

RESURRECTION NEGLECTED?

*In this the love of God was made manifest among us,
that God sent his only Son into the world,
so that we might live through him.*

1 J O H N 4 : 9

AS A YOUNG CHILD I asked why Good Friday was called “good.” My dad replied, “Because Jesus died for us.” I continued, “But why was that good?” My dad answered, “Because he came back to life.” I challenged him again: “But why not bad Friday and good Sunday?” I somehow instinctively knew that the cross could not be good news without the resurrection.

My dad then explained that sin led to punishment—something as a child growing up in the seventies I understood. Jesus, unlike us, did not deserve to be punished by death or hell. I could be forgiven only if I accepted the grace of God. The offer seemed almost too good to be true. In that moment, a rather one-sided deal was struck between me and God. I offered him my sinful heart and surrendered to him, and he gave me the gift of his righteousness. Because of his sustaining grace, I have never really looked back.

Many times when I heard the gospel explained in later years, the resurrection was either omitted altogether or briefly discussed in passing. When I began to share the Christian message with others individually and while preaching, to my shame I often did so without mentioning that Jesus was alive. The resurrection had become an afterthought to the message that Jesus died for our sins.

This lack of emphasis on the resurrection is not a new phenomenon. We have already seen that the young Spurgeon became concerned

about this curious neglect of the resurrection. He became convinced that preaching the resurrection would lead to salvation.¹ Every time he preached he expected such results, and his words challenge us even today:

You must also believe in the power of that message to save people. You may have heard the story of one of our first students, who came to me, and said, “I have been preaching now for some months, and I do not think I have had a single conversion.” I said to him, “And do you expect that the Lord is going to bless you and save souls every time you open your mouth?” “No, sir,” he replied. “Well, then,” I said, “that is why you do not get souls saved. If you had believed, the Lord would have given the blessing.” I had caught him very nicely; but many others would have answered me in just the same way as he did. They tremblingly believe that it is possible, by some strange mysterious method, that once in a hundred sermons God might win a quarter of a soul. They have hardly enough faith to keep them standing upright in their boots; how can they expect God to bless them? I like to go to the pulpit feeling, “This is God’s Word that I am going to deliver in his name; it cannot return to him void; I have asked his blessing upon it, and he is bound to give it, and his purposes will be answered.”²

Were so many saved through Spurgeon’s preaching partly because Spurgeon emphasized the resurrection? In his published sermons, he mentioned resurrection a staggering 7,620 times, which averages more than twice per sermon.³

Billy Graham has spoken to live meetings attended by more people and has been associated with more public professions of faith than any other evangelist in previous history. He seems to have come to a similar conclusion about the importance of the resurrection. The Billy Graham Center, located on the campus of Wheaton College, plays clips from his preaching. A paraphrased summary of what you hear is: *Jesus died for you, but not just that—he was raised! He’s a living Jesus, and he’s here*

¹See chapter 1, pages x–x.

²C.H. Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner*, “Qualifications for Soul-Winning: Godward”; <http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/sw02.htm>.

³There are 3,563 published sermons by Spurgeon. A Logos Bible Software search of the electronic editions was performed for the following search term: “resurrection OR (raised NEAR dead). OR (risen NEAR dead). OR (Christ NEAR raised). OR (Christ NEAR risen). OR (Jesus NEAR raised). OR (Jesus NEAR risen).” For comparison purposes the search “crucifixion OR (Jesus NEAR death). OR (Jesus NEAR died). OR (Christ NEAR death). OR (Christ NEAR died).” returned 12,157 hits, i.e., an average of just over three per sermon.

today, wanting to have a relationship with you. Could this emphasis help explain the power with which he preached and the millions of conversions that resulted?

In contrast, in many gospel messages I have heard, this strong emphasis on the resurrection has been absent, while the emphasis on the death of Jesus has remained. What is the reason for this difference?

WHY MIGHT THE RESURRECTION BE NEGLECTED?

1. *The Resurrection Could Be Eclipsed by the Prominence of the Cross*

The cross is the basis by which we can be forgiven. Our penalty was placed on Jesus; there our debt was discharged. Because the cross is literally crucial, it sometimes overshadows the resurrection. Richard Gaffin⁴ explains:

As a generalization . . . Christ's resurrection has been relatively eclipsed. In Eastern Orthodoxy . . . the accent has been on his incarnation. . . . In Western Christianity (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) . . . attention has been focused heavily and at times almost exclusively on Christ's death and its significance. The overriding concern, especially since the Reformation, has been to keep clear that the Cross is not simply an ennobling and challenging example but a real atonement. . . . In short, the salvation accomplished by Christ and the atonement have been virtually synonymous.

