

ARTICLES

Preaching the Resurrection

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Various Solutions to the Problem of Death

The ever-present and inescapable fact of death has drawn from man various responses. These may be subsumed under three general types described as “death-denying,” “death-accepting,” and “death-defying.” We shall seek to delineate each of these, with some critical comments, and then to set forth the Christian doctrine of resurrection, based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, as being faith’s ultimate answer to the problem of death. It should be noted that the Christian doctrine of resurrection is to be classed with the “death-defying” type of solution, although as we shall try to suggest later, it is unique and to be distinguished from other “death-defying” proposals.

The Denial of Death

There are many signs that our age is rapidly developing a “death-denying” culture. Our language, our customs, our general outlook, our refusal to discuss death with our children, our dealing with the aged, our lengthening of the span of life by medical skill, all combine to remove death from the consciousness of modern man and to give him the illusion that death is unreal, that although it may occasionally engulf others it is no concern of ours. We contrive by every possible means to shut out of our thought the reminder of the psalmist that

“Man cannot abide in his pomp,
he is like the beasts that perish” (Ps. 49:12).

In Western culture we have tried to adopt the illusion “that death is a fictive experience and does not truly exist.”¹

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1. Charles W. Wahl, “The Fear of Death,” in *Death and Identity*, edited by Robert Fulton (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965), p. 58.

The reason for our efforts to escape the reality of death may well be that death is the only problem which modern man, who indulges in the rather silly foible that he has "come of age,"² does not feel adequate to solve. Modern man can manipulate and control his physical environment to a degree undreamed of by his forebears. He feels, therefore, adequate to the solution of any problem which confronts him. As a scientist has recently put it: "Success has become a habit of the species."³ "But," the same writer continues,

There is a glaring exception to this paean of man's conquests, one problem where all his assurance, ingenuity, and wit avail him nothing; an area which stands in bold contrast to the rest of nature which is so malleable to his will. I refer, of course, to the phenomenon of death. Here man, with all his cleverness, is powerless. He may postpone death, he may assuage its physical pains, he may rationalize it away or deny its very existence, but escape it he cannot. . . . And if it does not yield to science and to rationality as does the rest of the physical universe, then we are perforce impelled to employ the heavy artillery of defense, namely, a recourse to magic and irrationality.⁴

The defense for many is to try to push death so far over into the circumference of consciousness that life goes on as though death did not exist.

A survey of some of the literature on death or a glance at many of our current medical and funeral customs, reveals how far this defense has

2. It seems to me that our age in many respects manifests many of the marks of adolescence. It has come suddenly into a great new body of knowledge and does not know what to do with it. Our tendency to try to emancipate ourselves from history, as though nothing that happened to the human race prior to our time has any significance, is a mark of immaturity. The easy assumption that because man has developed a host of new products in recent decades through which he has greatly increased the consumption of goods, or because he can make tin cans immeasurably faster than our grandparents, or because he can go to the moon, necessarily means that we are wiser and more mature than former generations, is highly questionable. Grandfather, living on the soil of New England two hundred years ago, may have been wiser than modern man trying to carve out an existence on the moon. It could even be argued that the Greeks some centuries before Christ knew the meaning of life better than we do.

3. Wahl, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

4. *Ibid.*

gone. Are you accustomed to hearing that someone has died? No, he has "passed away," "gone home," "gone beyond," "departed." Do people usually die at home, surrounded by loved ones and friends who see that death is a reality which cannot be avoided and has some relationship to all the activities of life which go on in that home? No, men usually die in hospitals or nursing homes, in an environment totally detached from the normal living of either the victim or his family and friends. Furthermore, men now usually die drugged into unconsciousness, so that they do not experience what Browning referred to when he wrote:

. . . to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form.⁵

And following death, does its stark reality stare us in the face by the necessity of family and friends preparing the body of the dead one for burial? (There is in the possession of the family of a former colleague of mine a "cooling board" which was used a long generation ago by his parents to lay out and prepare for burial the bodies of those who died in his community). Now we have a professional class who remove the corpse from sight and relieve those not in their group from any association with the dead body. The body is taken to a "funeral parlor" or "funeral home" or "memorial home," where modern skills are artfully applied to erase the marks of death from it. Visitors to the funeral establishment are likely to be told that "Mr. Smith is in Room 14," which is called the "slumber room." We are likely to be reminded how "lifelike" and "natural" the corpse looks. This has all the marks of a process of self-deception, whereby we exchange all the hard facts of death for an illusion of sleep.

