

things of God. You cannot convince them with logical arguments that the resurrection is reasonable or possible apart from the Word of God. The mind of the unbeliever is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). Our goal is to present the truth claims of the Scriptures and pray that the Spirit of God would use this Word to draw our hearer to Christ. Gill's approach—a systematic walk through the Scriptures—is the best and most reasonable defense of the resurrection.

Our world may seem more sophisticated today than it was in Gill's time. Yet little has actually changed. The arguments are the same. Nothing new is under the sun. Unfortunately what has changed is how little we care about history. Many of these fights have been raging for hundreds of years. Think about how much we can learn from those who have gone before us. Gill's comprehensive defense of the resurrection should help us in our own defense of this crucial doctrine. And there is no more important doctrine.

In closing, Gill's words as to the importance of the resurrection are fitting:

The whole gospel is connected with it; if there is no truth in this, there is none in that. As the doctrine of the resurrection receives confirmation from the doctrines of personal election, the gift of the persons of the elect to Christ, the covenant of grace, redemption by Christ, union with him, and the sanctification of the Spirit, so these can have no subsistence without supposing that.

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THE RESURRECTION:

AN 18TH CENTURY DEFENSE FOR 21ST CENTURY CHRISTIANS



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The two key elements at the heart of Christianity are the cross and the empty tomb. Rarely do many outside of the faith deny the veracity of the cross. That Jesus of Nazareth died in Jerusalem under the oversight of Pontius Pilate is a well-attested fact. The element more difficult to believe is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as Paul found the men at Athens skeptical of the resurrection (Acts 17:32), so people today struggle to accept this most important truth. But without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christianity itself falls apart. Paul makes this explicit in 1 Corinthians 15:12–19:

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if

there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.



We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not

been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life

only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Christianity stands or falls on the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In an age of skepticism regarding the supernatural, Christians find it difficult to show people the truth of Christianity because of denials of the resurrection. This is not a new phenomenon.

During the rise of the Enlightenment period in the 18th century, it became common to embrace only what could be verified using normal human faculties. Since no one could reproduce a resurrection, logically, it was reasoned, it must be impossible. When one removes the supernatural from Christianity, particularly through the denial of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, all of Christianity falls.

Thankfully, there were people who fought against the tide of anti-supernaturalism during the Enlightenment period. One such man was John Gill.

Introducing John Gill

John Gill was born in Kettering, Northamptonshire, England on November 23, 1697. His parents were God-fearing individuals of the Calvinistic Baptist tradition. His early years were spent studying in the local grammar school where he excelled in languages. The church at Kettering recognized his gifts as a preacher and in 1719 Gill became pastor of the famous Horselydown congregation in London where he served for a staggering fifty-two years until his death in 1771. Gill would become a prolific

author and one of the most influential theologians of the Particular Baptist cause.

Gill's Defense of the Resurrection

Gill taught and preached frequently the doctrine of the resurrection. One such occasion was the famous Lime Street Lectures of 1731.¹ While we cannot spend a detailed amount of time analyzing his defense, we can make some general conclusions about how he defended the resurrection and how we can learn to do the same today.

First, Gill knew his opponents and their arguments. Uneducated beyond some initial grammar school, Gill made it his goal as both a Christian and as a minister of God's Word to be informed in the writings of the orthodox and the unorthodox alike. He was expertly versed in Jewish thought and literature, and was aware of ancient pagan authors and the arguments they made. He was aware of Christian thinking on the issue from the early church through the Reformation and post-Reformation Puritan period in which he lived. He was aware of the arguments made by those who agreed with a resurrection and those who denied it.

Second, he progressed through his argumentation in a logical way. First, he considers that the doctrine of resurrection is a “credible” thing. When one considers all of the amazing things that occur in the world and all of the things God has done in the Scriptures, resurrection from the dead

is something that is not completely incredible to believe. From there he moves to more explicit references in Scripture to argue for the resurrection of the dead. Finally, he considers how the resurrection is necessary because it is connected with all kinds of other doctrines in the Bible. He clinches it with the key: If Christ is raised, so too are we. This leads the reader along the argument, slowly building the case, so that when one reaches the end, he faces an insurmountable argument defending the resurrection from the dead.

Third, the core of the defense of the resurrection for Gill comes straight from the Scriptures. When much Enlightenment thinking was turning to the other “book of the revelation of God” namely nature, to define the world, Gill still sees the lasting answers in God's special revelation, Scripture. Our theology can only be derived from the Scriptures itself. It is God's communication to man and thus gives us the answers we are looking for. Instead of rooting his argument in the conclusions of others, he looks to the Scriptures to defend this crucial doctrine.

Learning from Gill's Defense

It is not just the secular atheistic world that denies the core supernatural elements of our faith but also much of liberal Christianity denies the miraculous and especially the resurrection from the dead. It is imperative that we understand and defend this crucial element of our faith. If the resurrection of Christ is denied then our faith is in vain. What then can we learn

from Gill when defending the truth of the elements of our Christian faith?

First, the maxim of “know thy enemy” is invaluable. If we want to honestly interact with those who disagree with our position, we need to know what they are saying. Too many Christians attempt to contend against the arguments of liberals and atheists alike without knowing what they actually believe about the subject. Study the issue, especially as articulated by those who disagree with you. A. N. Wilson's, *Jesus: A Life*, Barbara Thiering's *Jesus the Man*, and John Shelby Spong's, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* are good places to start. For defenses of the resurrection which interact with detractors see Gary Habermas and Michael Licona's *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* and N.T. Wright's magisterial *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

Second, know the Word of God. There is no more important tool in your arsenal than the Word of God. Gill demonstrates his vast knowledge of the Word of God on the subject and draws Scriptures from throughout the Bible to support his argument. Strong argument for affirming the truth of the resurrection is based on a systematic understanding of the teaching in the entire Bible. For instance, Gill considers Job 19:25–27, Isaiah 26:19, and Daniel 12:2 from the Old Testament. The clinching argument from the New Testament is that since the resurrection of Christ is true (1 Cor. 15), then our resurrection is true too!

Finally, know how to make your argument. The reality is that the unbelieving mind cannot grasp the spiritual

¹ The sermons are available at http://www.pbministries.org/books/gill/Sermons&Tracts/sermon_87.htm