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*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 7 • Number 3 • SUMMER 1998

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Every work of God serves to display his glory, and set off the greatness of his majesty.

—JOHN GILL

To accommodate to the world spirit about us in our age is nothing less than the most gross form of worldliness in the proper definition of that word.

—FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER

## THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY: AFFIRMING THE INTEGRITY OF OUR CREATURELINESS

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*Cornelis P. Venema*

One of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. This doctrine, which constitutes a significant feature of the believer's expectation for the future, correlates with the basic Christian affirmation of the integrity and goodness of the creation. When the triune God redeems His people through Jesus Christ, this redemption issues in the restoration of the whole person—*body* and soul—in the new heavens and earth. It is, accordingly, fitting that we consider the doctrine of the resurrection of the body in this issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal*. For the doctrine of the resurrection is illustrative of many of the biblical principles that pertain to our understanding of the world as created by God.

### THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY AND BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY

The Bible's teaching about the future may be divided into two broad areas, *individual* eschatology and *general* eschatology. Individual eschatology, as the language suggests, addresses the Bible's teaching about what happens to individuals, particularly believers, in the state between death and resurrection at the end of the age. General eschatology addresses the Bible's teaching on the future in general or in terms of the unfolding of the triune God's purposes in history, leading up to the

return of Christ at the end of the age.

Within the broader compass of general eschatology, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is usually treated as one of the *concomitants of the second advent* of Christ, to use the phrase chosen by Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology* to describe the events that will accompany the return of Christ at the end of the age.<sup>1</sup> Though this language is not the kind we might use over the counter at the coffee shop, it nicely captures the idea: we are looking at *an event that, according to the Scriptures, will occur in the company of Christ's return at the end of the age*. When Christ returns, the Bible teaches that His reign as King will be consummated by means of a series of great acts of redemption and judgment. These events will draw this present age to a close and introduce the consummation of God's purposes in the new heavens and earth. They will precede the *final* and *enduring* state of God's kingdom.

The resurrection of the dead, including the just and the unjust, is the first of these great events or concomitants of Christ's return at the end of the age. The biblical expectation for the future of believers is not exclusively or even primarily focused upon what is often called the intermediate state. Though the Bible teaches that the believer's fellowship with Christ cannot be broken, even by death itself, and that at death the believer will begin to enjoy a more intimate and direct fellowship with Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:1-9), its teaching regarding the believer's future focuses primarily upon the resurrection of the body at the last day. In the biblical view of the believer's future, the emphasis falls not upon the "immortality of the soul," but upon the restoration and renewal of the whole person, body and soul, in a renewed state of integrity within the context of a new heaven and earth. The biblical promise for the future

directs the believer to the resurrection, when both body and soul will be granted immortality.

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*No biblical picture of the believer's future may fail to include as a central part of it the promise of the resurrection of the body.*

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This is, in fact, one of the distinctive features of the biblical view of the future and of the salvation that is obtained for us in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The biblical view of the world begins with the conviction that the triune God created man as a "living soul," taken from the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7). Man's creatureliness in its wholeness and integrity, therefore, always includes the body which was created originally good. Redemption from the curse of God against sin likewise addresses the whole of man's need—body and soul. This is the reason the *Heidelberg Catechism* speaks, for example, of the believer's comfort in terms of belonging to Christ "with body and soul." Redemption does not deny the integrity and goodness of creation; it rather brings the healing and renewal of creation. The same Lord who forgives all our sins is the One who "heals all our diseases," including that sickness of body and soul that leads to death (Ps. 103:3). For this reason, no biblical picture of the believer's future may fail to include as a central part of it the promise of the resurrection of the body.

### THE AUTHOR OF THE RESURRECTION

The most important and difficult questions relating to the Bible's teaching regarding the resurrection have to do with its author and nature. Who will be responsible for raising the dead at the end of the age? And, when we read that the dead will be raised prior to the judgment, how are we to understand this event? In what sense will even the unjust be raised from the dead? What will be the nature of the resurrection body?

It needs to be admitted that the Bible does not provide a complete description and answer to all of these and other questions.<sup>3</sup> Some things are clearly taught for the encouragement and comfort of believers. Other things remain shrouded in mystery. Here the words of 1 Corinthians 2:9 (from Isa. 64:4 and 65:17) need to be borne in mind: "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him."

