

A Call for Resurrection Theology

Christian theology has tended to focus on the birth and the death of Jesus, and in so doing has defaulted in explaining the significance of the resurrection.

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A CALL FOR RESURRECTION THEOLOGY

The church throughout the centuries has often failed to recognize the significance of the resurrection of Jesus. Despite the fact that the Easter celebration has been regarded as the culmination of the Christian year of worship, the full meaning of the resurrection has often been undeveloped or diluted in Christian teaching and preaching. Christian theology has emphasized numerous legitimate Biblical themes, but has seldom made the resurrection the focal point or fulcrum on which all other Christian subjects depend. Roman Catholic theologian, Claude Geffré, laments,

"As strange as it may seem, the resurrection of Christ, which sums up all of Christianity, has still not been the object of any exhaustive reflection within dogmatic theology. The remark has often been made that the theology manuals devote little space to the resurrection compared to the long elaborations dealing with the divinity of Christ or with his redeeming mission. And even today, rare are the theologians who choose the resurrection of Christ as the organizing principle of Christology." 1

Because of this neglect and the common misemphases of Christian theology, I am compelled to write this article and to make "a call for resurrection theology."

Historical emphases of Christian religion

As we evaluate Christian thought through the centuries, we note that different segments of the church have tended to emphasize different historical events in the life of Jesus. The two primary events thus emphasized are the *birth* of Jesus and the *death* of Jesus.

Roman Catholic theology has tended to emphasize the birth of Jesus in the theology of the incarnation. Emphasis is placed on Mary, the birth mother of Jesus, and upon the virgin birth of Jesus. This is not to say that Roman Catholic theology has neglected the death of Jesus in crucifixion, as is obviated by the crucifix symbol that is found in all Catholic churches and in many Catholic homes, but the primary emphasis to explain Jesus as the God-man has seemingly been on the incarnational birth of Jesus.

Protestant theology, on the other hand, has for almost five hundred years tended to emphasize the death of Jesus in crucifixion, focusing on the cross and the sacrificial blood of Jesus. The Reformation emphasis was on the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ as an expiatory action that propitiated God's judgment on man and reconciles sinners to God so that they may be declared justified.

Australian author, Robert D. Brinsmead, comments that, "It is well known that Catholicism made the Incarnation central to its theology, while Protestantism made the atonement of the cross the central thing."² The Scottish preacher and New Testament scholar, James S. Stewart, wrote similarly, "Protestant theology, concentrating on the atoning sacrifice of the cross, has not always done justice to the apostolic emphasis on the risen life."³ Stewart followed up by noting that, "Protestant theology, in some of its phases, has unconsciously altered the apostolic accent by almost isolating the cross, and failing to see Calvary with the Resurrection light breaking behind it."⁴

It is important to understand that the objective, historical events of incarnation and crucifixion, the birth and the death of the historical, physical Christ, were remedial measures enacted by God to remedy the problem of man's sin; to provide the solution to the fall of humanity into sin in Adam.

If the incarnation and crucifixion were the only historical acts of God on man's behalf, then the gospel would cease to be "good news". If the gospel narrative was only that "Jesus was born. Jesus died. God said to man: 'There is the remedy! I came. I fixed the problem. Now you are fixed. The slate is wiped clean. Now, go and do a better job next time.'" That is not good news! That is damnable doctrine. That is tragic teaching!

The incarnation and crucifixion *alone* serve only to condemn man all the more. The story would go like this: "A man came who was God-man. He did not share the spiritual depravity of the rest of mankind. He did not develop the "flesh" patterning of selfish desires like other men. He lived life as God intended, allowing God in him to manifest His desire and character at every moment in time for thirty-three years. He was the perfect man! He did not deserve to die, but He was put to death unjustly. In dying undeservedly, He died in our place, as our substitute, and paid the price of death to satisfy God's justice, and forgive mankind of their sins." Is that the whole of the story? If so, He lived and died perfectly which we cannot do. If the incarnation and crucifixion were the whole of the story, then we would have been better off without Him! Why? Because *He could* live and die as He did; *we cannot*. And the fact that *He did* only condemns us all the more by His matchless example, for *we do not* have what it takes to live like that.