My point is not to challenge the validity or even the necessity of this development, far less the conclusions reached. But in this dominating preoccupation with the death of Christ, the doctrinal . . . significance of his resurrection has been largely overlooked. Not that the Resurrection has been deemed unimportant, but all too frequently it has been considered exclusively as a stimulus and support for Christian faith (which it undoubtedly is) and in terms of its apologetic value, as the crowning evidence for Christ's deity and the truth of Christianity in general.⁵

Books like *The Cross Centered Life* by C. J. Mahaney, *The Jesus Gospel* by Liam Goligher, and *Pierced for Our Transgressions* by Steve

⁴Emeritus Professor of Systematics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

⁵Richard B. Gaffin, "Redemption and Resurrection," *Themelios*, Vol. 27.2, Spring 2002, 16–31; see www.beginningwithmoses.org/articles/redemptionresurrection.htm.

Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach all help us greatly. I am not concerned that there is *too much* emphasis on the cross. I am, however, anxious that in “surveying the wondrous cross” we also study the resurrection. We must remember that the cross is just as empty as the tomb, and Christ is now glorified, having completed his work. The truth is, we cannot be truly cross-centered without also being empty-grave-centered! Jesus was not just our prophet and priest—he is our reigning King.

At the cross we learn true humility, our hopeless sinfulness, and our need of God. At the empty tomb we fully appreciate what Christ has achieved for us and receive power to live for him. A deeper, fuller insight into the truth of Jesus’ resurrection will cause our lives to be radically transformed.

2. The Resurrection Has Missed out on the Beneficial Effects of Controversy and Heresy

The cross has prompted vociferous debate and hence much study. Most books about the cross of Jesus were written as a direct response to disagreements over the meaning of Jesus’ death. Recent controversy has centered on whether Jesus died in our place to take the punishment for our sin (penal substitution) and experience the full force of the wrath of God. This concept is taken from Romans, Isaiah 53, and elsewhere in Scripture. It can easily be explained to a child, yet its depths continue to puzzle the professor. A divine exchange occurred. He took our sin; we gained his righteousness. As a result, God’s attitude toward us changed, and now we are forgiven, and the guilt of our sin is washed away. God now sees us covered in the righteousness of his Son. With our debt paid, we come freely and boldly into the presence of a holy God.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. . . . Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself. . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:14–21)

This idea has recently been attacked by some leaders in the evangelical movement. Two key books popularized this. Steve Chalke and Alan Mann rejected this teaching as “cosmic child abuse.”⁶ Chalke since reaffirmed that he rejects the whole notion of penal substitution.⁷ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker argue that this teaching is a form of sadomasochism.⁸ Incensed by such inflammatory language, some evangelicals responded robustly, arguing that such thinking is misguided and contrary to Scripture.

This argument has led directly to some positive results, including books being written and, in the UK, a significant new Christian conference, New Word Alive.⁹ This caused many Christians to come together with one accord, from a variety of denominational backgrounds, and has strengthened many churches.

Therefore, because persistent and ongoing doctrinal arguments are difficult to ignore, controversy tends to heighten our awareness of certain doctrines, while noncontroversial ones become neglected. Biblical truths seem, at least in the long term, to actually *benefit* from being attacked. Truth appears to be most visible when viewed against a backdrop of error. Many have rightly stressed that when we define true doctrine, we simultaneously define false teaching. As J. Gresham Machen said:

Every really great Christian utterance, it may almost be said, is born in controversy. It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in the celebration of truth.¹⁰

The average preacher does not directly explain heresy in his preaching; he is, however, very well aware of it during his own preparation. He may deliberately engage the latest popular errors by preaching biblical truth as a specific antidote. Tim Challies¹¹ compared discernment to identifying fake money:

⁶Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182.

⁷Steve Chalke, in Derek Tidball et al., *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 34–48.

⁸Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 30.

⁹See <http://newwordalive.org>.

¹⁰J. Gresham Machen, “Christian Scholarship and the Defense of the Faith,” in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D. G. Hart (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 148–149.

¹¹Author of one of the most widely read Christian blogs, www.challies.com.

