

In the pamphlet *Two Ways to Live*, the section about the resurrection often troubles Christians. The wording is "God raised Jesus to life again. Jesus has conquered death, now gives new life, and will return to judge." The verse used to support these contentions is 1 Peter 1:3: "In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Many Christians are troubled by this doctrine of the resurrection. They can understand how Jesus' resurrection shows that he has conquered death or that God has conquered death in Jesus. But they can't see any connection between Jesus' resurrection and the fact that he is the ruler of the world and the giver of new life. The issue is this: what is the relationship between resurrection and ruling the world?

By and large, Evangelicals are very clear on the nature of Jesus' death as atonement for our sins. Justification by faith alone, faith in the death of Jesus as our vicarious sacrifice, is fundamental to our understanding of the gospel. That the innocent should become sin so that we who are guilty may become his righteousness is something in which we're well drilled. But what has this to do with the resurrection?

The Bible says that Jesus was raised for our justification (Romans 4:25), but we would prefer to say that he died for our justification. The resurrection is at the centre of the theology of the New Testament, or at least as central as the crucifixion, but this is not how we think of the resurrection. What part has the resurrection of Jesus to play in our understanding of the relationship between God and man?

Using & Abusing the Resurrection

In recent times the resurrection has been used by Christians as an apologetic for belief in the supernatural. Asked about the existence of God, we rightly point to the person of Jesus. Asked to demonstrate that Jesus is more than a man, we tend to point to the resurrection. The books of evidentialist apologists such as Michael Green, Paul Little or John Stott rely heavily on the resurrection. The famous book by Frank Morrison, *Who Moved The Stone?*, argues the case for Christianity on the basis of evidences for the resurrection. Josh McDowell from Campus Crusade and Professor JND Anderson have both produced booklets and pamphlets on the evidences for the resurrection.

There is some value in using the history and public evidence of the death and resurrection of Jesus to support the claims of Christ - the apostle Paul did so before King Agrippa (Acts 25- 26) – yet by and large the New Testament does not use the resurrection to demonstrate the existence of the supernatural. Nor does it use the resurrection to demonstrate that Jesus is God. Instead the New Testament uses the resurrection to show that Jesus is the Christ, for in rising from the dead he fulfills Messianic expectations.

Modern theology has also become caught in unfruitful discussions about the nature of the resurrection body. The New Testament evidence is fairly clear: the question is foolishness (1 Corinthians 15:36)! But for many modern theologians, quibbling about the nature of the

resurrection is their way of denying the reality of the resurrection. What the Bible tells us is that our mortal bodies will be raised (Romans 8:11) so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21) and thus we will have that spiritual body which is fitting for our heavenly existence (1 Corinthians 15:35-44).

While we may use, and misuse, the resurrection in our apologetics (and be side-tracked by the unbelief of many theologians about the nature of the resurrection body) we must not miss the importance of the resurrection for the gospel itself. If you undertake a study of evangelistic addresses in the book of Acts, you'll discover that the one subject which is always mentioned when the gospel is preached is the resurrection of Jesus. Other subjects like the Holy Spirit, sin, the Trinity, baptism, and the atonement are not always mentioned, but the resurrection is never omitted. Paul's preaching in Acts 17 can be described as "preaching Jesus and the resurrection". This is a measure of its centrality to the gospel.

Unfortunately, today many people preach the gospel without mentioning the resurrection. We don't have to mention every theological truth every time we preach the gospel, and people who believe in the resurrection may leave it out of a particular gospel presentation. But the Apostles didn't leave it out when they presented the gospel in the book of Acts, in contrast to modern evangelism, where it's left out more often than it's included. We leave it out because we don't understand its theological significance. When we do mention it, we use it to demonstrate the existence of the supernatural, although this was never the New Testament's reason for mentioning it. So what is the resurrection about?

The Old Testament

The Old Testament doesn't make very much reference to the word or idea of 'resurrection'. Even the idea of life after death isn't commonly put forward in the Old Testament. This isn't to say that Old Testament saints doubted that God would look after them in their death. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the living not of the dead. There is some confidence expressed that God will continue to look after his people after they "go down into the pit" (Psalms 49:15; 73:24-25; Job 19:25-27).

The idea of resurrection which the New Testament builds upon is found in the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Daniel and Ezekiel. In Daniel 12 we read about the end times when "everyone whose name is written in the book will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:1-2). At the end of the world, at the judgment time, there will be a resurrection of people to life and to condemnation. Isaiah 26:19 gives a similar promise of the reversal of the judgment of God in the resurrection of the dead in the future. Hosea 6 speaks of the restoration of Israel after the judgment.

However, it is Ezekiel 36 and 37 that spell out the promise of the national restoration in terms of resurrection. These two chapters, which play such an important part in the thinking of Jesus (the Lord's Prayer is based on them), speak of the coming of the Spirit, the cleansing and forgiveness of sins, and the establishment of the Davidic kingdom, the future Messianic age. These chapters come in the context of God's judgment on the people of Israel who, living in Babylon, could be excused for thinking that there was no hope for them. In chapter 37 God gives Ezekiel a vision of

dry bones, dead people, to whom life is restored through the coming of God's word.

Between the Testaments

Between the Testaments the theory of a general resurrection with the coming of the Messiah gained popularity among Israelites. The judgment time would come, God's nation would be raised up as from the grave, and God's righteous people would be restored to life and his enemies raised for condemnation and death. This view of the Judgment Day as a resurrection to life and a resurrection to death is seen in the New Testament. Not all the Jews believed in it: the division between Pharisees and Sadducees was based on it.

