



Canfield's Confession to Doubters

Robert Canfield

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Why I Believe in the Resurrection

He appeared to Peter and then to the twelve ... to more than five hundred ... to James, and then to all the apostles ... [and] to me.

I Corinthians 15: 5-8

If you doubt, it is to you I write.¹ I had serious doubts during part of my college days, but now I am convinced that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. I am convinced that any seeker of truth cannot avoid a strong impression of Christ's resurrection as he ponders the responses of the Pharisees who opposed the resurrection, the

Robert L. Canfield is one of the wise ones of WUSTL, a confessing scientist, whose presence is still felt in this place. In 2013, he retired from a long and successful career as an anthropologist here. He attends services at University City Family Church, and his wife Rita and he take a lucky few students out for lunch every week. Dr. Canfield's early field work was in Afghanistan, well before the wars. I recommend reading a brief portrait he wrote of an Afghan immigrant to the United States, two stories from another immigrant, and family honor in Kabul. Dr. Canfield is an expert on muslim politics and culture. We do well to remember his stories, even as his career has come to a close.

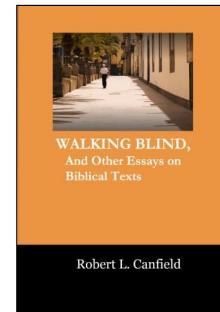
I've often talked with Dr. Canfield over the years about human origins. A rested and calm presence, he is full of kindness and knowledge of an area of study with which Christians have had a complicated relationship. He talks about how the mark of "human" is the steady, cross-generational accrual of cultural progress. Of course we see it recently, but he sees it as far back as 2 million years ago, with the rise of the Homo genus.

In a field often in conflict with Christians, Canfield is a confessing scientist. Canfield affirms evolution, but it is Jesus that reordered his entire world. In 2016, he published a few essays on his reading of Scripture. The most important essay is this one, his confession of the Resurrection, written to doubters like himself. With his permission, I've reproduced it here.

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How did the Pharisees who opposed the resurrection give evidence of it? By what they didn't do.

During Jesus' life the Pharisees had murmured at him for claiming that he could forgive sins. They had accused him of being the prince of devils when he healed a demoniac, and had opposed his healing on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath day he had cast out an unclean spirit, healed a woman of an infirmity which had existed for eighteen years, and cured a man of dropsy. And when he healed a man's withered hand on the Sabbath, they had gone out and discussed how they could destroy him.

They had tried to stone him to death for saying. "I and the Father are one," and had abused him for his last claim that he was the Messiah, the Son of God. They had taunted him with inveterate malice as he hung on the cross.

And after his death, they saw to it that his body was guarded, for to them his body was important. Recalling that the "impostor" had said at least five times that he would rise again the third day after his death, the chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate to secure the tomb so that his disciples wouldn't steal the corpse and claim he had risen. Making sure that there would be no fraud, the opposition did everything which human prudence and cunning could foresee to protect the body. They set a military watch outside the tomb and placed a government seal above the entrance.

In view of all this, would the Pharisees conceivably have conspired to cause the body of Jesus to disappear? And when the resurrection story came out, would they not have produced the body if it had been in their possession? All they had to do to stop the story once and for

1. Reprinted from HIS Magazine April, 1960. See also <http://www.harvardhouse.com/prophetictech/new/er.htm>

all was produce the body. But when Jesus' disciples began to preach his resurrection in the temple, and wouldn't stop teaching Jesus as the Messiah, filling the whole city with this news, the Jews arrested them, questioned them, warned them, threatened them and beat them. But they didn't do the crucial thing: produce the body.

If Jesus was dead, where was the evidence? The time had come, the time of desperation, for them to make an open show of the "fraud" of Jesus by presenting one final infallible evidence. Displayed even to a few witnesses, the corpse of Jesus would have revealed the false nature of this heresy and emptied the Apostles' teaching of its influence. The Christian "way" would have come to an abrupt end. But the Pharisees didn't produce the body of Jesus. They didn't even claim to have the body. They didn't mention the body.