Only in the resurrection do we have the message that God has given us the provision of His life in order that we might be man as God intended man to be; in order that the resurrection life of the risen Lord Jesus might become the

essence of spiritual life in the Christian; in order that we might live by His life and the expression of His character. The resurrection is the positive provision of life in Christ Jesus, around which all other theological topics must be oriented.

As Walter Kunneth concludes,

"The raising of the Christ is *the* act of God, whose significance is not to be compared with with any event before or after. It is the primal datum of theology, from which there can be no abstracting, and the normative presupposition for every valid dogmatic judgment and for the meaningful construction of a Christian theology. Thus the resurrection of Jesus becomes the Archimedean point for theology. All theological statements are oriented in one way or another toward this focal point. There is no Christian knowledge of God which does not acquire its ultimate fullness and depth from a revelation of God in the Risen One." 5

Christian theology, in both its Catholic and Protestant forms, has failed to recognize the resurrection as the central feature of its theology, and has often thereby abdicated and defaulted in explaining the significance of the resurrection of Jesus.

Emphases of resurrection in Christian religion.

When Christian religion *has* attempted to address the resurrection in its theological considerations, it has done so in a way that continues to short-change the significance of the resurrection. The resurrection in Christian theology has been relegated to apologetic arguments of historicity, defense of Jesus' deity, and futuristic expectations of bodily resurrection.

Christian religion has emphasized the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, employing a variety of sources to document, authenticate, and validate the historical resurrection of Jesus. Apologists like Frank Morison (*Who Moved the Stone?*⁶) and Josh McDowell (*The Resurrection Factor*⁷) have sought to provide Christians with historical "proofs" for the resurrection of Jesus.

Having "proven" the historical veracity of the resurrection by their chronological and logical evidences, Christian religion has then emphasized that the resurrection of Jesus was a supernatural miracle that verifies the divinity or deity of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus has been used as a tool for apologetic defense, as a leverage to authorize and "prove" Christ's divinity and the church's teaching.

As Robert D. Brinsmead explains, "The so-called 'historical proofs' of the resurrection have been marshalled, not to explore the meaning of the mystery itself, but to validate the church's claims about the divinity of Jesus, the authority of the church, and its possession of an exclusive and absolute

truth."⁸ Claude Geffré likewise comments that,

"since the end of the nineteenth century the resurrection of Christ has become the favorite object of Christian apologetics. It was a matter of establishing the historicity of the resurrection in order to furnish a proof for the divinity of Christ and thereby accredit his message and its legitimacy. And when apologetics had defended the historical character of the *miracle* of the resurrection, it seemed dogmatic theology had no more to say about the *mystery* of the resurrection." ⁹

On the basis of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection and the theological establishment of His deity, Christian religion has proceeded to emphasize that the primary theological import of the historical resurrection of Jesus is to validate the assurance of the eventual resurrection of Christians' bodies in the future. The historical, physical resurrection of Jesus is used as the foundational basis for authenticating the expected bodily resurrection of the Christian after death.

Is this not the argument that Paul uses in I Corinthians 15 in the "Resurrection chapter"? Yes it is, but this is not the entirety of what Paul had to say about the subject of resurrection. Though it is the most extended passage that he seems to have written on the subject, it is not the predominant or primary emphasis that Paul makes concerning the resurrection. The historical *sitz im leben* context of I Corinthians was that the Corinthians were so enamored with their present "spirituality" that they were eschewing or denying anything beyond the present. To counter this triumphalistic diminishment of hope, and to correct Hellenic concepts that deprecated embodiment, Paul ties the bodily resurrection of Jesus with the expected bodily resurrection of Christians.

