have everlasting life; and I will raise him up in the last day.”<sup>37</sup>

From this it may be drawn out that Clement was acknowledging the limitations of the human mind, pointing to the journey as the here and now, whereas the resurrection is the arrival at the destination. By way of such delineation, Clement allows for the journey to continue for successive generations of Christians, while at the same time not losing hope in the future promise of the resurrection simply because the destination has yet to arrive. While the desire of believers has been that the resurrection would occur during their lifetime, Clement returns the emphasis to the timing of Jesus and God the Father rather than focusing on humanity as the determiner.

Tertullian likewise wrote of the resurrection of Jesus. In particular he recounted how Jesus was crucified, taken down from the cross, placed in a tomb, that tomb having been guarded, on the third day there was no body present.

Then, when His body was taken down from the cross and placed in a sepulcher, the Jews in their eager watchfulness surrounded it with a large military guard, lest, as He had predicted His resurrection from the dead on the third day, His disciples might remove by stealth His body, and deceive even the incredulous. But, lo, on the third day there was a sudden shock of earthquake, and the stone which sealed the sepulcher was rolled away, and the guard fled off in terror: without a single disciple near, the grave was found empty of all but the clothes of the buried One.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor,” in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 216.

<sup>38</sup> Tertullian, “The Apology,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 35.

One may contest that Tertullian was merely parroting that which the Church had been preaching for a hundred years to this point, but such would fail to explain why the resurrection event was still being maintained as a literal, physical event whereby a dead body came back to life and was reportedly seen again walking, talking, and eating with those who had not died. In the wake of the persecution brought particularly by Nero and Domitian, one would have to wonder why the Christian population continued to insist on a physically risen Jesus rather than merely opting for a deification of lesser offense to the Romans.

While speculation may be of interest, what is not open for dispute is the fact that to the point of Tertullian there is still a firm adherence to the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, which was consistent with the eyewitness testimony as given by the New Testament writers. Tertullian would even concede the point that it was an *a priori* belief by the Christians that the resurrection was a real event to happen, and based on such a belief, they held death in contempt.<sup>39</sup>

### **Early Challenges and Difficulties**

To present data that would leave the reader believing there to have been absolute unanimity following the reported resurrection would be irresponsible. There were various issues which arose that affected the Church in the wake of the resurrection and the emergence of Christianity.

A point worthy of mention is the Quartodeciman debates that took place in the late second century. Here was to be found disagreement within the Church as to the proper day for celebrating the resurrection of Christ. Ultimately the formal position of the Church in relation to

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<sup>39</sup> Tertullian, "Ad Nationes," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 127.

the date on which the resurrection would be celebrated would be decided by the Council of Nicea in AD 325.<sup>40</sup> While interesting and certainly not a point upon which all would agree, it must be recognized that the disagreement here was over when to celebrate the resurrection, and not whether or not a physical resurrection happened.

A second significant event was to be found in the heresy of Marcion. With respect to Marcion, at the core of his theological system was a dualistic concept of God whereby he saw a different God of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>41</sup> In this dualistic system Marcion challenged the very core of Christianity by attempting to divorce it from the roots that gave rise to the coming of the Messiah. Marcion would set forth his own proposed canon of Scripture, leaving out texts not of Paul, altering texts that were written by those who traveled with Paul (specifically Luke), and discarding the balance.

With respect to the resurrection, the greater concern regarding Marcionism was to be found in the denial of the physicality of Jesus. Marcion held that, based on his concept of two gods, Jesus was not the messianic figure foretold in the Old Testament, rather he merely pointed to the good god of the New Testament, nor was Jesus physical in his appearance.<sup>42</sup> While Marcionism was indeed a challenge to orthodox Christianity in relation to the person of Jesus and the physical resurrection, since if Jesus was not physically present he could not physically rise from the dead, Marcionism failed to alter or undermine the original message of the Church. More specifically, Marcion denied the physical resurrection, but never demonstrated that the physical resurrection to which the Church appealed had not in fact happened. His case was built

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<sup>40</sup> D. Larry Gregg, "Easter," ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 362–363.

