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The Resurrection of Christ

by J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)



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Some nineteen hundred years ago, in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire, there lived one who, to a casual observer might have seemed to be a remarkable man. Up to the age of about thirty years. He lived an obscure life in the midst of an humble family. Then He began a remarkable course of ethical and religious teaching, accompanied by a ministry of healing. At first He was very popular. Great crowds followed Him gladly, and the intellectual men of His people were interested in what He had to say. But His teaching presented revolutionary features, and He did not satisfy the political expectations of the populace. And so, before long, after some three years, He fell a victim to the jealousy of the leaders of His people and the cowardice of the Roman governor. He died the death of the criminals of those days, on the cross. At His death, the disciples whom He had gathered about Him were utterly discouraged. In Him had centered all their loftiest hopes. And now that He was taken from them by a shameful death, their hopes were shattered. They fled from Him in cowardly fear in the hour of His need, and an observer would have said that never was a movement more hopelessly dead. These followers of Jesus had evidently been far inferior to Him in spiritual discernment and in courage. They had not been able, even when He was with them, to understand the lofty teachings of their leader. How, then, could they understand Him when He was gone? The movement depended, one might have said, too much on one extraordinary man, and when He was taken away, then surely the movement was dead.

But then the astonishing thing happened. The plain fact, which no one doubts, is that those

same weak, discouraged men who had just fled in the hour of their Master's need, and who were altogether hopeless on account of His death, suddenly began in Jerusalem, a very few days or weeks after their Master's death, what is certainly the most remarkable spiritual movement that the world has ever seen. At first, the movement thus begun remained within the limits of the Jewish people. But soon it broke the bands of Judaism, and began to be planted in all the great cities of the Roman world. Within three hundred years, the Empire itself had been conquered by the Christian faith.

But this movement was begun in those few decisive days after the death of Jesus. What was it which caused the striking change in those weak, discouraged disciples, which made them the spiritual conquerors of the world?

Historians of today are perfectly agreed that something must have happened, something decisive, after the death of Jesus, in order to begin this new movement. It was not just an ordinary continuation of the influence of Jesus' teaching. The modern historians are at least agreed that some striking change took place after the death of Jesus, and before the beginning of the Christian missionary movement. They are agreed, moreover, to some extent even about the question what the change was; they are agreed in holding that this new Christian movement was begun by the belief of the disciples in the resurrection of Jesus; they are agreed in holding that in the minds and hearts of the disciples

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there was formed the conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead. Of course, that was not formerly admitted by every one. It used to be maintained, in the early days of modern skepticism, that the disciples of Jesus only pretended that He had risen from the dead. Such hypotheses have long ago been placed in the limbo of discarded theories. The disciples of Jesus, the intimate friends of Jesus, it is now admitted, in a short time after His death came to believe honestly that He had risen from the dead. The only difference of opinion comes when we ask what in turn produced this belief.

The New Testament answer to this question is perfectly plain. According to the New Testament, the disciples believed in the resurrection of Jesus because Jesus really, after His death, came out of the tomb, appeared to them, and held extended intercourse with them, so that their belief in the resurrection was simply based on fact.

Of course, this explanation is rejected by those modern men who are unwilling to recognize in the origin of Christianity an entrance of the creative power of God, in distinction from the laws which operate in nature. And so another explanation has been proposed. It is that the belief of the disciples in the resurrection was produced by certain hallucinations in which they thought they saw Jesus, their teacher, and heard perhaps words of His ringing in their ears. A hallucination is a phenomenon well known to students of pathology. In an hallucination, the optic nerve is affected, and the patient therefore does actually in one sense "see" someone or something. But this effect is produced, not by an

external object, but by the pathological condition of the subject himself. That is the view of the "appearances" of the risen Christ which is held today by those who reject the miraculous in connection with the origin of Christianity.

