

ONE GREAT SIGN

By

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“There shall no sign be given, but the sign of Jonah.” (Matt. 12:39)

The greatest sign God ever gave is being obliterated by the perverse doctrines and traditions of men. Rudolph Bultman said that the resurrection of Christ was symbolic, rather than real. Paul Tillich said that “something unique happened,” but denied the objective factual details. George W. Cornell, writing for the *Associated Press* (April, 1969) said “It is always the meaning that counts, the intangible, underlying concern and response, which are not identifiable with the ‘thing’ itself, but which are conveyed by it.” The implication is that the “thing” itself, the resurrection, is not so important if you get the “underlying concern and response.”

Norman Vincent Peale (April 11, 1971) wrote that “we may be certain that when we finally come to it, death will be just another expression of God’s unbounded love and beauty.” His Easter message suggests that the hope is not resurrection but rather the hope that one doesn’t die in the first place. Jesus viewed death as actual, as an enemy (Paul calls it “the last enemy” Cor. 15:26). He spoke of death as a cup difficult to drink; he prayed over it with tears and in deep agony. Never once did he diminish the hard reality of the fact. “I lay down my Life,” He said.

It was the objective reality of death that caused the resurrection to stand out as the greatest sign of all time. Just as the death was a real case of man giving up life, the resurrection was a case of man literally being restored to life, a life including the body that had lain in the tomb. To convince the apostles that they were not just seeing a “symbol” or identifying with the “intangible underlying concern” Jesus said, “Handle me and see, for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me having.” To prove that He was made of solid stuff, He insisted on something to eat and when they gave it to Him he ate it before their eyes (Luke 24:36-43).

The apostles did not merely “feel His presence.” They felt His resurrected body and believed. “It is not likely that purely subjective experiences on the part of the disciples of Jesus, in the absence of eventful data, would have – set the world to singing a song of hope,” writes Fred P. Thompson, Jr. (*The Envoy*, March 1971). “The New Testament is not a collection of mystical documents; it is phenomenal, factual, and substantial in its approach to truth. Truth is found in deeds, happenings, and occasions. Christ’s death is the truth about sin, atonement and forgiveness. Christ’s resurrection is the truth about death and its conquest. Both events...are represented as time-space events.”

When the Pharisees asked for a sign Jesus said, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet: for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale; so shall the Son of man

be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:39-10). There was no question about the objectivity of Jonah’s experience. He didn’t dream it or merely feel it. Neither was there any question about Christ being raised from the dead. When He appeared to John on Patmos He identified Himself by declaring “I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore” (Rev. 1:18). Paul defined the gospel in these terms: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures...” (1 Cor.15:11).

This was the sign for all time. In the parable of the rich man and Abraham (Luke 16) the fleshly Jew is represented by the rich man who pleads for Abraham to send Lazarus from the dead to warn his brethren, other ungodly Jews. Abraham answered, “They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them.” But the Jew argues, “Nay, father Abraham; but if one go to them from the dead they will repent.” What he wanted was a great sign to overwhelm them, the same kind of irresistible sign being sought by millions today. Abraham answered, “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, if one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:27-31). The parable was fulfilled: when Jesus arose from the dead those who had substituted the traditions of men for the truth of God rejected Him, persecuted His believers, and to this day do not believe. Yet the sign still stands, and there will be no other.

The Gospel is not some fanciful legend that asks men to hope in that which is mystical and subjective. Rather it is solidly anchored in historic fact, and reveals the true meaning of our hope. To talk of Christ’s resurrection, but to mean something other than the resurrection of body is nonsense, for the only way it could be a “sign” would be for Him to be returned bodily from the grave as Jonah was from the fish. Moreover, the Bible says that “in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead BODILY” (Col. 2:9), showing that He is in the body now, and as such is the first and only immortal person.

Jesus, having become identified with the human race as a flesh and blood man in order that He might die a man’s death (Heb. 2:14), is now eternally identified with the race of men, as an immortal man, “The firstborn from the dead,” and the “first fruits of them that are asleep.”

The “Resurrection Sign” does more than confirm Jesus as the Messiah. It is also the revelation of God’s eternal purpose for His children. Writing of that purpose, Paul said that it “has now been manifested by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1-10). What He brought to light was the fact that life and immortality are gained by a resurrection from the dead, so as to include a restored body (See I Cor. 15:12-57). What happened to Christ in resurrection is the very thing that is to happen to every Christian in order for him to live forever.

Even as the whole creation “groans and travails,” awaiting the consummation of God’s plans, so “even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23). **THE ETERNAL PURPOSE OF GOD** is focused on this very thing, that we might become immortal men, like Jesus. “For whom

he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). At the creation, God desired to have man in His own image, but through sin man brought about his own death. But God will not be thwarted. In the final and eternal state, He will have a race of men “conformed to the image of His Son” and the Son will then be the “firstborn among many brethren.” The “image” is none other than the One who was raised from Joseph’s new tomb and made immortal, the **ONE** who will return in the body to raise the dead, receive the saints and destroy the rest. We are then to be “joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). As Christ has inherited a glorious and immortal life, so shall we. “And we shall be like Him” (1 John 3:2).

We know little about the substance of the resurrected body, but we do know that after Jesus came from the grave He was recognized by His friends. Surely we can expect as much. God is able, Paul writes, to reproduce the body just as He is able to reproduce the seed, so that it brings forth after its kind. So we can be sure that the person placed in the grave will be the person and personality resurrected, only the new person will have a body that is incorruptible, powerful and glorious. (1 Cor. 15:42-57). The curse of death and atrophy will be removed forever, so that we may be the eternal people of God, reflecting the very glory and beauty of God in the body which He will fashion anew, “that it may be conformed to the body of His glory” (Phil 3:21).

As Paul defended himself before his Jewish persecutors, he said that he believed all things which “are written in the prophets, having hope toward God, which these also themselves look for, that there shall be a resurrection both of the just and unjust” (Acts 24:14-15). Later, before the King, he said, “Now I stand here to be judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers unto which promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. And concerning this hope I am accused by the Jews, O King! Why is it judged incredible with you, if God does raise the dead?” The hope of the fathers and prophets was just this: that all who died in the faith would be resurrected to immortality. According to Paul there was nothing in this hope of a so-called millennium; nothing about an earthly utopia: the hope from the beginning was for a resurrection from death, to live again for eternity.

Death is the penalty for sin. Resurrection is made possible by the fact that Christ “bore our sins in His body upon the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24), thus meeting the death penalty in our stead.

A confusing idea of the resurrection is often presented to the world through the many symbols and Legends associated with Easter. Churches which reject the philosophies of Bultman, Tillich, and Peale often mix in the pagan symbols of colored eggs, the product of Persian superstition, and bunny rabbits, a Teutonic tradition connected with the worship of the fertility goddess. Interesting legends surround the Easter Lily, the dogwood tree and the lighting of candles. But rather than manifest the purpose of God, such traditions only obscure the mighty “sign” which God has given in the actual resurrection of Christ from death.

The Bible teaches that there is “One hope” (Eph. 4:4). Either we have the one, or we have none.

Our effort to pattern life after Christ is with the firm expectation that someday we will become like Him-pure, glorious, and immortal, dwelling in the new creation, completing the original and eternal purpose of God.

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