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Must One Believe in the Resurrection to be a Christian?

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This was the question asked for the end of the past week by the editors of *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* for the “[On Faith](#)” conversation. Here was the question as stated by the editors: *Do you have to believe the resurrection is literally true — that Jesus came back to life in his body — to be a Christian?*

A similarly framed question is often asked about various Christian doctrines and such questions are unavoidable. If the word “Christian,” used as a noun, is to mean anything, it must be defined — and the definition must include some essential doctrinal elements. The New Testament leaves no choice here, for essential beliefs are explicitly mentioned within the Bible’s presentation of the Gospel.

On this essential question — *Do you have to believe the resurrection is literally true — that Jesus came back to life in his body — to be a Christian?* — the Bible is actually very clear.

As I said in my [On Faith](#) column [see [full text here](#)]:

The literal, historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the vindication of Christ’s saving work on the cross. The issue is simple — no resurrection, no Christianity. For this reason, belief in the resurrection of Christ is essential in order to be a Christian.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the central miracle of the Christian faith. As the New Testament reveals, the resurrection represents the Father’s complete satisfaction in the obedience of the Son — even unto death. Sin and death do not have the final word. Indeed, they are defeated through the saving work of Christ. . . .

As Paul well understood, Christianity stands or falls with the empty grave. If Christ is not raised, we are to be pitied, for our faith is in vain. Those who would preach a resurrectionless Christianity have substituted the truth of the gospel for a lie. But, asserted Paul, Christ is risen from the dead. Our faith is not in vain, but is in the risen Lord. He willingly faced death on a cross and defeated death from the grave. The Resurrection is the ultimate sign of God’s vindication of His Son.

The great good news of the resurrection is this — those who come to Christ by faith will share in His victory over sin and death. Belief in the resurrection of Christ is clearly essential in order for one to be a Christian. The Christian church has understood this from the beginning, and the Apostle Paul left no room for doubt when he declared that those who are saved are those who confess with their lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead [Romans 10:9].

There were other significant responses. [Bishop N. T. Wright](#) argued for the resurrection as a “concrete” event in history and as the central affirmation of Christ’s victory, but did not actually answer the question as asked. Oddly, [Michael Otterson](#), Media Relations Director of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, said: “To take the resurrection out of Christianity is to gut the Christian faith of much of its hope and promise.” Much? The Apostle Paul said it would remove *all* hope and promise from the Christian faith. What do Mormons believe would be left?



Interestingly, [Deepak Chopra](#), the New Age president of the Alliance for a New Humanity, made this claim: *I think there are three ways to interpret the Resurrection and remain Christian in every sense of the word. 1. Jesus of Nazareth literally arose from the dead. 2. The divine Resurrection as the core of Christian theology. 3. The resurrection of the spirit whenever a person attains higher consciousness.*

Now, Chopra writes as one who knows he is “someone outside the Christian faith,” but what makes his point so interesting is that it is almost precisely the argument made by liberal Protestant theology — that it is enough to believe that the Apostles experienced a special consciousness of the risen Christ.

In a set of parallel articles at “[On Faith](#),” various figures spoke of what the claim of the resurrection means to them. Unsurprisingly, retired Bishop [John Shelby Spong](#) said more about what he does *not* believe — another testimony to liberal theology: *I do not believe that the deceased body of Jesus was resuscitated physically on the third day and was restored to the life of this world as, at least, the later gospels assert, but I do believe that in him and through him people found a way into that which is eternal and so they portrayed him as breaking through and transcending the limits of death.*

Spong said he was speaking “for those people who are committed to the Jesus experience, but because they are citizens of the 21st Century cannot twist their minds into First Century pretzels in order to say “I believe” to the traditional explanations offered by the biblical writers.”

Well, at least he is strangely if boldly honest. The choice is between John Shelby Spong and the Apostle Paul. A choice this clear is truly a gift.

