

# PREACHING THE RESURRECTION THEN AND NOW

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We live in a world of continual ferment in politics, economics, morality and theology. The modern church seems to suffer from a self-induced schizophrenia resulting from her desire to be accepted in the suprarational world of pagan empiricism while yet paying some form of lip service to the historic creeds and dogmas of traditional Christianity. Bowing at the altar of organizational union, she has sacrificed much of New Testament truth to receive the pottage of status recognition from a kosmos which seriously doubts the necessity of her existence.

Reaction against the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ has echoed through the hollow halls of skepticism for centuries. From ancient Gnosticism to contemporary demythologizing the mind of man has refused to acknowledge the action of an omnipotent God in manipulating the events of history. Every conceivable attempt at naturalistic explanation has been offered in an effort to set aside the obvious regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But facts still are stubborn things and history has a way of abiding. Furthermore, man has yet to find a satisfactory solution for the problem of life and death which consistently confronts him, and it is precisely to this problem that the doctrine of the resurrection addresses itself.

There are those, of course, who have remained faithful to the Biblical account of resurrection and preach it even today. Unfortunately, their preaching of Christ's conquest over death is often relegated to Easter and funerals when the glorious theme of resurrection should ring throughout the pulpit year. As Craig reminds us, ". . . the doctrine of the Resurrection is not just one among others, but the keystone of the sublime arch which rides from heaven to earth and earth to heaven, so that its subtraction would involve the collapse of the structure."<sup>1</sup>

The word "resurrection" is a comprehensive term bearing reference not only to the miraculous exit of Christ from the tomb of Joseph, but also to the final resurrection of righteous and wicked in the future eschaton. The concern of this present study is to examine the relevance of the preaching of the resurrection of Christ to contemporary life and theology. It is assumed that the New Testament account of our Lord's resurrection is accurate history and that His resurrection lays a pattern in form and hope for the resurrection of the believer. For such preaching the church has excellent precedent in its early history.

A truly Biblical preacher in any age must ask himself four basic questions concerning his ministry of exposition. The first relates to the exegesis of the text itself as he deals with the question, "What does this passage say?" Secondly, he raises the hermeneutical question, "What does this passage mean?" When these two questions have been honestly answered the preacher is ready to ask the third, "What is the relevance of this passage to my life and the lives of my people?" Finally, translating fact, interpretation and application into communication he decides, "How can I best proclaim this truth to others?"

The Apostles were Biblical preachers within the revelational frame of reference available to them. They were sincerely concerned with the reality of the resurrection event and its relationship to Old Testament scripture. Their interpretation was conditioned by their direct relationship with the risen Lord and the crisis reception of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The relevance of the resurrection to their time was so obvious that it saturated their ministry. Backus says that "to preach the Gospel was, for the apostles, to preach the resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> This they did, and in so doing, laid a foundation for every honest homiletician who follows in their train.

### THE APOSTOLIC RECORD OF THE RESURRECTION

"Belief in the resurrection was the foundation stone, as it were, of the Christian community which came together again after the death of Christ. There was no opposition between belief and fact, because belief is built on fact."<sup>3</sup> The apparent glory of the apostolic preaching of the resurrection was its simplicity. These men lived so close to the event that its historicity literally formed their words as they communicated both the fact and its meaning. Apostolic preaching was personal in application; "Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:26, emphasis mine). This verse is an example of the pressing relationship between God and man which the apostles recognized in the empty tomb and living Lord.

#### Basic Elements of the Apostolic Gospel

The resurrection was not, to the Apostles, an isolated event. It was rather a crowning seal to the whole unified revelation of God's redemptive plan carried out in Christ. H.T. Kerr identifies five distinct but inseparable elements in Apostolic preaching:

1. The prophetic proclamation of the coming Messiah.
2. The earthly life of Christ.
3. The death of Christ.
4. The resurrection of Christ.
5. The repentance of sinful man necessary for participation in God's redemptive process.<sup>4</sup>

The faith which resulted from this kind of kerygma was faith in the fact and meaning of the resurrection. It was through this faith that the early church experienced such phenomenal

growth. "Death and resurrection" echoed and reechoed across the sun-baked plains of Judea and Galilee, traversed the Mediterranean to penetrate Hellenistic culture across Asia Minor, and found its way to the Eternal City carried by these Spirit-filled men who had "seen the Lord." Weatherspoon speaks of this flaming evangel in Sent Forth to Preach:

It is a notable fact that although all the elements of the message were never in a single sermon the Cross and the Risen Living Christ were never absent. They are at the center of all Peter's preaching in Jerusalem (Acts 2:22-32; 3:14; 4:10; 10:45-49); and basic to the teaching and counsel of his later life is this: 'By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (I Pet. 1:3, RSV).<sup>5</sup>

### The Centrality of the Resurrection in Apostolic Preaching

According to Tenney, "Twelve major addresses, covering the period from the day of Pentecost (c. A. D. 30) to the close of Paul's Caesarean imprisonment (c. A. D. 60), represent the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome," and "in each stage of presentation the place of the resurrection is constant; it is never deprecated or ignored but occupies a prominent place."<sup>6</sup> Though the earliest Apostolic preaching was to Jews, the resurrection did not lose its centrality as the message of grace was extended to the Gentile world. Witness as examples Peter's address to Cornelius at Caesarea (Acts 10:34-43) or Paul's apologetic in Athens (Acts 17:16-32).

The greater volume of the New Testament, however, does not consist of sermonic material but rather epistles, both theological and personal. Since it is a reasonable assumption that these men would write the same basic kerygma which characterized their preaching, one can note the significance of the resurrection as it appears in the letters of all the New Testament writers. (Note: Any mention of the four gospels is omitted since their historical record of the resurrection is apparent. Acts has already been mentioned.)

Paul: The classic passage is I Corinthians 15 in which he establishes the resurrection as an integral part of "the gospel" and the Christian faith and then proceeds to build a careful case for the nature of the resurrection body. In studying Paul on the resurrection, however, one ought not to overlook Romans 1:4; 4:24, 25; 6:5-8; 10:9, 10; Colossians 2:12; 3:3, 4; and I Thessalonians 4.

John: It is obvious in studying the Johannine Epistles and the Revelation, that the author assumes the reader's familiarity with his Gospel. Therefore, in his epistles, John's resurrection presentation is simply a recognition of the living Lord. Indeed, the whole concept of "life" so prominent in the epistles, refers the reader back to Him who is "the resurrection and life" (I John 1:1, 2; 5:10-13). Of course, John's reference to resurrection in Revelation is primarily eschatological (20:4-6) although there are clear allusions to the risen Lord in 1:5, 18; and 2:8.

Peter: Peter's emphasis on resurrection is apparent from his sermons in the early chapters of the book of Acts (1:22; 2:31; 4:2). His epistles, however, also bear the imprint of this great doctrine (I Pet. 1:3; 1:21; 3:21). In II Peter there is less explicit testimony, but references to "the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (1:11) and the promise of his coming (3:8-14) demonstrate that the living Christ is a reality in the author's mind.

James: The practical, ethical content of this epistle does not lend itself to theological discussion on atonement and resurrection. However, even here the careful reader can see an assumption of exaltation ("Lord Jesus Christ of Glory" 2:1) and expectation of parousia (5:7) which exemplify the faith of the Apostle in resurrection.

Jude: Again the fact of the living Lord permeates the writer's thought. "Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." Christ is viewed in the benediction as the Omnipotent Deity who protects the believer (verse 24). Present life and power are dependent upon resurrection.

The Author of Hebrews: Although the writer holds to Pauline authorship of this book, the diversity of opinion on the issue requires a separate mention here. Like Jude and James, the Epistle to the Hebrews assumes a living Lord. However, here there is no casual reference but a carefully detailed theology of the post-ascension ministry of Christ in glory. He is pictured as seated "on the right hand of the majesty on high" (1:3); he has destroyed "him that had the power of death" (2:14); he is a present high priest (4:15); he is the intercessor in the presence of the Father (7:25); he "shall appear the second time" (9:28). In the last chapter there is an explicit reference to resurrection (13:20).

