Lumen et Vita 9:2 (2019), doi: 10.6017/lv.v9i2.11131

Raised Imperishable: The Ethics of the Bodily Resurrection

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Abstract

Christians live in light of eternity: we anticipate a future glory yet to be unveiled, but we also have some level of participation in that glory in the present. What shape should that anticipation and participation take? In other words, how does the resurrection influence ethical choices in the present? This paper draws on the work of historical and modern theologians to consider what effects the resurrection of the body has on Christian life in the present. It argues that the nature of embodied life in the resurrection affects our view of and our behavior towards our own bodies, the body of the church, and the bodies of other people in the world. While the paper sketches the outlines of an ethic based on the bodily resurrection in each of these areas, its main concern is with the spiritual attitude that informs and results from these ethical choices. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, Christian ethics that focuses on the resurrection tends to fall into one of the two traps of otherworldliness or secularism. However, when attention is given to the spiritual effects of a resurrection-oriented ethic, both of these pitfalls can be avoided. Living in light of the resurrection sharpens our anticipation of heavenly glory, but it also proves our inability to attain that glory by our own power, forcing us to rely ever more on God as the source of our salvation. Thus, although living with reference to the resurrection of the body has positive influence on our ethical choices, the primary impact of such a life is to drive the Christian back to the Gospel.

Text

In this paper, I want to reflect on the significance that "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" may have for Christian life in the present. There are many ways to approach this subject, and equally many answers represented throughout the Christian tradition. As such, I do not propose to offer a comprehensive account of how the resurrection affects ethics, even as regards the issues and thinkers I will bring up throughout this paper. Rather, I wish to limit my remarks to the sphere of theological ethics, asking how the bodily resurrection of the saints in the eschaton impacts our choices about how to live now. I will further focus on a specific spiritual dynamic that results from living in light of the resurrection, arguing that the nature of the resurrection, particularly the resurrection of the body, can and should play a role in shaping the way we

live life now, and that the most important effect of this shaping is to sharpen and sweeten our hope for heaven and our reliance on Christ as our only way to reach it.

Before I begin my argument, it should be noted that challenges might be made against the claim that we can let the nature of the eschatological resurrection direct our choices in the present. There is a profound gulf between the states of creation and resurrection, as shown by the fact that marriage was given to humanity in Eden, but in heaven "they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matt. 22:30, ESV). While the distinction between the different states of the world must be kept in mind, we must also acknowledge that they can still exert a degree of influence upon one another.[1] Thomas Aquinas exemplifies this influence in his consideration of the evangelical counsels. Aquinas argues that the best way to perfection in the present life is to renounce worldly goods, marriage, and personal power, because this is the way we best imitate the lives of the saints in glory as they focus on the beatific vision.[2] While I do not agree on every point with Aquinas' idea of our resurrection life, I want to take as a model his method of using what we know about the resurrection to frame our ethical considerations in the present.[3] Throughout, my main concern will be with our attitude towards this dynamic, as I examine how such a life calls us back to the Gospel.

In considering the effects of the resurrection on present ethical choices, the individual's relationship to his or her own body is the natural place to start. The discussion found in the Third Part the *Summa Theologica* is helpful in orienting our conversation: the Third Part presents the

[1] For a contemporary example of how this might be parsed, see Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

[2] Thomas Aquinas. *The Religious State* [*De perfectione spiritualis vitae*], ed. and trans. F. J. Proctor, (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950, 96-103 [ch. XVIII]. See also Viktória Hedvig Deák, *Consilia Sapientis Amici* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2014), 155; Etienne Gilson, *Moral Values and the Moral Life* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1931), 327.