It is also held, it is true, that what was decisive in the resurrection faith of the early disciples was the impression which they had received of Jesus' person. Without that impression, it is supposed, they could never have had those pathological experiences which they called appearances of the risen Christ, so that those pathological experiences were merely the necessary form in which the continued impression of Jesus' person made itself felt in the life of the first disciples. But after all, on this hypothesis, the resurrection faith of the disciples, upon which the Christian church is founded, was really based upon a pathological experience in which these men thought they saw Jesus, and heard perhaps a word or two of His ringing in their ears, when there was nothing in the external world to make them think that they were in His presence.

Formerly, it is true, there were other explanations. It used to be held sometimes that the disciples came to believe in the resurrection because Jesus was not really dead. When He was placed in the cool air of the tomb, He revived and came out, and the disciples thought that He had arisen. A noteworthy scholar of today is said to have revived this theory, because he is dissatisfied with the prevailing idea. But the great majority of scholars today believe that this faith of the disciples was caused by hallucinations, which are called "appearances" of the risen Lord.

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But let us examine the New Testament account of the resurrection of Jesus, and of the related events. This account is contained particularly in six of the New Testament books. Of course, all the New Testament books presuppose the resurrection, and witness is borne to it in all of them. But there are six of these books, above all others, which provide the details of the Resurrection. These are the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians.

According to these six books, if their witness be put together, Jesus died on a Friday. His body was not allowed to remain and decompose on the cross, but was buried that same evening. He was placed in a grave chosen by a leader of the people, a member of the Sanhedrin. His burial was witnessed by certain women. He remained in the grave during the Sabbath. But on the morning of the first day of the week, He arose. Certain women who came to the grave found it empty, and saw angels who told them He had risen from the dead. He appeared to these women. The grave was visited that same morning by Peter and the beloved disciple. In the course of the day Jesus appeared to Peter. In the evening He appeared to two unnamed disciples who were walking to Emmaus-, and apparently later on the same evening He appeared to all the apostles save Thomas. Then a week later He appeared again to the apostles, Thomas being present. Then He appeared in Galilee, as we learn from Matthew 28. Paul is probably mentioning this same appearance when he

says that "He appeared to above five hundred brethren at once," 1 Corinthians 15:6. It was probably then, also, that He appeared to the seven disciples on the sea of Galilee, John 21. Then He appeared in Jerusalem, and ascended from the Mount of Olives. Some time in the course of the appearances there was one to James, His own brother, I Corinthians 15:7. Later on He appeared to Paul. Such is the New Testament account of the resurrection appearances of our Lord.

There are two features of this account to which great prominence has been given in recent discussions. These are, (1) the place, and (2) the character, of the appearances of Jesus.

According to the New Testament, the place was first Jerusalem, then Galilee, and then Jerusalem again. The appearances took place, not only in Galilee and in Jerusalem, but both in Jerusalem and in Galilee; and the first appearances took place in Jerusalem.

So much for the place of the appearances. As for the character of the appearances, they were, according to the New Testament, of a plain, physical kind. In the New Testament Jesus is represented even as holding table companionship with His disciples after His resurrection, and as engaging in rather extended intercourse with them. There is, it is true, something mysterious about this intercourse; it is not just a continuation of the old Galilean relationship. Jesus' body is independent of conditions of time and space in a way that appeared only rarely in His previous ministry. There was a change. But there is also continuity. The body of Jesus came out of the tomb and appeared

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to the disciples in such a way that a man could put his finger in the mark of the nails in His hands.

In two particulars, this account is contradicted by modern scholars. In the first place, the character of the appearances, is supposed to have been different. The disciples of Jesus, it is supposed, saw Him just for a moment in glory, and perhaps heard a word or two ringing in their ears. Of course this was not, according to the modern naturalistic historians, a real seeing and hearing, but an hallucination. But the point is, that those who regard these appearances as hallucinations are not able to take the New Testament account and prove from it that these appearances were hallucinations and were not founded upon the real presence of the body of Jesus; but are obliged first to reduce the New Testament account to manageable proportions. The reason is that there are limits to an hallucination. No sane men could think that they had had extended companionship with one who was not really present, or could believe that they had walked with Him and talked with Him after His death. You cannot enter upon the modern explanation of these happenings as genuine experiences but at the same time mere visions, until you modify the account that is given of the appearance themselves. And if this modified account be true, there must be a great deal in the New Testament account that is legendary. You must admit this, and you are going to explain these appearances as hallucinations. So there is a difference concerning

the nature of the appearances, according to modern reconstruction, as over against the New Testament.

