

APPLYING THE RESURRECTION

By

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When a Colorado pastor advised the court that Jesus Christ was legal counsel for the church, the Deputy Attorney General submitted a Motion for Default on the grounds that “Jesus Christ died 1991 years ago” and therefore, being dead, would be unable to be the church’s counselor. The judge approved the motion.

This should come as no surprise to Christians, since in most churches the resurrection is no longer the central message but is treated as a mere appendage to the faith to be mentioned at Easter, and often with no relation to the final destiny of the race. One of the main reasons the church is seen as irrelevant to modern man is that it has abandoned its original message of good news about death and resurrection.

The resurrection gives meaning to life now as well as to final things, such as the judgment and the new creation.

THE ONLY HOPE. Corinthian believers had some problems accepting the resurrection of the dead. They were steeped in the Greek concepts of Plato, who taught that at death the “real person” was released from the body, making resurrection unnecessary and even undesirable. Paul wrote to them: “Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection from the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has Christ been raised.”¹ Paul is not arguing to prove the resurrection of Jesus. They already believed that.² The question was over Christians who had died: would they be resurrected? Jesus was a member of the human race, born of a woman and subject to death,³ so Paul reasoned that if the dead are not raised, neither was Jesus raised. “We witnessed of God that he raised up Christ; whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead are not raised.”⁴

He further writes, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished.”⁵ This contradicts many popular ideas of blissful joy for the dead. Paul’s argument is that if there is no resurrection, the dead have perished. There is no way to experience life after death except by a resurrection. This is in keeping with the hope Paul expresses in the Roman letter, where he writes that we “who have the first-fruits of the spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.”⁶

The resurrection hope is the only hope given by Jesus. He did not promise glowing health and material wealth. He didn’t promise worldly success. In fact, He didn’t even promise to keep us safe and secure in the world but warned of the enemy’s hatred and persecution. What He promised is a resurrection to life that is eternal, in a glorious new creation.⁷

THE OTHER SIDE OF HOPE. The resurrection is the assurance of final judgment. The Greeks, who strongly resisted resurrection truth, were shaken by Paul’s declaration that God “has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained; whereof he has given assurance unto all men in that he has raised him from the dead.”⁸

Resurrection gives reality to Christ's death. One who is not dead cannot be raised from the dead. The penalty for man's sin against God — sin being rooted in unbelief — is death.⁹ Christ's resurrection is frightful assurance that unbelievers will be raised but only to face judgment and to suffer the punishment of death that is final and eternal.¹⁰ Jesus tied judgment to resurrection when He said, "Marvel not at this: for the hour comes, 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."¹¹

Failure to recognize the reality of resurrection has left room for all kinds of doctrines about the final punishment of the unredeemed. Having adopted the Greek idea that everyone has an immortal soul that can never perish, churchmen came up with the idea of lost souls being perpetually tortured, so that instead of the punishment being death, it became life in a state of fiery pain, or as some put it, a "state of living death." But this denies the reality of resurrection. If the judgment is to consign man to a spiritual suffering, why have a resurrection? Rather, Jesus taught that the unsaved are to be raised in order to be judged and that the judgment is eternal destruction — the loss of life forever. Note the contrast in John 3:16: "...that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Paul wrote that even death itself would one day be abolished,¹² a fact which denies the teaching that eternal death means a kind of spiritual life separated from God. According to the Revelation, death is to be cast into the lake of fire,¹³ a symbol of the final end of all that is not fit for the presence of God in the new creation.

While this application of resurrection to judgment and final death is considered unorthodox in most religious circles, it has always been in the thinking of many Christian scholars world-wide, although generally suppressed. Fortunately, in our day there is more of a willingness to bypass the counsels and creeds of men and to examine the traditional theory in the light of scripture only.

Brother Edward Fudge cited the fact that this change in attitude was predicted over 100 years ago by Moses E. Lard, whose Quarterly is still quoted.¹⁴ In 1879 Lard published a 50-page booklet entitled "Do the Holy Scriptures Teach the Endlessness of Future Punishment?" in which he concluded that scripture is not clear on the matter but that there is no biblical basis for the opinion that God will make the lost indestructible and then torment them in fiery pain forever. He wrote that the prevailing attitude was such that no open-minded study on this subject could take place but predicted that this attitude would change.

"Belief in endless future punishment is destined to wane. With it, moreover, is doomed the present tyrannous orthodox sentiment which denies to dissent freedom of speech. Men dare not now utter aloud their conviction on the subject. But the day is at hand when they will be free. Manly independence will, at last, assert itself; and intolerance will grow gentle. Mark the course of coming events, and remember this foretelling."¹⁵

Lard's prophecy has been fulfilled. When over 35 years ago I came to the conclusion that the lost are to be totally destroyed in the "second death," I was bitterly opposed, severely criticized, and had various ridiculous accusations leveled at me. But this attitude has changed. Now I frequently hear from people — including preachers — who, after careful biblical research, have reached the same conclusions as I.

For God's people the day of judgment took place when Jesus bore our sins on the cross and was judged and executed on our behalf.¹⁶ The same cross which gives Christians the hope of salvation from judgment gives to the lost a preview of their own execution on that judgment day. Christ's resurrection is the assurance in both cases.

RESURRECTION LIBERATION. Life in the resurrected Christ is one of freedom. It is life free from the bondage to the fear of death.¹⁷ It is life free of the religious systems of man and of a system of rules. It is life free from slavery to sin and free from the oppressive weight of the world's pessimism due to its descent from truth and loss of hope.

To see the result of denying the truth of resurrection and judgment one only has to look at what has happened in education, economics and government in the past few decades. Having rejected God's purpose to resurrect man to glory or to raise him up for an accounting at judgment, man has drifted aimlessly, with no moral standard and no incentive to hold such a standard. Human behavior is determined by past conditioning or by "what works." Instead of giving children instruction in morals, they are trained in "values clarification," while the only basis for values is denied.

We are now reaping the results of this denial by a rapidly deteriorating society of crime, poverty, violence, economic instability and the loss of cherished freedoms. We are not to the low point that environmental activists are preaching that man is of no more significance than an animal or a tree or a rock!

If Christ's people are to be a light to this society, we must get back to the apostolic message, the truth and meaning of the resurrection.

Notes and References

1. I Cor. 15:12-13
2. I Cor. 15:1-4
3. Hebrews 2:14
4. I Cor. 15:15
5. I Cor. 15:17-18
6. Romans 8:23
7. Romans 8:18-23; II Peter 3:13;
Rev. 21:1-4, 22:1-5
8. Acts 17:30-31
9. Romans 6:23
10. Jude 7; II Thess. 1:8-9
11. John 5:28-29
12. I Cor. 15:26
13. Rev. 20:14
14. *Restoration Review*, Jan., 1991
15. Ibid.
16. John 12:31-33; II Cor. 5:21
17. Hebrews 2:15

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