We then bury the body, resting on an air mattress, in a waterproof vault, another aspect of the illusion suggesting that the corpse is not really dead but sleeping, so that we would not want water to seep in either to disturb his comfort nor to drown him! Also by protecting the corpse from water damage we are enabled to bypass the fact that the worms will probably not leave enough for water to damage, even if it should get in.

5. "Prospice," *op. cit.*, p. 395.

And where is the body placed in the ground? Not in a "graveyard" next to the church, where the worshippers are reminded weekly of the fact of death, but in a "memorial park," or a "garden of memory," or in a mausoleum called a "temple of memories" with "Clean Dry Above Ground Burial," where no touch of elegant landscaping is omitted, and where frequently grave stones are forbidden lest they remind us of what the lovely park contains. The illusion is carried even further by the encouragement of picnics and weddings in these parks designed to disguise the reality of what these places represent. All of our handling of death is contrived to suggest psychologically that death is not an ugly intrusion on life but a sort of nonentity enshrined in sunshine and loveliness.

Our refusal to face death is to be seen also in the wariness with which our generation discusses, or rather refuses to discuss, death with children. In a recent study of "Attitudes of the American Public toward Death," Robert Fulton discovered that those intellectuals who are most emancipated and sophisticated in other realms are the least willing to have their children confront death in any form. He writes:

It is worthy of note that such finding. . . is inconsistent with all that characterizes the style of child rearing of professional and progressive groups such as this. Typically, families of the social, professional, and intellectual level of . . . [this] group strive to bring their children up in a world of reality through the discouraging of such phantasies as ghosts, hobgoblins, Santa Claus, and the bogies of sex. Nevertheless, in this setting they appear to behave contrary to form and seek to shield the ultimate truth from their children.⁶

Another writer asserts that a child whose "insatiable curiosity" leads him to raise the question "What is it to be dead?" has this question

met today, as his questions about sexuality would have been met in the 1890's, with evasion and subterfuge. He encounters the same embarrassed prudery and frightened withdrawal which he would have encountered fifty years ago in his efforts to find out about sex. . . And the answers which are supplied are as straining to his credulity and faith in his parents as were

6. "The Sacred and the Secular: Attitudes of the American Public toward Death, Funerals and Funeral Directors," in *Death and Identity*, p. 103.

the “stork” and “baby-in-the-basket” stories which were proffered to him three decades ago in response to his sexual questions.⁷

In surveying these modern evasions of the question of death, I do not want to be misunderstood, as though I am suggesting that the outward form they take is always wrong. It may well be that for hygienic and aesthetic reasons, to say nothing of possible theological reasons, some of our current customs may be preferable to those of cruder times. If our quick separating of the bodies of the dead from the living were only to avoid disease, if our attempts to beautify death were motivated by our faith in a final resurrection, if our efforts to turn cemeteries into gardens bespoke our rejoicing in the memory that God’s triumph over death came in “Joseph’s lovely garden,” there might be some theological justification for some of our modern customs. But the plain fact is that society’s attitude toward death reflects “emerging secular emphasis,”⁸ and, as Robert Fulton asserts, “The suppression of the idea and presence of death” is the result of “temporal-mindedness and scientific scepticism in America.”⁹ He adds:

Modern industrial America with its emphasis upon long cars, long vacations, and longevity has struck a new note in the minds of man. . . death becomes an infringement upon our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As never before, we choose to disguise it and pretend the meanwhile that it is not the basic condition of life.¹⁰

