

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	50		Gary L.W. Johnson
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AND WE LOOK FOR THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

Most of you will remember the mass suicide of thirty-nine members of the “Heaven’s Gate” cult. In the days following their deaths, video interviews with the leader Marshall Applewhite and his followers spoke of their bodies as “vehicles.” They firmly believed that by committing suicide, they could reach Paradise by leaving their bodies and hooking up with a UFO that was following the Hale-Bopp comet. Applewhite, among other things, claimed to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ. He taught his followers that the human body is merely a vehicle or a container inhabited by a divine soul from the “Kingdom Level Above the Human.” Such “incarnate souls” find other souls to give them an “implant of knowledge concerning the **truth**,” weaning them from “humanness,” in particular, making themselves genderless in preparation for the “disconnect,” which is entry into the next world.¹ These were, as we later learned, very intelligent people. Call them kooks, gullible and naïve followers of a man who had lost touch with reality – but they were sincere in what they believed. Many people think the same of Christians. Clarence Darrow, the famous lawyer in the Scopes trial, once said in reference to the Christian belief in life after death that it was an “absurd idea . . . it is kept alive by hope and fear, by a childish faith, and by cowardice.” H. L. Mencken, the noted journalist and social critic of the first half of this century, wrote: “I do not believe in immortality and have no desire for it. The belief in it issues from the puerile egos of inferior men.”² Christianity teaches that there is life after death – but it is not an escape from the body – in fact, biblical Christianity (unlike Gnostic forms of Christianity) emphatically teaches the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

- I. ***THE CENTRALITY OF THE RESURRECTION (vv. 12-19).*** The realities of the resurrection are established upon the absolute certainty of the actual event. The Corinthians had imbibed the Greek notion that the body was innately evil, and a bodily resurrection was absurd (cf. Acts 17:32-24). Paul responds with the consequences of such a denial.
 - A. ***This is a Denial of Christ’s Resurrection*** (vv. 12, 13, 16). Jesus was a genuine man and possessed a real human body. If He has been raised, then there is a resurrection of the body.
 - B. ***This Denial Makes the Christian Faith Vain*** (vv. 14-16). In a word, if Christ has not been raised from the dead then forget it – chuck the Gospel out the window. The KJV word *vain* (Greek *kenōs*) means devoid of value, empty, useless. If Christ did not rise bodily from the grave, the Gospel is a hoax, a mirage.
 - C. ***This Denial Means Christians are Still in Their Sins*** (vv. 17-19). There is no salvation, no forgiveness of sins unless Christ has been raised from the dead. The word translated *vain* here (Greek *mataios*) refers to that which is void of useful aim or effect (NIV translates this *futile*). Regardless of the sincerity of our faith, sincerity won’t make it real. If our “faith” is not based upon the reality of the empty tomb, then we are only fooling ourselves.

- II. **THE FACT OF THE RESURRECTION (vv. 20-34).** The Apostle now moves to the reality of the resurrection. It actually *did happen*, and this in turn points to the unity of Christ's work on our behalf. Redemption and resurrection belong together, and those who benefit from Christ's work await in eager anticipation the redemption of their bodies (cf. Romans 8:21-23). There is a proper sequence, a two-fold order.
- A. **Christ the Firstfruits.** To what is the Apostle referring? There can be little doubt that this language refers to the "firstfruit" offerings of grain, wine, cattle, and the like appointed by the Mosaic law (Exodus 23:19; Leviticus 23:10; Numbers 15:20; 18:8; Deuteronomy 18:4; 26:1-10). "*Firstfruits* expresses the notion of organic connection and unity, the inseparability of the initial quantity from the whole. It is particularly this aspect which gives these sacrifices their significance."³
- B. **Believers the Harvest.** In late spring or early summer the Israelites would go into the wheat field and gather the first heads of ripened grain. These would be offered up as a sacrifice and a promise of the general harvest in due season. The Apostle Paul uses this as an illustration of Christ and the church. The Apostle here is arguing by analogy. What happened to Christ in the resurrection (and transformation of His physical body) is going to also happen to Christians at some time in the future. Note how Paul reasons here in terms of how belief in this biblical truth affects how we live. If life ends with death, then let us eat, drink and be merry – such was the reasoning of the pagan world. The great Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), wrote: "You should realize that Jesus' resurrection provides a solid guarantee for that beautiful, precious hope. It's a solid guarantee not that with your death your soul will be free from sin or that your fellowship with Jesus and his elect people will be sweet and blessed. No, rather, it's a solid guarantee that should you die this week and be buried the next, you will come forth from the womb of the earth and reappear. This will happen even though after two years no more is left of you here than a skeleton. It will happen even if men were to dig up your coffin in ten years and move your poor bones to an ossuary so that people would say: *There's really not much left of him!* It will happen even if a wild animal were to rip you apart or your remains were to be burned or pulverized. It will happen even if it takes a hundred or perhaps even a thousand years for that day to come. Then you, the same person who once lived here on earth, will be raised. You will reappear by a mighty miracle of God, not with some other body, but in your own. But it will now be a gloried body. Then Jesus will be there in his glorified body. He will be joined by all God's saints from the old and the new covenant, all the prophets and apostles, all the martyrs and witnesses, all fathers and mothers in Christ, all sincere children of God that we have known, and also our own precious loved ones if they belonged to Jesus. If things were any different from this, there would still be a resurrection, but it wouldn't be a blessed one! But that day will be a great one for the blessed of the Lord. It will be a great and illustrious day. For on it vengeance will be heaped on all the world's unbelief, mockery, and slander. Throughout the ages, the mocking laughter of unbelief directed at the resurrection of the dead has persisted. Even so, throughout those same ages, God's people have maintained their steadfast confession: *But there will in fact be a resurrection of the dead!* For now, the mocker appears to be right, for the Lord still tarries. But then, in the end, the child of God will have gotten it right! And that's the precious glory that Jesus' resurrection guarantees."⁴
- III. **THE MANNER OF THE RESURRECTION (vv. 35-49).** Paul next turns his attention to the question, "How are the dead raised and with what kind of body?" – His answer is in verses 36-38 and the emphasis is on the power of God. In essence the Apostle argues as follows: since God is able to give the kind of bodies needed for life at this earthly and physical level, He has power to give life at the eternal and spiritual level. This is illustrated in two ways.
- A. **The World of Vegetation.** Wheat is a grain which, in the process of time falls to the ground, and, through the various processes that are inherent in its properties, it dies. But out of this death comes not one grain of wheat, but many.