In so doing, Paul does not necessarily imply that the resurrected physical body of Jesus is prototypical of the resurrected body of the Christian after death. The physicality of the resurrected body is not the issue Paul was addressing.

Secondly, it must be noted that the predominance of Paul's references to the resurrection of Jesus do not relate to the future bodily resurrection of Christians. Paul's primary inference from the resurrection of Jesus is that anyone who is receptive in faith to the living Lord Jesus can be spiritually raised to newness of life (cf. Rom. 6:4,5) by the resurrection life of the living Jesus. Paul emphasized the present availability of life in Christ, and avoided lapsing back into the Jewish framework of theology that he had espoused in the past.

Jewish theology was always a theology of future expectation. As can be noted throughout the Old Testament (the old covenant literature), the Jewish people were always looking for fulfillment in the future; the prophetic promise of that which was yet to come. Regrettably, Christian theology has often fallen prey to just such future expectations in a reversion to a Jewish paradigm of theological

expectations.

New covenant Christian theology, as expressed in the New Testament, emphasizes that God's promises and man's expectations are realized in Jesus Christ. Christian theology looks back to the "finished work" of Jesus Christ (cf. John 17:4; 19:30). Christians are "complete in Christ" (Col. 3:10). Christian theology is a realized theology (cf. I Cor 3:21-23; II Pet. 1:3). The emphasis is not on "it is coming," but on "it is done!" for the whole of God's intent is in the risen and living Lord Jesus.

The emphases of Christian religion on resurrection have traditionally been on proving the historical accuracy of Jesus' resurrection in order to authenticate His divinity, which in turn has been used to convince and assure Christians of an eventual bodily resurrection after physical death.

If Christian theology does not get beyond the cradle and the cross, the birth and the death of Jesus, then all we have to offer is a static history lesson with no contemporary consequence. If Christian theology does not get beyond apologetic defense for what "was", and longing expectation for what "will be," then it becomes an irrelevancy of temporalized "bookends" that fails to address what "is" and "should be" presently.

H.A. Williams explains that,

"Resurrection, at least in Western Christendom, has invariably been described as belonging to another time and place. The typical emphasis has been upon the past and future a past and future with which our connection can only be theoretical... So, for example, a book about the resurrection is naturally assumed to be a discussion either about what can be held to have happened in the environs of Jerusalem and Galilee on the third day after Jesus was crucified or about what can be held to be in store for us after our own death. When resurrection is considered in terms of past and future, it is robbed of its impact on the present. That is why for most of the time resurrection means little to us. It is remote and isolated."

It is a neat trick...this banishing of resurrection to past and future. It saves us from a lot of reality and delivers us from a great deal of fear. It has, in short, the advantage of safeguarding us from life."¹⁰

What a tragedy that the Christian religion has itself blockaded people from life in Christ by projecting the implications of the resurrection to an historical event of the past or to an anticipated expectation of the future. These are not the predominant emphases of resurrection in the new covenant literature of the New Testament as we shall proceed to note.

Present Dynamic of Life emphasis in Resurrection Theology

This is a call for a Resurrection Theology that emphasizes the present dynamic of life in the risen and living Lord Jesus. Such Resurrection theology will be a restoration of Biblical theology as previewed in the literature of the Old Testament and explained by the New Testament writers.

Everything in the old covenant (Old Testament) was but a pictorial prefiguring of what God was going to do in the resurrection of His Son, Jesus.

The resurrection was a replay of the Genesis account of "coming into being", for the resurrection of the "last Adam" (I Cor. 15:45) allows for God's breathing "the spirit of life" (cf. Gen. 2:7) into man again that he might once again become a spiritually alive soul. Mankind is re-genesised in spiritual regeneration, becoming a "new creature" (II Cor. 5:17) as part of a "new creation" (Gal. 6:15).

Resurrection is likewise the basis for the spiritual reportrayal of the Exodus story, bringing mankind out of the land of slavery into the promised land. Christ's coming out of the grave can be seen to correspond to Moses and his people coming out of Egypt, wherein the resurrection becomes the liberating exodus of salvation history.