But is the denial of death really any solution to the problem of death? As long as death is the end of all living things, its denial is merely escape by means of delusion. And does this not mean illness both for individuals and society? Do not efforts to escape into unreality take their toll? It is beyond the limits of this lecture to explore this subject in any depth. We may, however, call attention to a study by Dr. Adolph E. Christ of one hundred acute psychiatric geriatric patients, eighty-seven per cent of whom had never talked about death or dying before.¹¹

7. Wahl, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

8. Robert Fulton and Gilbert Geis, “Death and Social Values,” in *Death and Identity*, p. 68.

9. *op. cit.*, p. 100.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

11. “Attitudes toward Death among a Group of Acute Geriatric Psychiatric Patients,” in *Death and Identity*, p. 152.

He concluded that "one can speculate that at least some of their psychiatric symptoms, which often included fear of being poisoned, killed, or thrown out of their homes, as well as frank, somatic delusions, may be symptoms of marked denial of death."¹²

As far as the consequence of the denial of death on the whole of society is concerned, it may be sufficient to point out a judgment of Franz Borkenau, that primitive men who asserted that "man need not die" converted

tribal society into a madhouse. Every death is then regarded as the effect of black magic, and the life of the tribe centers not so much upon the procurement of the necessities of existence as upon the search for witches who appear to threaten life much more than do famine and disease. . . it invariably goes with a socially organized persecutory paranoia.¹³

It is possible that some, at least, of the witch-hunting of our own time is rooted in the denial of death, in that death itself is not considered our enemy but whoever seems to threaten the way of life we have carved out which we think will normally not end in death. The view of Dr. Charles W. Wahl may have some validity, that "the pell-mell dash of mankind from the central and inescapable fact of existence, viz., its finitude," leads to a "heavy reliance upon magical thinking and delusion. . . which . . . even when collectively shared, raises problems of emotional sickness and health both for the individual and society which are directly germane to the field of psychiatry."¹⁴

There is little to be gained by the refusal to look death in the face, by excluding it "from our images, our words, our ideas, because death will obliterate all of us, beginning with those who ignore it or pretend to ignore it."¹⁵ A civilization, says the Mexican author and diplomat Octavio Paz, that denies death ends by denying life. [Man] "must open himself out to death if he wishes to open himself out to life."¹⁶

12. *Ibid.*

13. "The Concept of Death," in *Death and Identity*, p. 44.

14. *op. cit.*, p. 58.

15. Octavio Paz, "The Day of the Dead," in *Death and Identity*, 391.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 391-92.

Facing the inescapable fact of death, we need a better answer than shutting our eyes to it.

The Acceptance of Death

A second way of dealing with the problem of death is merely to accept it as our inevitable fate. Man dies—so what? So do butterflies, flowers, animals, and trees. Even the stars will some day burn out. Man is born to die. Death is but the natural outcome of birth. It is “the eternal void” into which all life passes. It is merely “the end point of aging.” It is “the inevitable conclusion of a natural process.” Marcus Aurelius gave this view classic expression in his *Meditations*:

It is the duty then of a thinking man to be neither superficial, nor impatient, nor yet contemptuous in his attitude toward death, but to await it as one of the operations of Nature which he will have to undergo.¹⁷

The author of Ecclesiastes said more vividly: “For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; . . . All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.” Here is “absolute death” with nothing beyond.

Modern materialistic views of life confessedly produce much evidence to undergird such a view. We know that man is a psychosomatic organism. Thought, feeling, appreciation, will, a sense of values—all that has historically been spoken of as the spiritual or psychic part of man’s life—function definitely through the biological organism which is man. The nervous system, culminating in and controlled by the brain, is the physiological seat of the intellect, feeling and will. If the brain is damaged, so are thought, feelings, appreciation. If these are so thoroughly related to, and dependent on, the functioning of the brain, why is it not logical to assume that to destroy the brain is to destroy these? There is no existence for man beyond the empirically observable biological and psychic life of man as we now know him. Since this is inescapable fact, it is futile to “kick against the pricks” concerning this. We may as well accept death as the end of what may have been a pleasant or an unpleasant, a fruitful or an unfruitful, a successful or an unsuccessful, threescore

17. Quoted by Fulton and Geis, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

years and ten, plus or minus. When death comes, it should not be surprising; it should be expected. We are born, live, die—period.