[3] For Aquinas, the legitimacy of this model is grounded in a teleological understanding of the human: if a) the beatific vision is what humans were created for, then b) that must represent our end in the present life as well as the future (otherwise we would be different creatures in Heaven than on earth, since teleology is grounded in the type of being you are). Therefore c), the resurrection is a fitting source of ethical dictates in the present.

argument that in the resurrection of the blessed, body and soul will become more closely united by the body's fourfold endowment of impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity.[4] Subtlety, the gift which allowed Jesus to enter a locked room without opening the door, and clarity, a transparent luminosity, are not qualities we could pursue in the present life with much practical success;[5] but agility and impassibility may provide fitting referents for living life with an eye to the resurrection. Exercise in order to help the body achieve more of its potential for agility, and maintaining our physical health in general to prevent illness and injury, are perhaps the closest ways we can approximate agility and impassibility in the present life, thus helping our body and soul to work in better accord with each other and anticipating our bodies' resurrection blessedness.

Health and fitness are not controversial goals, but in motivating them theologically in this way, one risks errors and excesses. One might become too invested in these penultimate goods, forgetting that we cannot, by our own power, reverse the effects of sin and death in our bodies. However, the other extreme, treating the present body as the abode only of sin and death and something to be endured and not cared for, is equally undesirable. Both these harmful attitudes can be corrected when the spiritual effects of living in light of the resurrection body are rightly understood. The danger of overconfidence in our ability to perfect the body is real, but that hope is inevitably shattered by the relentless press of age or the onslaught of sickness and injury. This is reflected in the character arc of Chris Traeger on the NBC show *Parks and Recreation*. When Chris' character is introduced, he is in the peak of physical health, runs ten miles every morning, and believes he will be the first human to live to age 150.[6] However, when he becomes physically

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 82-85.

[5] These gifts also arguably detract from the body's physicality, which is desirable for Aquinas but not for a theologian who wishes to accord the material world a more profound place in the resurrection than medieval thought tends to.

[6] *Parks and Recreation*, "The Master Plan" (13 May 2010).

ill[7] or is forced to acknowledge the reality of death,[8] Chris' mental stability, which is built upon his confidence in his own physical health, is shattered.[9] This leads him into a lengthy struggle with depression, from which he only emerges when he makes peace with the inability of physical fitness to protect him from death.[10] We see in Chris an experience that is encountered, to one degree or another, by everyone who relies on physical health to provide salvation. This enforced knowledge of our inability to escape the curse in our own bodies has an effect that parallels Martin Luther's understanding of the Law: knowing our weakness causes us to turn to God's grace, the future glory guaranteed to us by Jesus' death and resurrection, as the only means by which perfect bodily life can be brought about.[11]

Beyond these mortifying effects, pursuing agility and impassibility in anticipation of the resurrection body also works positively on the soul. Like "the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited," to quote C.S. Lewis, these physical goods make the promise of the resurrection more vivid, real, and delightful to us.[12] The physical dimension of life is particularly important because, as creatures that are both spiritual and material, that which affects our bodies has a profound effect upon our souls, and thus the spiritual effects of these ethical choices have a particular poignancy due to their origin in the body.[13] As John Calvin points out, God gave us material symbols in worship so that we

[7] *Parks and Recreation*, "Flu Season" (27 January 2011).
[8] *Parks and Recreation*, "Li'l Sebastian" (19 May 2011).
[9] *Parks and Recreation,* "Soda Tax" (27 September 2012).
[10] *Parks and Recreation*, "Ron and Diane" (6 December 2012).
[11] Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian,* trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 57-59.
[12] C.S. Lewis "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 5.
[13] David O. Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 50-51; C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 16.

material creatures might more powerfully experience God's grace.[14] Similarly, physically experiencing even a foretaste of the resurrection body awakens hope and longing for the resurrection in a way that cannot be achieved simply through intellectual knowledge about the resurrection. Thus, acting in one's present body in light of the resurrection motivates the Christian to hope and rejoice in the promise of Christ's return.