- B. ***The World of Creatures.*** Human beings possess one kind of body, animals possess different kinds of bodies, which fish and birds are likewise entirely different. The heavenly bodies (moon and stars), it will be granted, are also different. These “bodies” all have one thing in common – they are limited. They all suffer from the effects of time. Our earthly bodies are adapted to the needs of this physical plane of existence, while the resurrected body will be a body perfectly adapted to the needs of the eternal state. It is a real body – but it is a new body, one that is conformed to Christ (cf. Philippians 3:20-21).

IV. ***THE NECESSITY OF THE RESURRECTION (vv. 50-58).*** The question of *when* this event will occur is now addressed. Paul takes up the subject of the nature of the resurrected body. This is done first negatively and then positively.

- A. ***The Negative.*** “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.” This assertion is not meant to imply that the resurrected body will not be physical. Rather, the Apostle is stating the fact that our bodies as presently constituted, i.e., weak, frail and subject to corruption, cannot inherit the full blessings of the eternal state. There must be a change. This change will affect not only those who are alive at Christ’s return, but those who have died as well (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).
- B. ***The Positive.*** The perishable and mortal must put on that which is imperishable and immortal. This is the only way we can enjoy the glories of the eternal state. We will no longer be subject to death. The *result* of the resurrection is now stated – death is completely robbed of its victory (cf. Revelation 20:5-6). “Through sin, death has had dominion over man, but through the redemptive work of God through Christ, the dominion of both sin and death has been defeated. Victory over sin comes in regeneration; victory over death comes in resurrection. It is Paul’s view that God’s purpose for man is to redeem him in his total personality. Only through the process of resurrection can this victory be completely realized.”⁵

CONCLUSION: Hugh Binning (1627-1653) was one of the noted Scottish ministers of the seventeenth century. In his sermon on Romans 8:11 he closed with a solemn warning with an urgent invitation, saying: “But though there be the same power required to raise up the bodies of the godly and ungodly, yet oh, what infinite distance and difference in the nature and ends of their resurrections! There is the resurrection of life and there is the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28). Oh, happy are they who rise to life that ever they died! But oh, miserable, thrice wretched, are all others that they may not ever be dead! The immortality of the soul will be infinite misery because it is that which eternalizes their misery. Thus, when this overplus of the incorruptibility of the body is added and the whole man made an inconsumable subject for that fire to feed upon perpetually, then what heart can conceive it without horror! And yet we hear it often without any such affection. It is a strange life that death is the only refreshment of it and yet this may not be had: *they shall seek death, and it shall fly from them* (Rev. 9:6). Now, my beloved, I would desire this discourse might open a way for the hearty and cordial entertainment of the gospel and that you might be persuaded to *awake unto righteousness and sin no more* (1 Cor. 15:34). Be not deceived, my brethren, *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God* (1 Cor. 15:50). Certainly, if you have no other image than what you came into the world withal, you cannot have this hope to be conformed one day to the glorious body of Christ. What will become of you in that day, who declare now by the continued vent of your hearts that this Holy Spirit dwells not in you? Alas, how many are such? Oh, pity yourselves, your souls and bodies both. If for love to your bodies you will follow its present lusts and care only for the things of the body, you act with the greatest enmity and hostility against your own bodies. Consider, I beseech you, the eternal state of both soul and body that your care and study will run in another channel. And for you who have any working of the Spirit in you, whether convincing you of sin and misery and of righteousness in Christ, or sometimes comforting you by the word applied to your hearts or teaching you another way than the world walks into, I recommend unto you the exhortation of the apostle: *Wherefore, my brethren, be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing your labor is not in vain in the Lord* (1 Cor. 15:58).”⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ For an analysis of the Gnosis roots of this cult, see Peter Jones, “Hell at Heaven’s Gate: Computer cult merely a new take on ancient Gnosticism,” *World* (April 12, 1997), p. 19.

² cited in the Foreward to S. D. F. Salmond *The Biblical Doctrines of Immortality* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1984).

³ R. B. Gaffin, Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Pauline Soteriology* (Baker, 1978), p. 34. The language of firstfruits is used elsewhere in the New Testament. In Romans 16:5 and 1 Corinthians 16:15 it is used of the converts in a particular location. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and James 1:18 it is used of Christians in general, and in Revelation 14:4 of the 144,000 saints in heaven.

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Honey From The Rock: Daily Devotions From Young Kuyper* (Lexham Press, 2018), p. 711.

⁵ Ray Summers, *The Life Beyond* (Broadman, 1959), p. 711.

⁶ Hugh Binning, *The Sinner’s Sanctuary: Gospel Freedom From Death, Condemnation, and The Law* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2025), p. 324.