The New Testament

In Acts 23:6 Paul divides the Jewish community according to their views on the resurrection. He knows that some of the Sanhedrin believe in the resurrection (the Pharisees) while others do not believe in the resurrection (the Sadducees). The resurrection under discussion is not personal immortality, nor the resurrection of Jesus, but the general resurrection. Belief in the resurrection is what Paul considers to be Orthodox Judaism. So in Acts 24:14-15, when he explains his actions to Felix, he claims to follow the law and the prophets, which all Jews should be following, giving them the same hope in God that he has: a hope in the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. He makes the same point before King

Agrippa in Acts 26:6-8. The resurrection is the Judgment Day in the future when the Messianic kingdom will be established. It is this resurrection that the Sadducees did not believe in.

If we go back to the Sadducees' challenge to Jesus in Luke 20 (cf Matthew 22 and Mark 12) we read in verse 33:

"At the resurrection whose wife will she be?" and in verse 34: "Jesus replied, 'The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry or be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.' "

Notice how Jesus talks about the resurrection as the last age, or the next age, and about God's children as the children of the resurrection. He is not talking about his own resurrection or our personal immortality, but about the age to come.

It's not just in response to the Sadducees that Jesus speaks like this. In Luke 14:14 he says, "Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." In John 5:27 he also speaks about the resurrection as the Judgment Day:

"And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me."

In John 6, four times we have the phrase "Raise them up at the last day" (6:39, 40, 44, 54). At the resurrection of Lazarus we have Jesus saying: "Your brother will rise again." Martha answered, "I

know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:23-26). That is, with the coming of Jesus, we have the arrival of the resurrection. The last day commences with him. It is as we believe in him that we enter into this resurrection life.

Paul argues with the Corinthians about belief in the resurrection from the dead. If there is no resurrection from the dead then Jesus couldn't have risen from the dead. Notice that he is still arguing as a Pharisaic Jew from the basis of belief in the resurrection from the dead. He doesn't argue from the resurrection of Jesus to prove the existence of the resurrection of the dead, but rather from the resurrection of the dead to prove the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus however, is the 'first fruits' of those who have died, for with the resurrection of Jesus the age of the resurrection commences.

The idea of first fruits in the Scriptures is the payment of the first part of the crop to God as a testimony to the coming of the rest. It is like a deposit or down-payment. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the general resurrection. In his death, atonement for sins is made, the temple veil is torn asunder, and the dead rise up from the tombs and appear after his resurrection. He is the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18) because he is the beginning of the new age of mankind, the last age, the Kingdom of God. Thus when Paul talks about the resurrection he goes on to talk about the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ where all things are being put under his feet. This alludes back to Psalm 8 and looks forward to the time when Christ will hand all things over to his Father (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Thus the inextricable link is made between resurrection, judgment and Kingdom of God.

For this reason, when the Apostles preached the gospel, they proclaimed the resurrection from the dead in much the same way that Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God. To preach the resurrection of Jesus is to establish him as Christ. To preach the Christ having come is to declare that the Kingdom has arrived. An interesting verse that illustrates this is found in Acts 4:2 where we read, "They were greatly disturbed because the Apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead." Notice that it was in Jesus that the resurrection from the dead was being proclaimed. That is, they were not preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead but that in the rising of Jesus the general resurrection of the dead was coming into effect.

In the light of this we can understand why the heretics Hymenaeus and Philetus in 2 Timothy 2:17-18 wandered away from the truth saying "the resurrection has already taken place". For we modern readers the quote seems strange. We think that the resurrection has taken place because Jesus has risen from the dead. We do not think of the resurrection in terms of the last day and the judgment time and therefore do not see how peculiar the doctrine of Hymenaeus and Philetus was. However, given that Paul and the other Apostles were preaching Jesus as the first fruits of the resurrection, it would not be hard to understand how

Philetus and Hymenaeus may have got it wrong.

This understanding of the resurrection can also help us grasp the meaning of being born again. Just as Jesus is the first fruit of the resurrection age, so the effect of Jesus' resurrection is to give

new life to us in the here and now. In his resurrection, Jesus came to his kingly power (Acts 2:36; Romans 1:4). As Messiah, he pours out the Spirit of God on all flesh. Thus, as Peter teaches us, we have been given "new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). So the New Testament sees that we have been raised with Christ to sit in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). We have died with Christ in his death and have been raised with him in his resurrection (Colossians 2 & 3). This resurrection life that we enjoy now is the spiritual rebirth that has been given to us. The Spirit is our guarantee of the life to come. This resurrection life is a hidden life – it cannot be seen now - but will appear when Christ returns. But Colossians 3:1-4 and 1 John 3:1-3 speak of the present reality of our resurrected life and the hidden nature of this spiritual reality.

Therefore, Christians are still waiting for the resurrection. The resurrection for which we now wait is the resurrection of our bodies. As Paul puts it in Romans 8:18-25 our bodies are still caught up in the fallen creation and though we have the first fruits of the Spirit we are still groaning inwardly "as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." When Christ appears, then our lowly bodies will be changed to be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:21).

Thus, in the death and resurrection of Jesus the general resurrection has come and is yet to come. For in his death and resurrection, Jesus is established as Messiah and the Kingdom of God is established on earth – at this stage a spiritual, but in the days to come, a physical reality as well.

So when we turn back to Two Ways to Live, we read that "God raised Jesus to life again which shows that Jesus – conquered death, is the ruler of the world, is the giver of new life."

For Discussion

Set up a role play with one 'non-Christian' and one 'Christian' discussing this section of Two Ways To Live. The rest of the group can advise the Christian in his answers.