<sup>41</sup> R.E. Webber, "Marcion," ed. J.D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 452.

<sup>42</sup> Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 416.

by denying texts that had already been accepted by the Church as being delivered either from an Apostle directly, or from one associated directly with an Apostle. While such is the case, it cannot be denied that Marcion was successful in leading others to follow his brand of Christian theology. It was in part from this ability to lead people toward a different theology than that which was taught by the Church that the Council of Nicea included the resurrection in the Apostle's Creed in an effort to clearly state exactly what it was that the Church believed.

The challenge, looking back, appears to have been tied to relying heavily on a Platonic worldview whereby one considered the material portion of reality to be evil, while the spiritual was thought good. While the dichotomy may have appeal both then and now, it is suggested that by way of appealing to such a separation between the two realms, the appeal does nothing by way of addressing either the terminology used by the writers of the New Testament, or with respect to how the earliest members of Christianity understood the resurrection. It is further suggested that the appeal made by Marcion and those following Docetism in general fails to hold up even when taken out of the realm of Christianity. Consider as an example, Suetonius' report of the apotheosis of Julius Caesar.

He died in the fifty-sixth year of his age, and was ranked amongst the Gods, not only by a formal decree, but in the belief of the vulgar. For during the first games which Augustus, his heir, consecrated to his memory, a comet blazed for seven days together, rising always about eleven o'clock; and it was supposed to be the soul of Caesar, now received into heaven: for which reason, likewise, he is represented on his statue with a star on his brow. The senate-house in which he was slain, was ordered to be shut up, and a decree made that the ides of March should be called parricidal, and the senate should never more assemble on that day.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars; An English Translation, Augmented with the Biographies of Contemporary Statesmen, Orators, Poets, and Other Associates*, ed. Alexander Thomson (Medford, MA: Gebbie & Co., 1889).

What should be obvious here is that even the Romans, who were steeped in Platonic thought, did not hold that the death of Julius Caesar had the emperor in the afterlife as some incorporeal entity. In this case it was presumed by many that Caesar did have a material form, that being a comet. Based on this lone example it can be shown that there was at least some level of acceptance by non-Christians that there was to be at least some form of physicality involved with respect to life after death.

### **The Council of Niecea, AD 325**

When evaluating the “why” behind the convening of the Council of Nicea, one finds Arianism as a core cause. Two key points are offered here in an effort to demonstrate that this council was focused on issues other than the bodily resurrection of Jesus, thus implying that the physicality of resurrection was not a matter of dispute by this time. A third point, the Quartodeciman debate, has already been addressed.

The Arian controversy was based upon the belief that Jesus was a created being, and as such was not equal to the Father. “Named after Arius, this heresy maintained that God the Father alone is eternal and made His Son to be the first creature He created *ex nihilo*. Some Arians went on to teach that the Holy Spirit was the first and greatest creature produced by the Son. The Council of Nicea met in A.D. 325 to deal with the subject, and it firmly rejected Arianism.”<sup>44</sup> Based on the key distinction by Arius that purported the Father to have been eternal, the Son was the first created, and then the Son created the Holy Spirit, the challenge was in relation to the Trinity and not a challenge against the resurrection. It has already been shown that Paul used the terms which indicated that what went down is exactly the same as what came up in relation to the

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<sup>44</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 40.



burial and resurrection of Jesus. What has not been presented, and for lack of space cannot be done in depth, is that the terminology used by Paul specifically as it relates to the sentence construct, indicates that in terms of action, Jesus died, others buried him, God acted upon him, thus Jesus was raised. If this expression of where the action rested in relation to the resurrection is accepted as accurate, then all that would be necessary for Jesus' resurrection is that the Father existed. This is not a dismissal of the Trinity, rather it is merely intended to point out that it was the Father that raised Jesus, therefore no challenge was brought against the bodily resurrection on this point.

A second factor that could not be overlooked was the divergent views in relation to how the Church understood Jesus in light of the Father. Three positions were offered prior to and at the Council.