It is by the resurrection that we have the spiritual restructuring of the *Torah* as detailed in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The external codification of Law becomes an internal dynamic of "the law written in our hearts" (Jere. 31:33; Heb. 8:10; 10:16). Christ becomes "the end of the Law" (Rom. 10:4) as its completion and fulfillment, for the living Lord Jesus expresses the character of God in man as the Law required. The behavioral performance commitments of "we will do it"(Exod. 19:8; 24:3,7), are transformed by the dynamic provision of Christ's resurrection life whereby "He will bring it to pass" (I Thess. 5:24).

The history of Israel becomes His-story as the resurrected Jesus establishes the Davidic Kingdom (Acts 13:34) of divine intent. Those in Christ become the "chosen race", the "people of God" (I Peter 2:9,10), the spiritual Israel of God (Gal. 6:16; Rom. 9:6).

The resurrection is a transformation of the psalms and songs of God, as those participating in the resurrection sing a "new song", singing "spiritual songs in their hearts to God" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

All of the prophetic promises of God for His people are affirmed by the "Yes" and "Amen" (II Cor. 1:20) of God's completed action in the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The entire Old Testament, (old covenant) was but a preliminary blueprint that pictorially pointed to the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Christ wraps up the physical prefiguring of the old covenant, and is the culminating and continuing action of God that makes all things new in the eternal new

covenant.

The new covenant (New Testament) literature is obviously more directly focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for the resurrection is the dynamic reality that is the essence of the new covenant.

All four gospel narratives (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) culminate and climax with the account of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. But even prior to the historical enactment of His physical resurrection, Jesus had revealed that His resurrection would have an extended and eternal impact. He declared to Martha, "I AM the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). To the Jews in the temple, Jesus foretold that the temple of His body would be destroyed, but raised in three days" (John 6:19-22), indicating that by His resurrection the new center of worship would be in Him. Later He told the Jews that He would "raise men up in the last day" (John 6:39-44), the finalization of the new covenant.

Luke's account of the progressive advance of the early church in *The Acts of the Apostles* reveals that the *kerygma*, the preached message, of the apostles was centered in the resurrection of Jesus. Peter declares in the first sermon of the church that "God raised Him up, ...because it was impossible for Him to be held in death's power" (Acts 2:24), and "this Jesus God raised up, to which we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:32). In Peter's second sermon he proclaimed that "God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning everyone from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:26, cf.15). The resurrection was the message, the theology, of the early church (cf. Acts 4:10,33; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30,34), as they were "preaching Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18).

The Apostle Paul, having met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-8; 22:6-11; 26:12-19), had no concept of a gospel apart from the dynamic implications of the resurrected Jesus who had become his life (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21; Col. 3:4). In his brief recitation of the foundational historical events of the gospel, Paul explains that "Christ *died* for our sins, ...was *buried*, ...and was *raised* on the third day" (I Cor. 15:1-4), but whereas the verbs "died" and "buried" were Greek aorist tenses of the past, his verb choice for Jesus "having been raised" was the Greek perfect tense that conveys a past event with present consequences. The resurrection of Jesus was never mere history in the thinking of Paul; it was always the present dynamic life and power of the risen Lord within him.

To the Romans Paul noted that Jesus was "declared the Son of God with *power* by the resurrection from the dead," being now "the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 1:4). Jesus became, by His resurrection, the "life-giving Spirit" (I Cor. 15:45), the "Spirit of life" (Rom. 8:2), the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9) who invests His resurrection life in those individuals receptive to such by faith, and without which "they are none of His" (Rom. 8:9). "The Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you," Paul asserts, and "He who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit

who indwells you" (Rom. 8:11).

