

THE BIG DIFFERENCE

By

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For at least one day out of the year, modern Christians come close to recapturing the enthusiasm and mind-set that motivated those of the first century to challenge the world with the gospel message. That day is Easter, when churches celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

A marked change took place in the attitude of the apostles when they became convinced of the fact of the resurrection. Prior to the crucifixion they were puzzled and afraid of the Jews who were seeking the life of Jesus. At His arrest they fled, as was predicted, and Peter denied Him. They were defeated and afraid. John records that on the evening of the day of His resurrection, “the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews.”¹

Then Jesus appeared and showed them His hands and His side.² This was the One they had seen crucified, the One they had laid in the tomb, Who had been dead for three days.

Alive again! This was not a vision nor a spirit nor an illusion. He was a flesh and bone man, with the nail holes in His hands and feet and the spear wound in His side. Now raised from death, He stood before them well and whole, the “firstfruits of them that are asleep.”³

As Jesus ate and demonstrated that He was literally restored to life,⁴ the apostles remembered what He had said about being put to death and rising again in three days.⁵ Now they could understand why He had told them to have no fear of men who could kill them.⁶ Men had killed Jesus, but He was alive again. Their fear of the Jews was replaced with boldness, and Peter and John were soon confronting the religious leaders with the gospel, ignoring their threats.⁷ Their assurance of resurrection outweighed their fear of death. Indeed, they were beaten, jailed and one by one put to death (perhaps save John), but this never slowed down the growth of their movement.

In spite of the cruel persecution they suffered, the apostles and other Christians took the message of Christ to the whole world before Paul had finished his work, sometime before 70 AD.⁸

These first century saints understood Jesus to be alive, to be seated in authority at God’s right hand.⁹ They saw themselves as pilgrims, as stranger to this world, with a message to the world. They were not afraid to be different and not afraid to die because they understood that Jesus would return to raise them from death and transform them to be like Himself.¹⁰

Even as they took the loaf and cup in remembrance of His death, they were reminded that He would return,¹¹ because He had risen and was alive. His coming meant a resurrection for all who have died in Christ, so their gatherings were centered upon salvation from sin by Christ’s death and the hope of life through a resurrection.

Then something happened that began to erode this joy and expectation. The Greek concepts of life and death were brought into the movement by prominent men who had been converted to Christ but who never gave up the pagan philosophy of Plato. Chief

among these were Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine. Tertullian admitted, “I may use, therefore, the opinion of Plato, when he declares, ‘Every soul is immortal.’”¹²

Under this Greek influence Christians adopted a different concept of life and death. There was no change in the words, but they took on a different meaning. Death no longer meant cessation of life but life in another unknowable and mysterious realm. The wages of sin, described as “death” throughout scripture, became “spiritual death”, a phrase not found in scripture. Immortality, said in scripture to belong only to God¹³ and something for Christians to attain in the resurrection,¹⁴ now is ascribed to everyone, as evangelists tell you to save “your immortal soul.” Jesus and the apostles promised eternal life only to true believers,¹⁵ but now everyone is asked, “Where will you spend eternity?”

Christ’s resurrection is widely believed and preached to prove He is who He said He was and to show His authority. We are often reminded that the one monumental fact that separates the Christian faith from all other religions is the resurrection of Jesus. But it is tragic that this is not followed by the fact that resurrection is the only way for any of the rest of us to have life after death.

It is the hope of resurrection that marks one of the biggest differences between the Christian faith and all other religions. But that difference is greatly obscured when we embrace the Platonic concept that all mankind is inherently immortal and continues to live after death.

Death has always been the ultimate threat. Pagan philosophy seeks to escape this threat by postulating an immortal soul as the essence of man’s being. According to this doctrine, “death” only happens to the body while the “real person” is liberated from its physical prison and goes on living. Resurrection is superfluous and, in fact, highly undesirable to those who expect to pass immediately into a better form of life.

It is not hard to understand why the message of resurrection to life has lost its impact. If what we term “death” is only changing of residence for the “real you”, as we often hear, then death is only an illusion and Biblical resurrection becomes meaningless.

By allowing Platonic philosophy to define death and immortality, the reality of resurrection is negated, and the door is open for a variety of concepts embraced by different religions.

George Barna, in *What Americans Believe*, reports the finding of his research group, which show that “traditional Christian beliefs are eroding.” He says that many Christians have “unwittingly embraced” perspectives of popularized non-Christian religions and that 65 percent of Americans say Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists all “pray to the same God”, although called by different names. “Two out of three adults,” he says, “believe that it doesn’t matter what god or higher power you pray to because that universal force will respond regardless.”¹⁶

The survey found that most people — 63 percent — think the “purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment,” which contrasts with Christ’s teaching that first we are to please God and find fulfillment in the resurrection to eternal life. Instead of this purpose the Christian community now hears lessons on self-improvement and financial success. Without the exciting prospect of resurrection to life and immortality, many churches look for motivation through psychology, entertainment, and other means.

The early Christians had no attractive buildings, if any at all, and no professional staff. They did not advertise their gatherings because of intense persecution. Often they knew that confessing Christ might mean torture and death. But they also knew that death

would be defeated by their resurrection at the coming of Jesus, who declared, “For this is the will of my Father, that every one that beholds the Son, and believes on him, should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”¹⁷ Jesus had more to say about the resurrection of believers than about His own resurrection. Apostolic preaching was focused on this great event.

They were confronting the issue of life and death, and theirs was the only solution. Paul wrote that “if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised: 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.”¹⁸

Read it again carefully. **If the dead are not raised, they will not live on in some other realm but will have perished. The only way out of death is by way of resurrection!**

Jesus said that He would built His “ekklesia” and that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Some suggest that this pictures warfare between Christians and the devil, as though the devil resides in Hades. But Hades represents the abode of all the dead. The promise of Jesus means that even though His disciples may be killed or will die in some other way, the gates of death will not prevail. At His voice they shall arise from death and instantly be transformed from mortal to immortal beings.¹⁹

This is the ultimate victory God gives through our Lord Jesus Christ,²⁰ a destiny that cannot be found through any other religion in the world. It is sufficient motivation.

The application Paul makes is still appropriate: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the lord, forasmuch as you know that your labor is not vain in the Lord.”²¹

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