Indeed the resurrection was, as Kerr has observed, "the trumpet note of Apostolic preaching."<sup>7</sup> Why did this theme so dominate their proclamation? According to Weatherspoon:

They saw triumph in the Resurrection. It was the Resurrection that revealed the triumph of the cross; it proclaimed the Redeemer in the horizon of his glorious Divine Sonship. It proved his power over the last enemy--death. . . . They preached a Christ who was Conqueror, and his face alive and glorious was never absent from a single sermon. All their preaching was in the key of the Resurrection. The decisive battle was already won--the tyrannical power of sin and death was broken and man could now throw off their yoke. . . . Apostolic preaching calls us back to the Cross and Resurrection and Pentecost that we may recover the sense of triumph.<sup>8</sup>

## THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

The existential theologians of the day propose that resurrection faith is nothing more than an appreciation of the cross of the Messiah as a saving event. To them history is irrelevant in the construction of a kerygma for the twentieth century. According to Bultmann, "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical

discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."<sup>9</sup> In Bultmann's theology "an historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable."<sup>10</sup> Man must search through the mythology of Scripture to uncover the supernatural penetration into time. Hence exegesis becomes a process of "demythologizing" the Bible in an effort to allow oneself to be confronted with the existential message of God to man.

Someone has said, however, that history is for the race what memory is for the individual. Biblical preaching is the communication of the meaning of God's hand in history. The redemptive kerygma is grounded in history from Sinai to the parousia and perhaps never so much so as at the time of the empty tomb. Backus reminds us that "any preaching which claims to be a preaching of the Word of the New Testament must aim at more than rehearsing exegetical fine points, more than stimulating imagination by making history vivid, more than convincing people that propositions are correct. Preaching, to be a preaching with the direction of the New Testament, must be a communication to human beings."<sup>11</sup> If the Resurrection preaching of the Apostles is to be adopted as a pattern for the late 1960's, six elements must characterize the proclamation of resurrection truth:

#### Preaching the Resurrection Historically

The most obvious explanation of why the New Testament writers recorded the resurrection events as they did is simply because that is the way it happened. As Luccock says, Christianity must be attached "to its foundations in history in the life, teachings, person, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> Preaching the resurrection historically implies a recognition of the record supporting the event. The preacher should deal thoroughly with the New Testament account of bodily resurrection and in so doing acknowledge the empirical evidence offered by the writers and historians:

1. The certainty of the death of Christ.
2. The affirmations of definite interment.
3. The testimony of the empty tomb.
4. The displaced stone and the soldiers' story.
5. The significance of the grave clothes.
6. The physical appearance of the Lord.
7. The rejuvenated life of the disciples.
8. The phenomenal growth of the church.
9. The continual reference to resurrection in New Testament literature.
10. The testimony of centuries of Christian faith.

Dr. Wilbur Smith includes in his apologetic, Therefore Stand, a quote from E.G. Selwyn relative to the historicity of the resurrection: "The fact that Christ rose from the dead on the third day in full continuity of body and soul, and passed into a mode of new relationships with those who knew him on earth--that fact seems as secure as historical evidence could make it."<sup>13</sup>

Preaching the Resurrection Exegetically

Any thorough exposition must be based on exegesis. In proclaiming the resurrection, the preacher must allow the other five elements to rest upon this one as he declares to his hearers what the New Testament says regarding the resurrection. An honest respect for the accuracy and inspiration of the record is essential to Biblical exegesis. Furthermore, preaching should be built upon the total record and not partial proof texts.

Preaching the Resurrection Hermeneutically

Sound interpretation is the child of sound exegesis. Once the preacher has clarified the New Testament record, he is ready to deal with its meaning. Here arises the temptation which has led to allegorizing and "mythologizing" the text. Sound hermeneutical principles must guide the preacher at this point. Surely the resurrection is history but it is more than history. Why does the Scripture provide specific time delineations? Why the varied nature of the appearances? What was the nature of post-resurrection teaching? Is there some significance to the dramatic earthquake and stone moving scene? These are the types of questions facing the interpreter and their number is legion.

Preaching the Resurrection Theologically

If hermeneutics is the child of exegesis it is also the mother of theology. Several major areas of Biblical theology are affected by the New Testament interpretation of the resurrection:

## Theology Proper: (Doctrine of God)

Several truths concerning the nature of God are discernible through the resurrection. God is sovereign over the affairs of man (Acts 2:23-24); He omnipotently controls the powers of life and death (Acts 13:30); He has a filial relationship with this One who has been raised (Acts 13:33); and He is working out a redemptive relationship with man (Eph. 1:15-20).