The resurrection of the body has a further powerful influence, not only on individual bodies, but on the life of the church body. Understanding the body's role in the resurrection worship affects how we conceive of and experience the church's worship in the present. Fr. Isaac Morales argues that "proper human worship of God must be both corporeal and corporate," and in the resurrection "every act of the human being"—including bodily actions—"will become an act of worship."[15] David O. Taylor likewise says that our theology of resurrection worship must give attention to "the mediation [of God's presence] that will occur *in and through the resurrection body*... the continual mediation that will take place through the *new creation*, and ... the *material symbols of worship* that the blessed saints employ in glory."[16] Corporate worship as the Body of Christ in the present is a bodily reality, not only a spiritual one: we sing, we stand and kneel, we use real water for baptism and partake of real bread and wine in communion. The fact of the bodily resurrection affirms and informs this physical worship in the present, shaping our appreciation for the body's role in worship.

As with physical health, corporate worship done in light of the resurrection both gives us a glimpse of resurrection life and shows us our distance from it, thus sharpening our desire and longing for heaven. Worship in the present life is not an end in itself, but a foretaste, preparing us

[14] John Calvin, "Psalm 132:7," in *Commentaries of John Calvin*, trans. by Charles W. Bingham. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-1855. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).
[15] Isaac Augustine Morales, "With My Body I Thee Worship," *Pro Ecclesia* 25, no. 3 (2016): 338.
[16] Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 72. Emphasis in original.

for something greater.[17] The nature of worship in the present impresses this truth upon us, since we never worship with soul and body entirely united. Sore throats might impede our singing ability, so that our spiritual fervor is not appropriately expressed by our bodies; or we might participate physically in the service, kneeling or standing at the proper times, while our hearts and minds wander, making us hypocrites.[18] Again, this causes us to throw ourselves upon God's mercy and trust in God's power, not our own, to bring us into the perfection of resurrection worship. But physical worship also heightens our anticipation for the worship of the resurrection by letting us experience a foretaste of that worship. We do not give up on worship in this life because it is not enough; we pursue it more eagerly, because it gives us a glimpse of that to which we look forward. If mere earthly music, the words of a human preacher, or a mouthful of what seems to be simple bread can awaken our souls to devotion, how much greater will our joy be when we are called to worship by the vision of God's very self![19] Thus worship in the Body of Christ impresses upon us both our distance from the fullness of resurrection worship, and the coming joy of that worship.

Finally, looking beyond the church, the resurrection of the body has profound significance for how God's people relate to the world at large. That significance can be defined, in broad terms, as the pursuit of justice, traditionally defined as giving everyone his or her due.[20] When we consider the resurrection, in which "a great multitude ... from every nation, from every tribe and

[17] Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, ann. Erik H. Herrmann, ed. Paul W. Robinson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 38-39.

[18] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), bk. 3, ch. 20, sec. 3.

[19] Morales' article is a powerful argument that the doctrine of the beatific vision and a strong emphasis on the role of the physical body in the resurrection can be harmonized. Taylor presents another viewpoint, that worship in the resurrection will be mediated not by the sight of God in His essence, but by the physical sight of Christ, which is enabled by the Spirit (Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory,* 71-72).

[20] Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson, (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), Bk. 19, ch. 2.

people and language" (Rev. 7:12 ESV) will worship God together in righteousness, our understanding of justice in the present life gains vivid meaning.[21] In particular, the fact of the bodily resurrection and the call to anticipate that reality in the present time motivate the pursuit of justice and unity both in the body of Christ and in the world at large. The fact that the resurrection is a physical reality prohibits any idea that oppression can remain while "spiritual" unity is upheld. In the resurrection, there will be neither oppression nor violence; swords will be beaten into ploughshares and the lion will lie down with the lamb (Isaiah 2:4, 11:6). As such, we should pursue equity and peace in this life to reflect, in whatever ways possible, the reality of the next.