Paul wanted Christians to understand that they had been subjectively and spiritually "united with Christ in His resurrection" (Rom. 6:5) and "raised to walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4) in the mastery of death (Rom. 6:9). Based on our being "raised up with Christ" (Eph. 2:6; Col. 2:12; 3:1), Paul was desirous that Christians know "the surpassing greatness of the power" (Eph. 1:19) that is functioning with us as Christians, the very "working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ when He raised Him from the dead" (Eph. 1:20). This is the "power of His resurrection" (Phil. 3:10) that Paul continually longed to know and experience in a deeper way.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews refers to "the better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35) that is in Christ alone, whereby "the God of peace who raised up...Jesus our Lord, equips us in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ" (Heb. 13:20,21).

Consistent with the other New Testament writers, Peter posits the resurrection as the prerequisite and personal reality of Christ's life received in spiritual regeneration, when we are "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3). This is the basis on which we are "saved...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 3:21).

When the Apostle John refers to "passing out of death into life" (John 5:24; I John 3:14), it is the resurrection reality that is foundational to his thought, implemented "because He has given us of His Spirit" (I John 4:13).

Everything in the New Testament, the entirety of Christian preaching and theology, is predicated on the Resurrection of Jesus and the continuing dynamic of His life in those who receive Him by faith. That great Scottish preacher, James S. Stewart, expressed it so eloquently when he wrote,

"The resurrection was indeed the very core of the apostolic *kerygma*. ...It was the theme of every Christian sermon; it was the master-motive of every act of Christian evangelism; and not one line of the New Testament was written not one sentence, whether of Gospels, Epistles, Acts or Apocalypse, was penned apart from the conviction that He of whom these things were being written had conquered death and was alive for ever.

"Never did the apostles make the mistake, all too common today, of regarding the Resurrection as a mere epilogue to the Gospel, an addendum to the scheme of salvation, a providential afterthought of God, a codicil to the divine last will and testament. This is to falsify disastrously the whole emphasis of the Bible. Not as an appendix to the faith was the Resurrection ever preached in the apostolic Church. The one and only God the apostles worshipped was the God of the Resurrection. The one and only Gospel they were commissioned to preach was the overpowering, magnificent good news of the Resurrection." 11

Can the emphasis be made any more evident than it is made throughout the New Testament that the Resurrection of Jesus is not just an historical event of yesteryear or just an anticipation of embodiment in the future, but is the essence of the vital restoration of humanity in the present? The misemphases in modern Christian religion necessitates a call for Resurrection Theology that returns to the Biblical emphasis.

We cannot do better than to allow the Scottish preacher to continue to drive home his point:

"It is immensely significant that those first Christians never preached the resurrection simply as Jesus' escape from the grave, the reanimation of One who had died, the return of the Master to His friends. They always proclaimed it as the living God in omnipotent action. 12

"This is the conviction that makes the New Testament...the most exciting and the most relevant book in the world. The power that was strong enough to get Jesus out of the grave, and thus to set going the whole Christian movement across the centuries, mighty enough to shatter and confound the hideous demonic alliance of evil, creative enough to smite death with resurrection this power is in action still. 13

"...preaching the Resurrection means telling men that the identical divine energy which at the first took Christ out of the grave is available still available not only at journey's end to save them in the hour of death, but available here and now to cause them to live.

It is an awful catastrophe for the Church when the proclamation of such a Gospel grows pity us dull and listless and mechanical. ...the same power which on that day shattered death is now given us for life to vitalize the most depressed and disillusioned and defeated son of man into a resurrected personality and a conquering soul." 14

"How was it that a little group of men in an upper room ordinary, fallible, blundering men became the nucleus of a movement that was to turn the world upside down? This was the Church's hidden secret. It was not that they were commanding personalities; most of them were not. It was not that they had official backing, impressive credentials, or illustrious patronage: of all that they had less than nothing. It was this that the unearthly power which at the first had brought creation into being, which now at the last had inaugurated a new creation in the Resurrection of Christ, had laid hold upon them and refashioned their lives as with a second birth." 15

"it is no mere interest in immortality which explains the apostolic concentration on the Resurrection. It was not as a dramatic verification of personal survival that they preached Christ risen from the dead. They were not really concerned with proofs and theories of survival as such.