## Christology: (Doctrine of The Son)

Inasmuch as Christ is God, the aforementioned characteristics apply also to Him. However, in His specific office as the second member of a Triune Godhead we learn through the resurrection that He is the Son with power (Rom. 1:4); He receives glorification as a result of resurrection (Acts 2:30); He is the object of regenerating faith (Rom. 4:24); in Him we have justification (Rom. 4:25); and He is the eternal Lord (Rev. 1:18).

## Soteriology: (Doctrine of Salvation)

The Scriptures do not treat the resurrection merely as an historical fact but also as a present power. Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life and since He is the life, He is

capable of producing life in others (Jn. 11:24, 25). In Romans Paul proclaims that justification is dependent upon the resurrection (4:25) and that confession of the resurrection is essential to salvation (10:9, 10). Resurrection is inseparably connected with baptism in both the spiritual reality and the physical symbol (Rom. 6:4-10). Resurrection is not to be divorced from atonement for together they demonstrate the crisis of God's redemptive act. The eternal quality of the believer's salvation is assured by the present ministry of Christ which is a result of the resurrection (Rom. 8:31-34).

Paul also demonstrated the relevance of the resurrection to Christian living as his challenge in I Corinthians 15:58 plainly declares. Beginning with the word, "therefore," he links the Christian's service to the vast truths of resurrection and parousia. "The power of His resurrection" for Paul, is an identification of the believer with his Lord.

#### Eschatology: (Doctrine of Last Things)

Since the resurrection of Christ is the pattern for the resurrection of the believers yet to come, the eschatological nature of resurrection is obvious. God's redemptive process will not be fully realized until every believer possesses a glorified body like unto the body of Christ (Rom. 8:18-25; I Jn. 3:1-3). The consummation of the age is very much tied up with the fact and meaning of resurrection (Jn. 5:28, 29; I Cor. 15:20-28; II Cor. 4:14; Phil. 3:11; I Thess. 4:13, 14; Rev. 20:5, 6).

#### Preaching the Resurrection Practically

Faith in the work of God is always practical and none the less so in relation to the resurrection. One of the most relevant passages on sanctification in the entire New Testament is Romans 6 and it literally abounds with reference to the resurrection. Since the Colossians had been "raised with Christ," they were to "seek those things which are above" (Col. 3:1).

. . . Let your preaching ring with resurrection, as did the Apostles' and that not only on Easter morning, but whenever you seek to encounter sin and despair and death in the human heart. . . . But always as you preach it, remember so to preach it that you do not obscure this inmost paradox of Christianity: faith in Him who raised up Jesus from the dead and gave Him glory gives us victory and life; but the victory and life it gives for our mortal days is the power to die daily in the image of Christ's death, that at the last we may be found alive in Him. . . .<sup>14</sup>

#### Preaching the Resurrection Evangelistically

The "evangel" has always had as its purpose the securing of commitment to Jesus Christ. In his introduction to the great resurrection discourse of I Corinthians 15, Paul plainly indicates that the Corinthians were saved by faith in that body of truth about the Saviour in which the

resurrection holds a prominent place. The Apostle John declares that his writings concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Christ were "written that ye might believe. . .and have life through his name" (Jn. 20:31). The preacher today will only be true to his calling as a proclaimer of good news insofar as he communicates the truth of the risen Lord as the object of faith and the power of life.

Resurrection preaching today, when cast in the mold of the Apostles' witness will secure similar results. There will still be those of the Sadducees, Epicureans and Stoics who will think anyone peculiar who sets forth Jesus and the resurrection. Festus will still consider the resurrection preacher a madman confused in his own metaphysical mysticism. But the attitudes of men cannot change the truth--He is risen, as He said. "At a time when a large segment of Christendom looks upon the resurrection merely as an historical event in the remote past, it is imperative that the Christian church and the individual Christian make crystal clear the relevance of Christ's resurrection to the bewildered world. . . ."15 Preaching the resurrection is an essential quality of evangelical ministry--now, as then.

#### DOCUMENTATION

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