And there is a difference also concerning the place of the appearances. According to the customary modern view of naturalistic historians, the first appearances took place in Galilee, and not in Jerusalem. But what is the importance of that difference of opinion? It looks at first sight as though it were a mere matter of detail. But in reality it is profoundly important for the whole modern reconstruction. If you are going to explain these experiences as hallucinations, the necessary psychological conditions must have prevailed in order for the disciples to have had the experiences. Therefore modern historians are careful to allow time for the profound discouragement of the disciples to be gotten rid of — for the disciples to return to Galilee, and to live again in the scenes where they had lived with Jesus; to muse upon Him, and be ready to have these visions of Him. Time must be permitted, and the place must be favorable. And then there is another important element.

We come here to one of the most important things of all — the empty tomb. If the first appearances were in Jerusalem, why did not the disciples or the

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enemies investigate the tomb, and refute this belief of finding the body of Jesus still there? This argument is thought to be refuted by the Galilean hypothesis regarding the first appearances. If the first appearances took place not till weeks afterward and in Galilee, this mystery is thought to be explained. There would be no opportunity to investigate the tomb until it was too late; and so the matter could have been allowed to pass, and the resurrection faith could have arisen. Of course, this explanation is not quite satisfactory, because one cannot see how the disciples would not have been stimulated to investigate the tomb, whenever and wherever the appearances took place. We have not quite explained the empty tomb even by this Galilean hypothesis. But you can understand the insistence of the modern writers that the first appearances took place in Galilee.

So there is a difference between the modern historian and the New Testament account in the matters of the manner and of the place of these experiences. Were they of a kind such that they could be explained as hallucinations or were they such that they could only be regarded as real appearances? Was the first appearance three days after Jesus' death, and near the tomb, or later on in Galilee?

Let us come now to the New Testament account. The first source that we should consider is the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. It is probably the earliest of the sources. But what is still more important — the authorship and date of this particular source of information have been agreed upon even by the opponents of Christianity. So this is not only a source of first-rate historical importance but it is a source of admitted importance. We have here a fixed starting-point in all controversy.

We must examine, then, this document with some care. It was probably written, roughly speaking, about 55 A.D., about twenty-five years after the death of Jesus, about as long after the death of Jesus as 1924 is after the Spanish American War (1898). That is not such a very long period of time. And of course, there is one vital element in the testimony here, which does not prevail in the case of the Spanish War. Most people have forgotten many details of the Spanish-American War, because they have not had them continuously in mind.

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But it would not be so in the case now under consideration. The resurrection of Jesus was the thing which formed the basis of all the thought of the early Christians, and so the memory of it when it was twenty-five years past was very much fresher than the memory of an event like the Spanish-American War of twenty-five years ago, which has passed out of our consciousness.

Let us turn, then, to I Corinthians 15, and read the first verses, "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received." "First of all," or "among the first things," may mean first in point of time, or first in point of importance. At any rate, this was a part of Paul's fundamental preaching in Corinth, in about the year 51 or 52. So we get back a little farther than the time when the Epistle was written. But these things were evidently also first and fundamental in Paul's preaching in other places, so that you are taken back an indefinite period in the ministry of Paul for this evidence. But then you are taken back by the next words farther still — "that which I also received." There is a common agreement as to the source from which Paul "received" this information; it is pretty generally agreed that he received it from the Jerusalem church. According to the Epistle to the Galatians, he had been in conference with Peter and James only three years after his conversion. That was the time for Paul to receive this tradition. Historians are usually willing to admit that this information is nothing less than the account which the primitive Church, including Peter and James, gave of the events which lay at the foundation of the Church. So you have here, even in the admission of modern men, a piece of historical information of priceless value.