In discerning what is true from what is false it is best to focus more attention on what is genuine than what is counterfeit. It would be tempting to train people to identify what is fraudulent by focusing a great amount of time on what is false. However, because falsehood is always changing, it is more beneficial to focus on what is unchanging. Knowing and identifying what is false can be done best by knowing and understanding what is true. A person who studies and understands what is true is necessarily equipping himself to discern what is false.¹²

This same approach is also seen in the New Testament, where most of the epistles are written in response to error in the churches. Surprisingly, Paul never elaborates in any real detail on precisely what false teaching he is addressing. Instead he explains the truth in a way that contradicts the specific errors, while not providing them a platform for further attention. This reads a bit like a transcript of one side of a telephone conversation. We could strain our brains in the fruitless task of trying to infer what is being said on the other end, or we can focus instead on understanding what the apostle is communicating.

At no point in church history has there been widespread debate among Christian theologians about the resurrection of Jesus. Certainly all major groups that say they are part of the Christian church today, including Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and all the Protestant denominations, believe that Jesus was raised bodily for us and that we too will be raised. Of course, some liberals deny the physical resurrection of Jesus, but there is broad agreement that by abandoning this view they lose their right to call themselves Christians at all. Because of this relative lack of controversy, we might incorrectly assume that all churchgoers believe in Jesus' resurrection and fully understand its significance. Unfortunately, this doctrine is rarely discussed in great detail, and hence understanding about its full ramifications is often vague.

We can be passionate about the glorious truths of God's Word, even when they are not directly under assault. The relative absence of controversy or heresy concerning the resurrection is not a sufficient excuse for us to fail to fully explore the impact of this doctrine. *All* of our doctrinal walls must be firmly built, not just those that currently are under attack. We cannot afford to allow any important doctrine to fall into neglect

¹²Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 142.

simply because no one seems to be publicly contradicting it. Too many Protestants are so busy protesting about what they are against that they forget to declare as loudly what they are in favor of.

3. Our Neglect of the Resurrection Could Be Part of a Satanic Strategy

Without becoming obsessed with the Devil, we must recognize that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12). It is quite likely that Satan has at least two different strategies that he utilizes to undermine truths that are essential to our faith. The first approach is to assault a biblical truth directly by encouraging us to doubt it or to form wrong conclusions about it. However, we have seen that attacks of this kind can often backfire and inadvertently benefit the church. Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon, and countless others taught glorious truth in direct reaction to the erroneous teaching of their day.

Satan’s other strategy might well be to encourage us to neglect a doctrine by merely assuming it. Everyone, in principle, accepts it, even though few may really understand it. Perhaps this is precisely how Satan has assaulted the doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection, as well as our own future resurrection.

We could even speculate that this doctrine is so distasteful to him that he cannot bear to think about the resurrection or even formulate false teaching on it. Given that it was such a glorious victory for Jesus, I am sure that Satan does not wish to be reminded of it, though he daily feels its effects. Satan might hope, therefore, that if he does not try to promote controversy and/or false teaching concerning the resurrection, perhaps the full implications of this important doctrine will remain relatively undiscovered. Since it is the power of the resurrection that enables us to live as Christians, it is no surprise if Satan is indeed trying to stop us from applying this power to our lives.

Satan sometimes also entices Christians to believe that they are defending a righteous cause even though they are profaning God’s name by the manner in which they are doing it. This is not dissimilar to the way many of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day behaved. For example, some bloggers seem to exist purely to root out the many and varied errors that are out there. They do so in a nasty manner and are nicknamed “watch

bloggers.” We must not allow our enemy to define our agenda. We have a positive body of truth to proclaim irrespective of the latest popular theological heresy.

4. The Bible Appears to Rarely Mention Resurrection

If we measured significance by merely comparing a count of those verses in the Bible where subjects are mentioned, we could assume that very little emphasis is placed on resurrection. However, there is little sense in this approach, since hell would then be more important than heaven, and money more important than forgiveness. The virgin birth of Jesus is mentioned only rarely in Scripture, but does that make it any less central?

HAS THE RESURRECTION BEEN COMPLETELY NEGLECTED?

Absolutely not! Christians have *not* totally ignored the resurrection. The resurrection is, after all, precious to us and is acknowledged as a vital factor in our salvation. “No tenet of Christianity is more central. . . . Resurrection is at once the foundation of Christian faith and the focus of Christian hope.”¹³ We must not use either the cross or the resurrection to reduce the value of the other.¹⁴ Many evangelicals *do* value this doctrine, but we must look more closely at “the most important doctrine of the New Testament.”¹⁵

John Piper also declared, “The gospel has at its center the events of the cross and the resurrection.”¹⁶ He included these words even though the purpose of that book was to discuss how the cross is involved in saving us. Elsewhere in the same book he quotes¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:3: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.”