Is this a satisfactory, or even a realistic, view of death? Two questions, at least, are to be raised about it. First, can we be so sure that death is the end, that there is no form of existence beyond that which is “discernible to direct human experience”? Have not the hope, and the fear, of something “beyond” been so universal as to raise the suspicion that death may not be the end? Does the camel’s foot create the desert? If man’s intimations of something beyond death were merely in the form of hopes, it might well be said that this was wishful thinking. But this is too easy an explanation, in the light of man’s fears of the beyond. Man’s fears could as well have made his wishful thinking take the form of denying any existence beyond this life. Franz Borkenau reminds us that civilizations that have issued from India

serve as a memento for all who regard belief in immortality as ordinary wish-fulfilment. Every form of Indian belief since the Upanishads has treated metempsychosis, hence immortality, as both a certainty and a curse! Indian thought and its Buddhist derivatives in China, and even more so in Japan, are occupied with the problem of liberation from this curse, be it by dissolving the individual in the absolute, be it by vouchsafing him eternal death, on condition of the faithful performance of certain ascetic techniques. Among certain Japanese sects the final outcome has been a veritable religion of suicide, an active search for death¹⁸

“Death-worship” is not only the acceptance of death but a longing for it and a searching after it. For those of this persuasion, at least, the idea of some form of existence beyond death can hardly be accounted for by wishful thinking. F. H. Lovell-Cocks points out that

Epicurus, with more insight than some of his modern disciples, saw that what man fears is not that death is annihilation, but that it is not; that the horror of death is not extinction, but the wrath to come.¹⁹

The same is true for more sophisticated Western man. Shakespeare put the case for many when he wrote:

18. *op. cit.*, p. 54

19. Quoted by Alan Richardson, “Death,” *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 61.

. . . The dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.²⁰

Wishful thinking could as well obliterate any suspicion of existence after death as create it. The ear usually does not create the music. There are times when blurred ringings stir in the ear which do not come from without, but these are usually distinguishable from those objective sounds which are stimuli to which the ear responds. So the well-nigh universal sense of something beyond the sphere of our biological living may be a response to a reality which we do not create but which calls forth this response from us. In spite of the widespread discounting of this on the part of modern scientific secular man, Browning's "Grand Perhaps" remains.

The second question is whether human life can retain any sense of meaning through a "death-accepting" view. I have talked with people who claim that if death ends all they would still find life a joyous experience, that the prospect of personal extinction holds no horrors for them. In fact, George Eliot in her poem "The Legend of Jubal," argued that it is life's brevity which gives it its preciousness. In her legend, death had never entered the world until it arrived by accident. The effect of death, which shortened life, was revolutionary.

Now glad content by clutching haste was torn,
And work grew eager, and device was born.
It seemed the light was never loved before,
Now each man said, 'I will go and come no more.'
No budding branch, no pebble from the brook,
No form, no shadow, but new dearness took
From the one thought that life must have an end.
And the last parting now began to send
Diffusive dread through love and wedded bliss,
Thrilling them into finer tenderness.²¹

20. *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I. *The Complete Dramatic and Poetic Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by William Allan Neilson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), p. 911.

21. Quoted by P. T. Forsyth, *This Life and the Next* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1948), p. 3.

True though it is that life's brevity imparts certain values to certain cherished experiences, would this prevail if there were certainty only that death ended all for everyone? Was not P. T. Forsyth right when, in commenting on Eliot's poem, he said that the effect of this view would "be like that of alcohol—first bustle, then blight, excitement, and then stupidity."²² Forsyth thought Tennyson, considered *passé* by our generation, much nearer the truth when he said that if we could not be sure of immortality, most of us would be

Halfdead to know that I shall die.²³

Forsyth saw plainly what has come to pass dramatically in our own time, that if men on a large scale began to think that "death ended all," even if morality were not immediately arrested, this would "lead to a lowered sense of that which is behind morality and is the condition of it—the value of personality."²⁴