The Roman Emperor Constantine, himself a Christian who had ended the persecution of the church in A.D. 313, called the Council of Nicea in 325 to deal with the uproar. Three positions were represented at Nicea: 1) Jesus was of a *different* essence from the Father (Arius); 2) Jesus was of the *same* essence as the Father (Athanasius); 3) Jesus was of a *like* essence to the Father (a compromise position).<sup>45</sup>

While certainly important in terms of how one understands Jesus, none of the three points offered above have any implication on the physicality of the resurrection for reasons already stated.

The decisive point for theological science lies here: where we move from one level to another—from the basic evangelical and doxological level to the theological level, and from that level to the high theological level of ontological relations in God. This is undoubtedly the great concern that occupied the mind of the Council of Nicea when the Credal formulation it produced, in spite of fiery discussion, clearly arose out of a profound doxological orientation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> James P. Eckman, *Exploring Church History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 30.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 159.

By the time Constantine convened the Council of Nicea, there appears to have been a shift from the manner in which the Church discussed matters related to Jesus and the resurrection event.

This distinction appears to be one where in the earliest days the Church relied on the testimony of those who saw the risen Christ, and the apologetic was an appeal to what they knew to be true or false. Following the Apostles, there was a shift to more of an offensive apologetic whereby the Church sought to take Christianity to all other worldviews, attempting to demonstrate the soundness, truth, and validity of the message of Christ. Beginning around the time of Marcion it appears that Christianity took more of a defensive posture related to their apologetics.

### **Conclusion**

The intent of this work has been to attempt to trace in a cursory manner the development of the doctrine of the resurrection from just days following the crucifixion of Jesus up until the Council of Nicea in AD 325. The paper began with the investigation and understanding of Paul's choice of words in relation to the reported resurrection event. By way of examining the distribution of *anastasis* in the New Testament, it became evident that two-thirds of the time when the term was used, it was by the Gospel writers or by Luke in Acts. Additionally, thirty-seven percent of the time when *anastasis* was used, it was used by Luke. Such should come as no surprise, as the Gospel writers were seeking to convey the events from Jesus' life, while Luke was writing to Theophilus in an effort to explain the origin of the Church. It was not the empty tomb that created the faith in the disciples, rather it was in the belief that they had encountered the risen Jesus, the very same one who had days before died.

One unique writing came from outside the Church during the Apostolic Age that may plausibly be connected to the birth of Christianity. A brief examination was made of the Nazareth Decree, ascribed to Claudius, and the fact that for the Palestinian area, the Emperor had

changed the penalty associated with disturbing a grave from financial to capital. It is difficult to say whether or not this move was spurred by the growth and message of Christianity which centered on the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Finally, a selection of early writers was examined. What is of interest at this point is that there was a variety of means by which the writers sought to convey the resurrection event. First, in looking to the Apostles, it would appear that there was no “apologetic” as is known today, rather they were merely conveying as eyewitnesses, or those who had spoken to eyewitnesses, the events that had happened. Following the earliest sub-apostolic writers it would appear that there was a fundamental shift in the apologetic method used by Christians, or more specifically it could be said that they went on the offense. By this it appears that the Christians of the second century sought to take Christianity to those who did not follow, and in doing so sought to demonstrate the truthfulness of the Christian worldview, with emphasis on the physicality of the resurrection. The texts were centered on demonstrating why competing worldviews were insufficient, or how the Christians were the model to which all of society should work to emulate. As the time of the Council of Nicea drew closer, it would appear that the Christian offensive apologetic transitioned into one of defense, focusing on responses to specific heretical movements and schisms more than returning to the message as originally communicated. In attempting to clarify any application from the above research with the current time, it is believed that additional research is warranted in an effort to more clearly trace and define apologetic methods and movements by the Patristics, with emphasis being made on pre-Constantine works. It is further suggested that in order to better understand the doctrine of the resurrection, one must begin the research in the Old Testament era, as there was no appreciable development identified between AD 30 and the Council of Nicea.

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