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Death Swallowed Up in Victory

The cross and the resurrection stand as the pivotal events at the heart of the Christian faith. Christianity stands or falls with the substitutionary atonement wrought by the death of the incarnate Son of God on the cross and the resurrection of the Son of God on the third day. The church comes each year to this celebration of resurrection because we must constantly remind ourselves and the world of the resurrection hope, and of the reality of the risen Christ. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ must always remain a company of resurrection witnesses, speaking the Gospel of the cross and the risen Christ to a world desperate for genuine hope.

Friday, April 14, 2006

The French positivist philosopher Auguste Comte once told Thomas Carlyle that he planned to start a new religion to replace Christianity. "Very good," replied Carlyle. "All you have to do is be crucified, rise the third day, and get the world to believe you are still alive. Then your new religion will have a chance."

The cross and the resurrection stand as the pivotal events at the heart of the Christian faith. Christianity stands or falls with the substitutionary atonement wrought by the death of the incarnate Son of God on the cross and the resurrection of the Son of God on the third day. If Christ did not die in our place, then we are still under the divine verdict. If Jesus was not raised, He was merely a victim, and not the Victor.

The church comes each year to this celebration of resurrection because we must constantly remind ourselves and the world of the resurrection hope, and of the reality of the risen Christ. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ must always remain a company of resurrection witnesses, speaking the Gospel of the cross and the risen Christ to a world desperate for genuine hope.

Yet, the world is not always ready to hear the challenging clarity of the Easter message. Words such as sin, guilt, redemption, atonement, and salvation are often seen as intrusive, impolite, and unsophisticated. Individuals who flee from the admission of their own sinfulness know that the word of the cross and the witness of the resurrected Lord come as judgment, as well as grace.

Some within the church have decided to help the Easter message conform to cultural expectations. David Jenkins, the former bishop of Durham (England) prompted an outcry in the Church of England over his suggestion that the resurrection was "real," but not an historical fact. Christ's resurrection was real, in the sense that the disciples experienced the "livingness" of Jesus. Nevertheless, says the bishop, the resurrection of Jesus was not a bodily resurrection.

Bishop Jenkins' rejection of the biblical doctrine of the resurrection is, as is most often the case, nothing new. The resurrection has been a focal point of theological compromise throughout the history of the church, though some in the contemporary era seem determined to reach new depths of resurrection "redefinition."

The modern flight from the reality of the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ is but another example of the revolt against classical Christian orthodoxy seen in some segments of the church. But the biblical message will not allow such compromise. The gospels record the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the appearance of the risen Christ to the disciples and to others.

Paul left no door open to misunderstanding when he stated: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." (1 Corinthians 15:17) If Christ was not raised "we are of all men to be pitied." But, Paul proclaimed, Christ has been raised, the firstfruits of the resurrection of the believers.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the vindication of the Gospel and the eternal sign of the atonement accomplished on the cross. The resurrection was recognized by the disciples as God's sign that Jesus was indeed the incarnate Son, that His

messianic claims were true, that His preaching of the Kingdom of God would be realized, and that His sacrificial death was sufficient for the salvation of sinful humanity. The resurrection is also the sign of his return.

Furthermore, the Scriptures make clear the fact that Jesus's resurrection is the promise of our own resurrection and the concrete hope of life beyond the grave. The reality of the resurrection prompted Paul's triumphant cry: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

The church must never apologize for its celebration of the resurrection. Indeed, though Easter is celebrated as Resurrection Day, each Lord's Day is a resurrection day, and each congregation is a body of believers united in the hope and witness of the resurrection.

The two great annual festival celebrations of the church provide for worship and witness. Churches must be faithful witnesses to the reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and bold to speak the truth of His resurrection as both judgment and sufficient hope.

Carlyle was right. The unprecedented and objective historical events of the cross and resurrection stand in judgment against all human pretensions and against religion as mere religion. He is Risen! He is Risen indeed.

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