It is rather startling to find a modern analyst of the human condition finding the echo of Forsyth's analysis in the state of our world today. Franz Borkenau, formerly professor of history at the University of Marburg, has written:

Our modern post-Christian attitude has somehow had to come to terms with the ingrained Christian belief that life without immortality is nothing. This conviction, once the concomitant belief in an actual after-life is abandoned, results in despair, which indeed has increasingly colored the more recent phases of Western—and latterly of Eastern—Christian history. There is an obvious tendency for the Christian concept of personality to follow the Christian belief in immortality into limbo. In consequence modern secularism is

22. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

23. "In Memoriam," Stanza, *The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 171.

24. *Op. cit.*, p. 8. F. W. Robertson once said: "If there be no God and no future state, yet even then it is better to be generous than selfish, better to be chaste than licentious, better to be true than false, better to be brave than to be a coward." *Life, Letters, Lectures and Addresses of Frederick W. Robertson*, M. A., edited by Stopford Brooke (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865), p. 86. This may have been true for a few rare souls among whom F. W. Robertson would rank with the highest. It is still to be doubted, however, that such a view would be valid for the mass of mankind.

patently about to end in nihilism, i.e. in denying the relevance, almost the existence, of personality.²⁵

Borkenau finds the roots of modern totalitarianism at this point. When personality is denied, it seeks to sublimate itself in a higher entity, the social, racial, or national group. The test of total abandonment of personhood is to be willing to die for the group to which one is attached. But paradoxically, a free choice to die for this higher loyalty leaves a modicum of personality for the individual who makes it, for it is he, by his own free decision, who wills to die. Logically, therefore, the total depersonalization process must issue in one dying for the group, not by his own choice, but by the will of the group. For, as Borkenau says:

No one is allowed to retain even the right to choose suffering willingly for the sake of the larger whole. Indeed, as Orwell has demonstrated [in his 1984], this free acceptance of martyrdom becomes the ultimate heresy.²⁶

Given this logic, even the leaders of a totalitarian movement would be destroyed, for "in this system all must be equally crushed, and there is no torturer who would not at the same time be a victim."²⁷ Modern totalitarian leaders, of course, do not follow the logic of their own "death-acceptance," and hypocritically try to save their own skins by eliminating all rivals. A totally depersonalized nihilism, however, is the logical outcome of the "death-accepting" view. If death ends all, then nothing is ultimately of any value. It may be fortunate that the human race, in the large, is likely not clear thinking enough to see, nor honest enough to accept, the implications of their professed faith in the acceptance of death.

One wonders whether the acceptance of death, with the resultant meaninglessness of life, is not at the root of much of the bizarre individual behavior rampant in current society. The spreading of the desire for LSD trips into a dream world, the ever-wider use of marijuana, the craze for intoxicants, the growth of pornography and the easy sex standards of the so-called "new morality" in which many moderns are now indulging, may be symptoms of the total loss of meaning in life and the depersonalization that follows it. Although it may not be present to the consciousness of many of the participants, it may well be that this is the logical outcome of the fact that men have accepted death as the end and no longer believe in

25. *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

27. *Ibid.*

anything beyond the grave. The logical outcome of "death-acceptance" may be some form of "death-worship"—either mass neurosis, which destroys millions of people, or some individual form of destroying one's personhood even before death. There must be a better answer to the problem of death than this.

The Defiance of Death

There is a third alternative in dealing with death. In contrast to "death-denying" views, it is to look death squarely in the face, fully aware that it is the inevitable historic end toward which all living things move. It cannot, therefore, deny death. On the contrary, since this end casts its shadow so decisively back over the whole of life, the reality of death must be reckoned with every day. For death is not an unfortunate accident that may be avoided by various safety-first measures, nor an unreality which does not exist if we refuse to think about it. Death begins with our first breath. Cells are born to die. They are replaced by living ones, and during babyhood, childhood, adolescence, and youth, the processes of life hold the ascendancy over the processes of death. In early adulthood and in our middle years, however, life and death maintain an uneasy balance for a period. Then, after that, death begins to gain the ascendancy over life. Following a longer or a shorter battle in individual lives, the grim monster finally triumphs and we are done. Death, therefore, is so inevitably the fate of all living things and so inextricably interwoven into the structure of every day that, whether we are aware of it or not, the real significance of any day is that it brings us twenty-four hours nearer death.