Something had happened to Jesus' body after it was placed in the tomb under guard. When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early on Sunday morning she found the tomb open, the seal broken, and the stone rolled aside. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, they have taken away my Lord!" she cried. When the other women came to anoint Him, they also found no body, nor did Peter and John.

The guards, after recovering from the shock of seeing the angel remove the stone and announce the resurrection to the women, went straight to the chief priests and told them what had taken place. (The chief priests therefore must have known of the empty tomb as early as the disciples, if not before.) The religious authorities' response to this news was significant: they bribed the guards to say that the disciples had stolen the body while they slept. (The New Testament writers let this explanation pass, as would a lawyer today, as a self-evident lie. Who can say what happens while he sleeps?)

But would the Jewish authorities have been so lenient with the guards for losing their evidence if they had sincerely believed the corpse had been lost through their negligence? After planning his destruction for several months, finally carrying it out successfully, and then personally arranging for the security of the body through the critical three-day test period, wouldn't they have demanded the guards' punishment instead of trying to insure their protection? These same authorities beat the disciples for speaking of Christ's resurrection. Why didn't they punish the guards for losing his body or try to get their Roman officers to punish them! Did they realize that it wasn't within the soldiers' power to keep the body?

But couldn't the disciples, supposing there had been a series of bungles by the guards and Pharisees, have succeeded in stealing the body?

Their lives deny this. Their initial reaction to news of the resurrection was disbelief. But later they were convinced of it. They considered themselves ordained of God to be witnesses to it. Why should such a change come over them, or why should they feel so strongly about what they knew was a lie?

On the first Easter morning when women came with the news of the empty tomb it seemed an idle tale to the disciples. They didn't believe it. Even when they saw Jesus for themselves, they couldn't believe it. Although he showed them his hands and feet, they thought he was a spirit. Similarly, some people today suggest that Jesus's resurrection was spiritual, not physical. But Jesus was eager to dispel that idea. "See my hands and feet" he said. "Handle me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see me to have."

"See," "handle," "see" — these were the words he used, for he wanted them to know that this was the same body that had been crucified. And while they still did not believe, he ate a piece of broiled fish from their table. If they were inclined afterward to wonder if they had seen a vision or had conjured their memory of him into a sense of his presence, they could remember his eating fish. One less piece of fish lay on the table. His body was physical.

But Thomas wasn't present. The story of Jesus' appearance didn't convince him. What's more, he wouldn't believe it unless he saw Jesus for himself and put his hands into Jesus's wounds. Later when the Lord appeared to Thomas, he said, "Put your fingers here and see my hands. Put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." "My Lord and my God!" was Thomas's awed acknowledgment.

Once they were convinced, the disciples considered themselves commissioned by God to testify to the resurrection. This was their high calling, their most pressing responsibility, their contribution to the world: to affirm the fact of His resurrection. Seven times in the Book of Acts they said they were witnesses to the resurrection. They set aside every menial task to allow full time to this ministry. They journeyed to the outskirts of the then-known world, and many of them died violent deaths maintaining that they were witnesses to Jesus's resurrection.

What fanatics they have seemed to some. No clamoring social acclaim spurred them on to ignoble deaths. No upper room agreements could conceivably have induced them to preach and die for a lie. Surely they would have stopped short of this. Nor would moral maxims of their dead leader have inspired them to carry on the movement for which he had died. Their deception would have sabotaged the movement. These men had been changed, they claimed, by an encounter with a Living Savior.

Certainly one of the most convincing evidences for the resurrection was its effect on the Apostles. Men who ran for their lives when he was betrayed, who watched him die from afar, who hid away in fear when he was buried: these men became fearless evangelists in the face of persecution, threatening, even torturous deaths, once they had met the Risen Christ.