"It was the shattering of history by a creative act of God Almighty. God was doing something comparable only with what He had done at the first creation. This was the beginning of a new era for the universe, the decisive turning-point for the human race. ...In the resurrection the new age had arrived, and this stupendous miracle signified the storming of history and the transforming of the world."¹⁶

"The Resurrection was evidence that there had now appeared, in the midst of time, life of a new dimension and the baptism of eternity. The heralds of the Resurrection were not merely preaching it as a fact: they were living in it as in a new country. They had received a Kingdom which could not be shaken."¹⁷

Preach on Dr. Stewart! The impact of the resurrection cannot be overstated or overrated. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is THE most stupendous act of God's grace. It is the focal point of all human history. It is the transforming reality in light of which everything else must be interpreted. All meaningful human existence must be interpreted by the earth-shattering, death-defeating, history-defining reality of Jesus' Resurrection.

Christianity is not a message of merely what "has been" (past) and "will be" (future); it is the message of what "is", the vital dynamic of the resurrected "I AM" of God who restores the whole of creation. The Resurrection facilitates and is the personal dynamic of the restoration of humanity whereby God functions once again in man by the presence of His own divine life in the Christian.

Christian theology is not simply an ideological and epistemological construct concerning events and doctrines. The personal resurrection-presence of the living Lord Jesus is intrinsic to His teaching. They cannot be detached. Apart from His resurrection there is no validity to His teaching. This is why Thomas F. Torrance writes, "What Jesus Christ is in His resurrection, He is in Himself. The very life of Jesus is the content of the resurrection." ¹⁸

Conclusion

Resurrection theology is necessarily Resurrection-living, the living manifestation of the life and character of the risen Lord Jesus in Christian behavior. As such, this is also a call for Resurrection-community, whereby the church functions as the Body of Christ by the interpersonal interaction of people living by the Resurrection-life of Jesus, loving one another and seeking the other's highest good.

The Resurrection is the basis of everything that can legitimately be called "Christian." It is only by the indwelling activity of the risen Lord Jesus that the dynamic life of Christ continues to effect Christianity.

Apart from the Resurrection there is no Christianity. Apart from the

Resurrection there is no gospel. Apart from the Resurrection there is no spiritual life. Apart from the Resurrection there is no salvation. Apart from the Resurrection there is no righteousness, holiness or godliness. Apart from the Resurrection there is no Christian living. Apart from the Resurrection there is no hope. It is imperative that we articulate and proclaim Resurrection Theology.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Geffré, Claude, *A New Age in Theology*. New York: Paulist Press. 1974. pg. 1.
- 2 Brinsmead, Robert D., Verdict Essay 1E, "The Resurrection", April, 1999. pg. 20.
- 3 Stewart, James S., *A Man in Christ: The Vital Elements of St. Paul's Religion*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. pg. 135.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pg. 136.
- 5 Kunneth, Walter, *The Theology of the Resurrection*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 1965. pg. 294.
- 6 Morison, Frank, *Who Moved the Stone?* London: Faber and Faber Limited. 1930.
- 7 McDowell, Josh, *The Resurrection Factor*. San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers. 1981.
- 8 Brinsmead, Robert D., *op. cit.*, pg. 2.
- 9 Geffré, Claude, *op. cit.*, pg. 1
- 10 Williams, H. A., *True Resurrection*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 1972. pgs 4,5.
- 11 Stewart, James S., *A Faith to Proclaim*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1953. pgs. 104,105.
- 12 Stewart, James S. *King For Ever*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. pg. 142.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pg. 143.
- 14 Stewart, James S., *A Faith to Proclaim*. pg. 126.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pg. 127.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pg. 106,107
- 17 *Ibid.*, pg. 109.
- 18 Torrance, Thomas F., *Space, Time and Resurrection*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1976