This third alternative, although it refuses to deny death, refuses also to accept it. It sees death as real and inevitable, but not final. This view has been termed "death-defiance" in that "it accepts death but also aims at transcending it."²⁸ It looks upon death as the end of life as we now know it, but not as the end of existence. It views death as marking the transition from one era to another, as a "passage" from life in time and history to another form of existence. Time and matter give way to eternity and spirit. Life continues beyond death. Therefore, death is faced as real, but not accepted. It is defied in the name of a higher life. The acceptance of death is replaced by the hope of immortality. This "defiance of death" in the name of immortality has a long and varied history which cannot be traced here. It includes the grosser forms of hope represented in burial customs where food, clothes, furniture, and all the

28. Franz Borkenau, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

accoutrements of life here were placed in the tomb for the use of the departed, suggesting that the immortal life was a sort of Mohammedan heaven with a quality of life quite like that we now know. It includes the struggle for democratization, where the monopoly on immortality, held by kings and the great of the earth, was increasingly challenged to make the after-life available to all men.²⁹ It includes also the more refined and sophisticated forms of belief in the immortality of the soul, held by some ancient Greeks and many moderns, whereby the spirit of man is set free from the prison of the body and the ambiguities and frustrations of time and history, and enters into a purely spiritual existence beyond death.

The Christian Doctrine of Resurrection

It is clear that in its dealing with death, Christianity belongs to the category of "death-defiance." Borkenau is right when he insists "that defiance of death is at the core of the Christian message. . . it was left to Christianity to place defiance of death at the center of its perception of the human situation."³⁰ What I should like to stress now, nevertheless, is that however much Christianity belongs in the general category of "death-defiance" it is unique and to be clearly distinguished from other views belonging in this category. And this is for at least two reasons.

First, other "death-defying" views posit the immortality of the soul—that there is something deathless in man as men. This suggests a consummate pride of man in his own existence, as though he had in himself an eternal, deathless quality, and as though he were somehow the arbiter of his own destiny. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it: "All the plausible and implausible proofs for the immortality of the soul are efforts on the part of the human mind to master and to control the consummation of life. They all try to prove in one way or another that an eternal element in the nature of man is worthy and capable of survival beyond death."³¹ Should this be countered by the judgment that belief in man's immortality is not human pride, but rather testimony to the wonder of man as God made him, it may be answered that this is the ultimate pride which refuses to take man's sin seriously. Even if one believes that man was created by God as immortal, it is difficult to believe that such a state is permanent in the light of the Old Testament's word, "in the day that thou eatest

29. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 51.

31. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), II, 295.

thereof thou shalt surely die," (Gen. 2:17), and the New Testament's word, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

The Bible has no doctrine of the immortality of the soul. As Alan Richardson has reminded us: "The Bible never for one moment allows men to forget their mortality. . . . The illusion of natural or inherent immortality is the Serpent's lie (Gen. 3:4)."³²

The Bible knows only of resurrection. And resurrection is not something inherent in man. It is God's action, and God's alone. Man dies; it is *God* who raises from the dead. And what is more, the Bible's doctrine of resurrection is not a mere theory, a generalizing about what God will do for man; it is rather related to the distinct historic event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostles, we are told in the Book of Acts, proclaimed in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4:2); or as the most recent English translation of the New Testament puts it, they "were teaching the people that Jesus had been raised from death, which proved that the dead will be raised to life."³³ The word of Christ is "because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19). The New Testament hope of resurrection is so tied to the historic event of Christ's resurrection that the two can never be separated. And granted that this event goes beyond the dimensions of ordinary events, it cannot be less than they are, and thus transformed into the category of myth, quite so easily as we are wont to do. My colleague, Markus Barth, has stated: "For the biblical witnesses . . . there is no difference between the *factuality, reality, actuality* of the crucifixion and of the resurrection events. They possess the same historicity."³⁴ He goes on to point out that this historicity can hardly be reduced to the category of myth. If the biblical witnesses