"For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." Why does Paul mention the burial of Jesus? The impression which the mention of the burial produces upon every reader who comes to it as for the first time is that Paul means to say that the body of Jesus was laid in the tomb. The burial, in other words, implies the empty tomb. And yet a great many modern historians say that Paul "knows nothing" about the empty tomb! Surely such an assertion is quite

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false. Paul does not indeed mention the empty tomb in so many words; he does not give a detailed description of it here. But that does not mean that he knew nothing about it. Those to whom he was writing believed in it already, and he is simply reviewing a previous argument in order to draw inferences from it with regard to the resurrection of Christians. To say that Paul knows nothing about the empty tomb ignores the fact that the mention of the burial is quite meaningless unless Paul had in mind the empty tomb. I do not see how any one can get any other impression. Moreover is not that what resurrection means, after all? Modern historians say that Paul was interested simply in the continued life of Jesus in a new body which had nothing to do with the body which lay in the tomb. That is rather strange in this connection. Paul is arguing, in this passage, not against men who denied the immortality of the soul, but against men who held the Greek view of the immortality of the soul without the body. The view that they were holding, would logically make of the resurrection of Jesus just the simple continuance of His personal life. There is no point at all, then, in what Paul says against them unless he is referring to the resurrection from the tomb. Unless he is referring to this, he is playing into the hands of his opponents. But many men nowadays have such a strangely unhistorical notion of what "resurrection" meant to the early disciples. They talk as though the resurrection faith meant that those disciples simply believed that Jesus continued to exist after His crucifixion. This is absurd. Those men believed in the continued existence after death of every man. There is not the slightest doubt about that. They were thoroughly imbued with this belief. They were not Sadducees. Even in those first three days after Jesus' crucifixion, they still believed that He was alive. If that is all that resurrection meant, there was nothing in it to cause joy. Conviction of the continued life of Jesus would not make Him any different from other men. But what changed sadness into joy and brought about the founding of the Church was the substitution, for a belief in the continued existence of Jesus, of a belief in the emergence of His body from the tomb. And Paul's words imply that as clear as day.

"And that he rose again the third day." Of all the important things that Paul says, this is perhaps the most important, from the point of view of modern discussion. There are few words in the New Testament that are more disconcerting to modern naturalistic historians than the words, "on the third day." We have just observed what the modern reconstruction is. The disciples went back to Galilee, it is supposed, and there, some time after the crucifixion, they came to believe that Jesus was alive. But if the first appearance took place on the third day, this explanation is not possible. The modern reconstruction disappears altogether if you believe that the first appearances were on the third day. If Paul's words are to be taken at their face value, the whole elaborate psychological reconstruction of the conditions in the disciples' minds, leading up to the hallucinations in Galilee, disappears.

Many men, it is true, have an answer ready. "Let us not," they say in effect, "go beyond what Paul actually says! Paul does not say that the first

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appearance occurred on the third day, but only that Christ rose on that day. He might have risen some time before He first appeared to them; the resurrection might have occurred on the third day and yet the first appearance might have occurred some weeks after, in Galilee."

But why, if nothing in particular happened on the third day, and if the first appearance occurred some weeks after, did the disciples hit upon just the third day as the day of the supposed resurrection? Surely it was very strange for them to suppose that Jesus had really risen a considerable time before He appeared to them and had left them all that time in their despair. So strange a supposition on the part of the disciples surely requires an explanation. Why was it, if nothing happened on the third day, that the disciples ever came to suppose that the resurrection occurred on that day and not on some other day?

One proposed explanation is that the third day was hit upon as the day of the supposed resurrection because Scripture was thought to require it. Paul says, it will be remembered, that Jesus rose the third day according to the Scriptures. But where will you find in the Old Testament Scriptures any clear reference to the third day, as the day of the resurrection of Christ. No doubt there is the "sign of Jonah." and there is also Hosea 6-2. We are certainly not denying that these passages (at least the former) are true prophecies of the resurrection on the third day. But could they ever have been understood before the fulfillment had come? That is more than doubtful. Indeed it is not even quite clear whether Paul means the words "according to the Scriptures" to refer to the third day at all, and not merely to the central fact of the resurrection itself. At any rate the Scripture passages never could have suggested the third day to the disciples unless something had actually happened on that day to indicate that Christ had then risen.