In the context of his defense of the importance of the cross, we can understand why Piper ends the quote where he does, thereby emphasizing his point. It is troubling, however, how frequently people omit the second half. If we do make a habit of doing this, we would appear to

¹³Donald K. McKim and David F. Wright, *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992), 319.

¹⁴See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 192.

¹⁵George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 10.

¹⁶John Piper, *The Future of Justification* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 82.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 89.

underemphasize “that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:4).

This is a good example of how our focus on the cross can make us appear to assume the resurrection. We need to be aware of Carson’s warning that “When we assume the gospel we are one generation away from denying it.”¹⁸ We could apply this specifically to talking about the resurrection, without which there is no gospel.

Most of us are not intentionally neglecting the resurrection. We do appreciate its importance and value it highly. But the resurrection has not been explored as fully as many of the other doctrines and has not been given the attention it deserves.

Paul states emphatically that without the resurrection we would still be in our sins. Without the resurrection we are lost and there is *no hope!* There is no salvation without a *living* Jesus. We need the resurrection to have its power-generating effect inside of us if we are to be born again. We really are “saved by his life” (Romans 5:10). We need a change within us that only the resurrection can produce. We must make sure that in our thinking and our speaking we give the resurrection the prominence it deserves. We must not neglect either the resurrection or the cross in order to focus on the other. We need *both*, as Mark Driscoll explains:

Sadly, there are those who err in emphasizing either the crucifixion or the resurrection of Jesus at the expense of the other. Some preach only the cross and its result of forgiveness of sin and justification. Without preaching the resurrection of Jesus as well, Christians are prone to overlook the mission of Jesus and the new life he has for them on the earth. They tend to see Christian life as little more than going to church to soak in teaching until they get to heaven. This is the perennial error of Christian fundamentalism.

Conversely, there are others who preach only the new kingdom life that Jesus offers through his resurrection. These Christians excel at helping the poor and handing out hugs and muffins, but fail at repenting of personal sin and calling others to repent of personal sin so that they might be forgiven and reconciled to God through Jesus. This is the perennial error of Christian liberalism.¹⁹

¹⁸Don Carson, “The Primacy of Expository Preaching, Part 1”; www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByConference/23/2085_The_Primacy_of_Expository_Preaching_Part_1/.

¹⁹Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 125.

The degree to which we neglect the resurrection is also the degree to which we neglect to think about Jesus as he really is, now. Jesus is enthroned in heaven and is reigning inside every believer. His powers are limitless, and he is at liberty to do as he wishes. While on earth he did not fully reveal his glory and divine power. To only think of Jesus as a long-haired, gentle man in a robe and wearing sandals has devastating effects on the church. This perception has permeated the attitudes of many who perceive Jesus as a weak character but a good teacher. The world seems blind to the Bible's description of the resurrected Jesus, full of power and authority. This description is highly offensive to the world. But to worship Jesus as the artists have portrayed him, instead of as the Son of Man in all his glory, is nothing short of idolatry.

To meditate on the reality of the risen Jesus promises to be of great benefit to us. Hope, optimism, enthusiasm, and certainty are likely to result. Angst, uncertainty, and complexity, as well as attempts to deny ourselves legitimate pleasures in an attempt to carry our own cross, might be the result if we neglect to meditate on Christ's glorious victory over death. This kind of condemnation and legalism is widespread in the church today. In the modern world, many accuse the church of being dead. This impression will merely be confirmed if they only hear us preaching about a Jesus who was crucified for them, speaking about him and acting as though he is still dead. Colossians 2:6–4:1 contrasts the legalism of religion with the resurrection life that is ours in Christ Jesus. Without setting our minds on our living Master in heaven we will never be able to live as God intended.

Jesus is glorious and very much alive. He is the one in control of his church and his world, as uncomfortable as that might make us. As a good friend said to me in an email:

If we leave him in the tomb we can systematize his teaching and sanitize his actions. We can manage the church and keep things in order. If we leave him in the tomb, then Christianity belongs to us to make of it what we will, to reform it in our image and sell it to the highest bidder. If the tomb is empty, the implications for the church are explosive to say the least. If he is truly with us in a way not so dissimilar to how he was with his disciples, then nothing will ever be the same again.²⁰

²⁰Andrew Cottingham, who blogs at <http://andycottingham.com>.