were speaking solely of a voice that was heard by them, of a feeling that was formed in them, of a sense of mission that fell upon them with irresistible force, or of a private or communal cultic experience and vision—then their reports. . . might stand on the same level as some mystics' intuitions and meditations. Since they do speak of seeing him, or touching him, or eating with him. . . they confront their hearers and readers with a concrete, this-worldly presentation of the

32. "Death," *op. cit.*, p. 60.

33. *Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English* (New York: The American Bible Society, 1966).

34. Markus Barth and Verne H. Fletcher, *Acquittal by Resurrection* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 11.

reality and meaning of the resurrection which assaults not only the sensibilities of the Sadducees and the Athenian philosophers, but those of every man. They might have spared themselves and their interpreters many difficulties if they had given the slightest indication that their speech referred to events that, unlike the crucifixion, did *not* occur at a given place, at a specific time, before chosen witnesses! But they do not spare us such difficulties. However much and deeply they interpret the event, they denote the event as an *event*, not as a timeless symbol, and for this reason they do not invite an allegorical or demythological interpretation.³⁵

To this Alan Richardson adds:

Against all theories that the risen Christ was merely a kind of ghostly appearance the Church taught that his resurrection was real, objective, palpable—bodily. His presence to the apostles after his resurrection was as ‘real’ as his bodily presence in Galilee had been.³⁶

Hence, although Christianity is most certainly to be classed with the “death-defying” faiths, it is to be distinguished from others in this class by its doctrine of resurrection rather than immortality, and its tying of resurrection solely to the unique act of God in raising Jesus. The uniqueness of Christianity at this point lies in the uniqueness and finality of her Lord as raised by God from the dead. Longfellow’s

Dust thou art to dust returnest
Was not spoken of the soul³⁷

is hardly biblical Christianity. Karl Barth has written:

In the controversy over the resurrection, two worlds clash. . . the world of the gospel. . . and a religious and moral world which looks very much like Christianity.³⁸

We must not confuse the two.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 11 ff.

36. “Resurrection,” *op cit.*, p. 194.

37. “A Psalm of Life,” *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1893), p. 3.

38. *The Resurrection of the Dead* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1933), p. 126.

The second thing that distinguishes Christianity from other “death-defying” views is its belief not only in resurrection, but in the “resurrection of the body.” Resurrection, for the Apostles, was not merely some sort of spiritual resurrection in a life beyond, but “a renewal under new conditions of the ultimate unity of body and soul which was human life as they knew it.”³⁹ It hardly need be pointed out here that the resurrection of the body, for the New Testament writers, was not a crude hope of the resuscitation of the atoms of our present fleshly body. Paul makes it clear that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (I Cor. 15:50). Both living and dead, at the final resurrection, will be “changed.” “For this perishable nature must put on the ‘imperishable’ and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (I Cor. 15:53). The Bible knows nothing of disembodied spirits; it knows nothing of spirits temporarily dwelling in bodies to be released at death; it knows nothing of an unreal sort of death which is “only a discarding of the outworn envelope of the body.” It knows only “persons” who are made up of both spirit and body. As Karl Barth has put it:

The corruptibility, dishonour, and weakness of man is, in fact, that of his corporeality. Death is the death of his body. If death be not only the end—but the turning point, then the new life must consist in the repredication of his corporeality. To be sown and to rise again must then apply to the *body*. The body is man, body in relation to a non-bodily, determined, indeed, by this non-bodily, but body. The change in the relationship of the body to this non-bodily is just the resurrection, not, therefore, some transition of man to a merely non-bodily existence. Of such Paul knows nothing whatever. The persisting subject is rather just the body. It is ‘material’ body this side, ‘spiritual’ body beyond the resurrection.⁴¹