But had not Jesus Himself predicted that He would rise on the third day, and might not this prediction have caused the disciples to suppose that He had risen on that day even if the first appearance did not occur till long afterwards? This is an obvious way out of the difficulty, but it is effectually closed to the modern naturalistic historian. For it would require us to suppose that Jesus' predictions of His resurrection, recorded in the Gospels, are historical. But the naturalistic historians are usually concerned with few things more than with the denial of the authenticity of these predictions. According to the ordinary "liberal" view, "Jesus certainly could not have predicted that He would rise from the

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dead in the manner recorded in the Gospels. So for the "liberal" historians this explanation of "the third day" becomes impossible. The explanation would perhaps explain "the third day" in the belief of the disciples, but it would also destroy the whole account of the "liberal Jesus."

Accordingly it becomes necessary to seek explanations farther afield. Some have appealed to a supposed belief in antiquity to the effect that the soul of a dead person hovered around the body for three days and then departed. This belief, it is said, might have seemed to the disciples to make it necessary to put the supposed resurrection not later than the third day. But how far did this belief prevail in Palestine in the first century? The question is perhaps not capable of satisfactory answer. Moreover, it is highly dangerous from the point of view of the modern naturalistic historians to appeal to this belief, since it would show that some interest was taken in the body of Jesus; and yet that is what these modern historians are most concerned to deny. For if interest was taken in the body, the old question arises again why the tomb was not investigated. And the whole vision hypothesis breaks down.

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Since these explanations have proved unsatisfactory, some modern scholars have had recourse to a fourth explanation. There was in ancient times, they say, a pagan belief about a god who died and rose again. On the first day the worshiper of the god were to mourn, but on the third day they were to rejoice, because of the resurrection of the god. So it is thought that the disciples

may have been influenced by this pagan belief. But surely this is a desperate expedient. It is only a very few students of the history of religions who would be quite so bold as to believe that in Palestine, in the time of Christ, there was any prevalence of this pagan belief with its dying and rising god. Indeed the importance and clearness of this belief have been enormously exaggerated in recent works — particularly as regards the rising of the god on the third day.

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The truth is that the third day in the primitive account of the resurrection of Christ remains, and that there is no satisfactory means of explaining it away. Indeed some naturalistic historians are actually coming back to the view that perhaps we cannot explain this third day away, and that perhaps something did happen on the third day to produce the faith of the disciples. But if this conclusion be reached, then the whole psychological reconstruction disappears, and particularly the modern hypothesis about the place of the appearances. Something must have happened to produce the disciples' belief in the resurrection not far off in Galilee but near to the tomb in Jerusalem. But if so, there would be no time for the elaborate psychological process which is supposed to have produced the visions, and there would be ample opportunity for the investigation of the tomb.

It is therefore a fact of enormous importance that it is just Paul in the passage where he is admittedly reproducing the tradition of the primitive Jerusalem Church, who mentions the third day.

Then, after mentioning the third day, Paul gives a detailed account which is not quite complete, of the resurrection appearances. He leaves out the account of the appearances to the women, because he is merely giving the official list of the appearances to the leaders in the Jerusalem church.

So much for the testimony of Paul. This testimony is sufficient of itself to refute the modern naturalistic reconstruction. But it is time to glance briefly at the testimony in the Gospels.

If you take the shortest Gospel, the Gospel according to Mark, you will find, first, that Mark gives an account of the burial, which is of great importance. Modern historians cannot deny that Jesus was buried, because that is attested by the universally accepted source of information, I Corinthians 15. Mark is here confirmed by the Jerusalem tradition as preserved by Paul. But the account of the burial in Mark is followed by the account of the empty tomb, and the two things are indissolubly connected. If one is historical, it is difficult to reject the other. Modern naturalistic historians are in a divided condition about this matter of the empty tomb. Some admit that the tomb was empty. Others deny that it ever was. Some say what we have just outlined — that the tomb was never investigated at all until it was too late, and that then the account of the empty tomb grew up as a legend in the Church. But other historians are clear-sighted enough to see that you cannot get rid of the empty tomb in any such fashion.

