

RESURRECTION FAITH

By

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The faith of the apostles became real upon their realization that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. They were eye-witnesses. They had handled him after He challenged, “Handle me and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). It was the resurrection that sent the women running to tell the apostles that brought Peter and John running to the empty tomb, and sent the two on the road to Emmaus hurrying back to Jerusalem to report this shocking news to the apostles.

They preached the Good News that Christ died for our sins, but it was the fact of resurrection that aroused interest, riveted attention and shook the nations. On Pentecost Peter declared that his audience had slain Jesus, “whom God raised up” and had exalted to His right hand (Acts 2:22–36). The thrust of the apostles’ message recorded in the book of Acts is summarized in one word: **resurrection**.

“And with great power gave the apostles their witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). “...they taught the people and proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:2). Not just Christ’s resurrection, but the resurrection of ALL the dead.

It was the preaching of resurrection that got Paul into trouble. It was explained to King Agrippa that the charges against Paul concerned “one Jesus, who was dead, who Paul affirmed to be alive” (Acts 25:19). As Paul made his defense before the king he said he was being accused concerning the hope made to his fathers. Then he asked, “why is it judged incredible with you, if God does raise the dead?” (Acts 26:6–8).

The very basis of faith and the message of the church under apostolic leadership was the resurrection. It was not merely one article in their creed, it was their very life and mission. It was the power that compelled the early church to challenge and conquer an empire!

What happened? Contrary to what the reformers taught, the “falling away” did not begin with the Papacy and the doctrine of salvation by works. It began far earlier when the influence of Greek philosophy was allowed to become a part of Christian faith. Many of those who had become enthusiastic in support of the deity of Christ and His ethics also had deep-seated convictions concerning the philosophy of Plato, especially with regard to the immortality of the soul. According to Plato, death had no effect upon the “real” person. The immortal soul went right on living in another realm, having shook off the body as an impediment, and hence free and transcendent and with no need of ultimate resurrection of the body.

Both Origen and Augustine were avid students of the Platonic philosophy and incorporated it into church doctrine. The pagan idea of praying to spirits of the deceased came into vogue. Believers who had died were now seen as glorified in heaven, as protectors of the saints on earth, and proper objects of prayer. The hope of resurrection dimmed. Why look for a resurrection to eternal life when at death one became a free spirit immediately receiving glorious and eternal rewards? The question of life and

death, which Jesus had emphasized, gave way to the question of where one's "eternal soul" should live, a question not found in apostolic preaching.

The falling away had taken place. The gospel as defined by Paul in I Cor. 15:1-3 is based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul went on to say that if the dead are not raised, then neither is Christ raised, for He lived and died as a part of the human race. And if there is no resurrection then faith is vain, and even those who "have fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (I Cor. 15:18).

There could be no greater departure from the original gospel than to change the hope of resurrection to the Platonic doctrine of natural immortality. The gospel teaches that we must await the coming of the Lord to raise the dead, that it is at His coming that we will see Him and not before. "...if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him, for we shall see him even as He is. And everyone that has this hope set on Him purifies himself even as He is pure" (I John 3:2-3). When Jesus talked of life after death he spoke in terms of resurrection. The power to give life is His alone and is to be exercised in the day of resurrection, "in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29).

In His farewell sermon the night before His crucifixion, Jesus told the apostles, "If I go away, I will come again and receive you unto myself" (John 14:3). This is in diametric opposition to the Platonic concept that future rewards and punishments begin at death. On one occasion Jesus said, "Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." The Greek text here is properly translated, "shall not die forever." Jesus did not deny that death occurs, but that for the believers it is not forever for the reason that at His coming He will restore the person to life.

Paul did a lot of his preaching to Greeks and most of his letters are to Christians with Greek backgrounds. The thing to look forward to, according to Paul, was Christ's appearing, when we shall realize the "blessed hope" and be clothed with immortality. His comfort to those whose loved ones had died was not the Platonic concept that they were enjoying the bliss of life in some heavenly realm, but that they would be raised from the dead at Christ's coming and all would be reunited at that time (I Thess. 4:13-17). Note verse 18 which says "wherefore comfort one another with these words." We are explicitly instructed to comfort the bereaved with the hope of resurrection!

The gospel of resurrection was nothing like the doctrine of pagan Platonism. Many today say that the resurrection proves the immortality of the soul when, in fact, it says the very opposite, that the way to life is by reversing death by resurrection. Jesus said to John, "I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore" (Rev. 1:18). He was no longer dead because He had been resurrected. According to Jesus and the New Testament writers, it is the resurrection that gives entrance to future life. This "good news" was so contrary to the popular Greek idea that all Paul had to do was mention the resurrection to a Greek audience and hostility immediately erupted (Acts 17).

It was resurrection that made the church invincible in those early years. Jesus had promised, "I will build my church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18). By no means did He mean to say that devilish men would not seek to destroy the church or that any given church could not be destroyed. We know better, for in our generation millions of saints have been murdered and thousands of churches have been destroyed. But what Jesus promised is that the gates of death would not prevail because

He will open them and bring forth the church through a resurrection. The early church understood this and the saints boldly confessed their faith in the face of death, being assured of a resurrection to life at the time of Christ's coming.

Today we are experiencing the greatest the greatest attack against faith in Christ the world has ever known. It is not coming from Communism, though Communists have murdered millions of Christians. It is not from the Muslims, though the religion of Islam claims a billion followers who are dedicated to converting the West. The attack is coming from a loose network of religions and cults generally identified as the New Age, a movement with roots in Eastern religions such as Hinduism. One of the reasons New Age cults are so attractive is that they deny the reality of death and promise reincarnation or some other form of immortality. The false religion offers to fill a gap left open by the churches of Christianity for its failure to present the essential meaning of the resurrection, and proclaiming the "immortal soul" theory of Plato.

In spite of the appeal of New Age teaching, the resurrection is the only way to eternal life. "For if the dead are not raised...then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (I Cor. 15:16, 18).

It is His resurrection that sets Jesus apart from all other religious leaders in history and gives authenticity to all His claims. It is because of resurrection that we have a living Lord who makes prayer possible and who reigns over His kingdom.

It is the promise of resurrection that sets us apart from the temporal world in which we live. While we have our responsibilities in the world and to the world, we can see the world from the perspective of resurrection, knowing that the "world passes away, and the lusts thereof," but in the resurrection we will have incorruptible bodies and live in an incorruptible world (I Cor. 15:42-43, 53, Rom. 8:18-23, II Peter 3:13).

The world is in bondage to the fear of death. Christ has given the only answer in resurrection. It is the only light that can penetrate the gross darkness of human philosophies, ancient and modern. It is in living in this light that we may be the light of the world!

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