In the New Testament, however, this hope of resurrection is tied solely to the resurrection of Jesus. Barth writes elsewhere:

Christian faith is not to be understood as idealism that has succeeded in discovering light in darkness, life in death, the majesty of God in the lowliness of human existence and

39. Alan Richardson, “Immortal,” *op. cit.*, p. 111.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *The Resurrection of the Dead*, p. 201.

destiny. On the contrary, *that* light, *that* life, *that* God are acknowledged by Him Himself Who without any human aid and against all human expectation, as light broke through the darkness, as life overcame death, as God triumphed in and over the lowliness of human existence. Resurrexit means—Jesus is conqueror.⁴²

We are free, of course, to disagree with the New Testament writers at this point. But it may be well to note, as Barth reminds us, that Paul so rests his whole structure of the Christian faith on this that to reject him here is to reject the whole of his theology. To reject Paul here is tantamount to “calling Christianity as such into question.”⁴³

One wonders whether the ease with which many today seem to reject Paul here, on the easy basis of a different “world view,” may not be coming very near to a “different gospel” of our own making (Gal. 1:6). Admittedly, this is insoluble mystery, stupendous miracle. But maybe such is the only thing that can match the tragedy of death. And remember, not all the problems are on the side of those who hold with Paul. Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us that “The Christian hope of the consummation of life and history is less absurd than alternate doctrines.”⁴⁴ He added:

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul implies that eternal significance can be ascribed only to that element in the historical synthesis which transcends finite conditions. If this implication is followed to its logical conclusion nothing remains in eternity but an undifferentiated unity, free of all particularity and distinction.⁴⁵

The biblical hope on the other hand, is “a consummation which will sublimate rather than annul the whole historical process”⁴⁶

In a recent lecture, Eduard Schweizer, of Zurich, indicated that the resurrection hope, although it involves being raised with Christ now, moves in the general realm of apocalyptic. Two features of apocalyptic, he said, correct the present tendency to reduce resurrection to a purely subjective phase of present experience. First, God is free to act entirely outside our

42. *Credo* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 98.

43. *The Resurrection of the Dead*, p. 128.

44. *Op. cit.*, p. 298.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

experience. Second, God creates an entirely new world, and does not only give us a new understanding of our own individual existence.

In the resurrection of Jesus, God has acted outside us, destroying death by His action, and has then opened the new aeon into which we are invited to enter. Since He has done this in Jesus Christ,—then Christ is final—our only hope.

Many years ago a traveler in Ireland asked a peasant the way to Dublin. The peasant replied: “I do not know the way to Dublin. I have never seen Dublin. But travelers who come from the direction you are going tell me that they have come from Dublin.” I did not witness the resurrection. I have seen no empty tomb. I have not “seen” the risen Lord. But the Apostolic witnesses tell me they have, and on their testimony I rest the case. “Blessed are they that have not seen, yet believe” (John 20:29). This is enough to kindle hope. This “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2). Our hope, then, rests not in a philosophy, nor a theory, but solely on Him. “Without having seen him [we] love him; though [we] do not see him [we] believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. . . Through him [we] have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that [our] faith and hope are in God” (I Peter 1:8, 21).

Is this subjective hope, or spiritual pride? We answer with a final word from Karl Barth:

Christian faith is happy and confident because and in virtue of this fact, that in the very exaltation of Jesus Christ, not faith, but, just as in His humiliation, Jesus Christ Himself acted, that is *God* in Christ; happy and confident that the very disclosure of God in His revelation is not interpretation of history but, equally with His concealment, *is history*. . . . It is no bold surmise, no dialectic sophistry, no religious arrogance if we believe in face of sin, evil, death and devil—that God’s wrath does not fall upon us, that we are righteous, that we are God’s and that the peace that passeth all understanding may be our consolation. In all that we are arrogating nothing to ourselves. . . . we are merely allowing God to be God!⁴⁷

47. *Credo*, pp. 98, 99, 103.