The midnight gloom of the cross was dispelled by unforgettable contact, they said, with a gloriously alive Savior. To death they insisted that they were not following "cleverly devised myths" when they preached the power and coming of Jesus, but that they were "eyewitnesses of his majesty." They had "seen and heard and touched Eternal Life in the flesh." And by this they had been changed. They were never the same.

But did Jesus appear only to his followers? Why not to his enemies? Peter once said that Jesus was manifested "not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." He showed himself to Mary Magdalene and the other women, to the two disciples who were walking toward Emmaus, to the Apostles and to Peter and James individually, and to five hundred people who saw him at one time. He was seen alive for a period of forty days. But only by his followers.

Still, one person who didn't believe in him saw the Risen Christ, a man notable for his unbelief, outstanding for his opposition to the

Christian “way,” famous for his intolerance of the resurrection witnesses: Saul of Tarsus.

Saul was an unlikely man to conjure Jesus back into existence, hardly one whose memory would ever “quicken to a presence.” He not only rejected the Apostles’ witness, he actively opposed it and was an accessory to the first murder of a Christian. Adopting the Pharisaical zeal that had crucified Jesus and stoned Stephen, he aimed to stamp out this heresy. He couldn’t compromise with any part of it. To him it was a blight to the Jew, an insult to the Law, rebellion from the God of his fathers, to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was God Incarnate, the Messiah. Liberator of Sinners, risen from the dead. And he sought to quench the idea, to bring the movement to a quick end.

Twelve times the New Testament says that Saul persecuted the Church. The long series of persecutions that continued through three centuries was aided in its beginning by Saul of Tarsus. By his own testimony he was violent in his attempts to destroy the Church, abusing Christians in the synagogues and trying to make them blaspheme, dragging them out of their homes to prison, traveling even to neighboring cities to arrest them.

But as he was traveling to Damascus, he and his friends were struck to the ground by a sudden light from heaven. A voice asked, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” and the speaker identified himself as “Jesus of Nazareth.” So Saul was confronted with the Risen Jesus. He was given a message: “The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to all of what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:14). “See, hear”: these words appear again in the Biblical record. And by what he saw and heard, the outstanding persecutor of the Early Church became a witness of the Risen Christ to the world.

His life was reversed. The destroyer of the Christian faith became its defender; a participant in the murder of Stephen became a servant of

the Christians; the persecutor became a sufferer. For the cause of Christ he endured mobs, beatings, imprisonments, perilous journeys, danger and physical affliction. Often near death, he received the Jews’ thirty-nine lashes five times, was beaten with rods three times, was stoned once, was shipwrecked three times and adrift at sea for several hours. In his frequent journeys he was in danger from rivers, robbers and personal enemies. He lived a life of hardship and labor, working for a living with his hands, having many sleepless nights. Hungry, thirsty, homeless and ill clad in cold and exposure, he was a spectacle to the world, an exhibition of weakness and disrepute, a fool for Christ, the refuse of the world, so that the Risen Christ could be manifested through him. Although he was reviled, slandered, treated as an impostor, ignored by some, punished by others, held in disrepute by many, his heaviest sufferings were his anguish for his unbelieving Jewish brethren and his anxiety for the spiritual welfare of the churches. Yet paradoxically, despite his sorrows, he rejoiced throughout his life at the privilege of serving the Risen Jesus, the One whom he had encountered near Damascus.

His meeting with Jesus was the key to Paul’s life. No epileptic seizure at Damascus, no sudden dawning of truth upon him, no resolution to stop his hateful razing of the Church produced such a change. The change came from a unique encounter with a unique figure in history, the risen Jesus, described in scripture as the Living One who was dead and is alive forever by the power of an Indestructible Life.

When he met the Risen Lord, the self-confessed chief of sinners was transformed into a bond slave of Jesus, a vehicle through whom God’s infinite patience and love would be demonstrated, as the scriptures say, to angels and many peoples.

By the Pharisees’ calculated opposition to Jesus, by the disciples’ unbelief, and by the persecutions of Saul, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is set in bold relief as a fact of history.

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