But if the tomb was empty, why was it empty? The New Testament says that it was empty because the body of Jesus had been raised out of it. But if this be not the case, then why was the tomb empty? Some say that the enemies of Jesus took the body away. If so, they have done the greatest possible service to the resurrection faith which they so much hated. Others have said that the disciples stole the body away to make the people believe that Jesus was risen. But no one holds that view now. Others have said that Joseph of Arimathea changed the place of burial. That is difficult to understand, because if such were the case, why should Joseph of Arimathea have kept silence when the

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resurrection faith arose? Other explanations, no doubt, have been proposed. But it cannot be said that these hypotheses have altogether satisfied even those historians who have proposed them. The empty tomb has never been successfully explained away.

We might go on to consider the other accounts. But I think we have pointed out some of the most important parts of the evidence. The resurrection was of a bodily kind, and appears in connection with the empty tomb. It is quite a misrepresentation of the state of affairs when people talk about "Interpreting" the New Testament in accordance with the modern view of natural law as operating in connection with the origin of Christianity. What is really being engaged in is not an interpretation of the New Testament but a

complete contradiction of the New Testament at its central point. In order to explain the resurrection faith of the disciples as caused by hallucinations, you must first pick and choose in the sources of information, and reconstruct a statement of the case for which you have no historical information. You must first reconstruct this account, different from that which is given in the only sources of information, before you can even begin to explain the appearances as hallucinations. And even then you are really no better off. It is after all quite preposterous to explain the origin of the Christian Church as being due to pathological experiences of weak-minded men. So mighty a building was not founded upon so small a pin- point.

So the witness of the whole New Testament has not been put out of the way. It alone explains the origin of the Church, and the change of the disciples from weak men into the spiritual conquerors of the world.

Why is it, then, if the evidence be so strong, that so many modern men refuse to accept the New Testament testimony to the resurrection of Christ? The answer is perfectly plain. The resurrection, if it be a fact, is a stupendous miracle and against the miraculous or the supernatural there is a tremendous opposition in the modern mind.

But is the opposition well grounded? It would perhaps be well-grounded if the direct evidence for the resurrection stood absolutely alone — If it were simply a question whether a man of the first century, otherwise unknown, really rose from the dead. There would in that case be a strong burden of proof against the belief in the resurrection. But as a matter of fact the question is not whether any ordinary man rose from the dead, but whether Jesus rose from the dead. We know something of Jesus from the Gospels, and as thus made known He is certainly different from all other men. A man who comes into contact with His tremendous personality will say to himself, "It is impossible that Jesus could ever have been hoiden [held] of death." Thus when the extraordinary testimony to the resurrection faith which has been outlined above comes to us, we add to this our tremendous impression of Jesus' Person, gained from the reading of the Gospels, and we accept this strange belief which comes to us and fills us with joy, that the Redeemer really triumphed over death and the grave and sin.

And if He be living, we come to Him today. And thus finally we add to the direct historical evidence our own Christian experience. If He be a living Saviour,

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we come to Him for salvation today, and we add to the evidence from the New Testament documents an immediacy of conviction which delivers us from fear. The Christian man should indeed never say, as men often say, "Because of my experience of Christ in my soul I am independent of the basic facts of Christianity; I am independent of the question whether Jesus rose from the grave or not." But Christian experience, though it cannot make us Christians whether Jesus rose or not, still can add to the direct historical evidence

a confirming witness that, as a matter of fact, Christ did really rise from the dead on the third day, according to the Scriptures. The "witness of the Spirit" is not, as it is often quite falsely represented today, independent of the Bible; on the contrary it is a witness by the Holy Spirit, who is the author of the Bible, to the fact that the Bible is true.

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