In considering the ability of resurrection-oriented thinking about justice to inspire both despair in human efforts and hope in God's power, James Cone's words are apt. He writes:

> There is included in liberation the "not yet," a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. This simply means that the oppressed have a future not made with human hands but grounded in the liberating promises of God. They have a liberation not bound by their own strivings. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has freed us to fight against social and political structures while not being determined by them.[22]

This passage helps contextualize the pursuit of justice as a necessary goal, but one that can only be properly understood in light of the eschaton. Justice works as a foretaste of the resurrection life, and as such must be pursued as something that sharpens our hope for the reality of that life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "there are conditions of the heart, of life, and in the world that especially hinder the receiving of grace, that is, which make it infinitely difficult to believe."[23] The Christian hope can look like an unrealistic dream to the oppressed, and the oppressors can be blinded by their sin. By working for justice—by humbling the proud and lifting up the lowly—we

[21] Justice, and not mercy or forgiveness alone, is triumphant in the resurrection, since the sin and guilt of God's people is not ignored, but paid for by the death of Christ.

[22] James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 145.

[23] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 162. "There is a depth of human bondage, of human poverty, and of human ignorance that hinders the gracious coming of Christ." There is also "a degree of power, of wealth, and of knowledge" that presents an obstacle on the way to Christ.

can bring the reality of the resurrection a bit closer, thus encouraging faith. Simultaneously, the difficulty attendant upon achieving justice even in an isolated situation proves that worldwide justice will never be accomplished by human power alone. "Nothing can save us that is possible: we who must die demand a miracle," writes W. H. Auden.[24] The pursuit of justice strengthens in us the conviction that salvation for this world is only achieved through the miracle of Christ's Incarnation, death, and resurrection.[25]

When a vision of the future, perfect life of the resurrection is made the foundation for Christian ethics, one of two errors often results (functionally if not doctrinally). On the one hand, we can become otherworldly, letting the knowledge that only God's power can bring about the resurrection lead us into indifference about the state of the present world. If this world is going to give way to a new creation ushered in by God's power, why should we try to make things better now? On the other hand, we can slip into secularism, focusing our efforts so much on making the present life look like the life of the resurrection that we forget that our confidence must lie in Christ's return as the only real and permanent solution to the brokenness of the world.[26] In seeking

[24] W.H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), 274.

[25] Intentionally, I have not discussed how my arguments might be applicable to the lives of non-Christians; as Stanley Hauerwas argues, the attempt to find a "foundation of ethics" that has universal applicability unfounded on Christian convictions is probably doomed to failure (*The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 10-12), and non-Christians are highly unlikely to accept ethical dictates based on the premise of a future resurrection in which they do not believe. However, a few things could be said about the relevance of my arguments outside the church. If the ethical choices I have defended here—physical health, bodily corporate worship, and the pursuit of justice—represent true human ends, then there is some good in any human achieving these ends. However, if these ends are not informed by the Gospel, then their positive influence is limited, and pursuing health and justice without the Gospel is just as liable to harm souls by plunging them deeper into despair as it is to help them by directing them towards their good in God (see G. K. Chesterton's critique of modernity as the "Christian virtues run wild," stripped of their proper context and thus made as destructive as they are fundamentally good. *Orthodoxy*, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 35). Participation in corporate worship is an interesting case: James K. A. Smith argues that humans are "liturgical animals," and the "cultural liturgies" in which we participate have a powerful and often unconscious effect in shaping our loves either toward or away from Christ. So worship in the church might have the potential to direct non-believers towards God to the point that the Gospel becomes a living reality for them.

[26] See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 57; Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 157-158, 228-229.

to protect against these two dangers while still appreciating the resurrection's significance for ethics, it helps to pay attention to the spiritual dynamics that accompany a resurrection-oriented life when the central truths of the Gospel are kept in mind. Looking to the life of the resurrection can give us helpful directives for how to live now: in caring for our bodies, shaping our corporate worship, and pursuing justice in the world, we bring about real good in the present life. However, these are merely penultimate ends, since the realities they anticipate will only truly be brought about through the work of God. In the meantime, by shaping our lives according to the resurrection of the body, we experience our own weakness and we receive glimpses of our future glory. Thus our hope grows stronger and we learn to rely ever more on God to make God's kingdom come.

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