

The First Century Skeptics' Club

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by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

Who were the original skeptics of Christianity?

One narrative claims that it was not until the 17th and 18th centuries that human civilization cast off the smothering shackles of Christian dogma and emerged from the Dark Ages into an era of Enlightenment.

A more nuanced approach might note that skepticism of Christianity existed early and persisted throughout antiquity. From Roman emperors and philosophers such as Julian and Celsus, to the medieval targets of Crusade and Inquisition, unbelief and 'heresy' has never truly disappeared.

But what if it goes back even further?

What if it goes all the way back to the beginning?

What if skepticism actually lies at the heart of Christian origins?

In fact, this is precisely what the New Testament records.

According to the last chapter of Luke's Gospel, the first witnesses to the resurrection were three ladies: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. On the first Easter Sunday, they went to the tomb of Jesus looking for a body. But they didn't find one. What they found was an empty tomb and an angel who asked them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

After this, Luke tells us that these ladies went and told "all these things to the eleven and to all the rest." But how did these men, who had lived with and followed Jesus for several years, respond? Luke tells us bluntly: "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."

Don't pass over the surprise here. Who were the first skeptics of Christianity?

The apostles.

Fast forward in New Testament history, and you see that the same thing is true of the other great ambassador of Christianity: Saul of Tarsus, later Paul the Apostle. In the twenty-sixth chapter of the book of Acts, we have his own testimony: "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth."

So skepticism is no late-comer to the Christian conversation. It is simply not the case that Christianity rolled along unchallenged for centuries, only to come to a screeching crash the moment anybody raised a serious intellectual question. Rather, skepticism began in the church. The first hard questions came not from outsiders, but from the original followers of Jesus.

Likewise, it wasn't an irrational "leap of faith" that changed the original eleven disciples – or Saul of Tarsus – from skeptics into apostles. What changed these men forever was a simple fact:

Jesus of Nazareth actually rose from the dead.

This resurrection was not allegorical, but literal. It was not merely a psychological phenomenon in the mind of his followers, but a physical fact in the history of our world.

Think about it. If the resurrection was nothing more than wishful thinking, why didn't the eleven leap for joy at the first report of Joanna and the two Marys? And how could wishful thinking ever come close to explaining the dramatic conversion of Paul?

No, friends. Whether you believe it or not, the only coherent way to explain the New Testament data is to admit that the apostles and the first century church really believed in a literal resurrection.

“So what?” you might reply. “Lots of people believe crazy things. And lots of people are wrong.”

But even here, one is hardly expressing an original thought. As we have already seen, the Apostle Paul himself initially believed that the resurrection of Jesus – and what it implied about the identity of the Christ – was crazy. So persuaded was he of its insanity that he “was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.”

But just before making this confession, Paul raises a question that each of us would do well to consider. Standing before the Roman and Jewish authorities in the city of Caesarea, he asked this simple of his audience:

“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26.8)

Why is this question worth considering? Because it questions our assumptions.

We say it is ‘crazy’ that Jesus rose from the dead. This question asks, “How do you know it is ‘crazy’? If there is a God, and if this God is like the Bible describes God to be – the Creator of all things, the Author of life and death, and so on – is it really beyond the power of such a God to raise the dead?”

To this one might reply, “I only believe in what is empirically observable and scientifically repeatable.” But even here, Paul’s question still speaks. “How do you know that empirical observation and scientific experimentation are really able to tell us everything there is to know about reality? After all, we are pretty small creatures in a pretty big universe.”

If we assume that physical reality is all there is, then of course the resurrection seems crazy...

Yet on the other hand, if physical reality is not all there is... is resurrection really impossible?

Confronted with the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, the first century skeptics’ club became the first century church. The record of this transformation, along with the supporting testimony, is recorded for us in the New Testament. Maybe you don’t believe it. But have you dealt honestly with the question? Have you questioned your assumptions?

If there is a God like the Bible describes, why would it be impossible for him to raise the dead?

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