Though the Old Testament includes explicit references to the resurrection of believers (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2), and though the expectation of the resurrection follows from all that the Lord promises His covenant people in the way of life and blessing,<sup>4</sup> it is only in the New Testament that the full light of the gospel promise of the resurrection shines. This should not surprise us, since the biblical teaching and hope for the resurrection is securely founded upon the great redemptive accomplishments of Christ in His death, resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand. As believers are united with Christ, they come to enjoy Him and all His blessings, most notably victory over death and the sure confidence of the resurrection of the body.

In spite of this clear focus upon Christ's resurrection and the believer's share in it, the New Testament makes

it clear that the *Author* of this resurrection is the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person of the trinity plays an integral part in granting resurrection life to those who belong to Christ. When Jesus responds to the Sadducean denial of the resurrection, He ascribes the power to grant resurrection life to God: "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:29-30). The apostle Paul describes believers as those who should not trust in themselves but "in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9).

In other passages, the resurrection of the dead is ascribed especially to the power and work of Christ. In John 5, a passage we considered in the previous section, it is the Son of God who together with the Father calls the dead from their tombs and grants them life (vv. 21, 25, 28-29). This authority to raise the dead is, according to the teaching of Christ, a prerogative granted to Him by the Father and a fruit of His saving work (John 6:38-40, 44-45; 11:25-26). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit, who applies and communicates the benefits of Christ's saving work, gives believers a foretaste and share in the power of Christ's resurrection. The same Spirit "who raised Jesus from the dead" dwells in believers and grants life to their "mortal bodies" also (Rom. 8:11).

Thus, as believers share in the benefits which are theirs in fellowship with Christ, they are promised the gift of resurrection from the dead, a gift which the Father is pleased to grant through the Son and in the power of the life-giving Spirit.

### THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION BODY

This, of course, leaves us with *the* crucial question yet to be answered: what is it to be raised from the dead?

What is the nature of the resurrection body, so far as this is disclosed to us in the Scriptures? If the return of Christ will be accompanied by the resurrection of the dead, the just and the unjust alike, and if the resurrection of believers in fellowship with Christ is a gracious work of the triune God, it remains to be seen what the Scriptures teach about the character of this event.

There are two ways by which we can arrive at an answer to this question. One way is to focus upon the accounts of Christ's resurrection to see what they might tell us about the resurrection. Since the believer's resurrection body will be fashioned after the pattern of Christ's glorious body (Phil. 3:20-21), this is one legitimate way to proceed. Another way is to consider those passages that speak rather directly of the nature of the resurrection body. In what follows, I will follow both of these ways, though the second will receive greater attention.

Careful study of the accounts of Christ's resurrection and subsequent appearances to His disciples allows us to draw some conclusions regarding the nature of the resurrection body. The accounts of the resurrection, for example, consistently witness to the fact that the tomb in which the Lord's body was laid was, by virtue of His being raised from the dead, now empty (Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:3, 6; John 20:1-10). The *same body* in which the Lord suffered and was crucified is now raised and glorified. The truth of the empty tomb authenticates the conviction that the resurrection was not a *spiritual* event separable from what happened to Jesus' body in the tomb. There is a genuine *continuity* between Jesus' preresurrection and postresurrection body (not *bodies*).

Consequently, when the risen Lord appeared to His disciples after the resurrection, they were able (despite their perplexity and initial unbelief at times) to recognize Him, identify the marks of His crucifixion, and

even enjoy a meal with Him (cf. Matt. 28:9, 17; Mark 16:9-14; Luke 24:11,16, 31; John 20:19-23, 27-29). In the account in the Gospel of Luke, all doubt as to the *reality* of the Lord's resurrection body is removed, when we read the Lord's words of rebuke to His startled and frightened disciples who "thought that they were seeing a spirit": "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24: 38-39).

Though we need to beware the temptation to draw too many hard and fast conclusions from these accounts, it does seem clear that, whatever the differences between the glorified and preresurrection body of Christ, there is a substantial and real continuity/similarity.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there are a few passages that speak more directly of the nature of the resurrection body. In 2 Timothy 2:18, there seems to be an allusion to false teachers in the early church who taught that the resurrection had "already taken place." These teachers apparently *spiritualized* the resurrection and were confusing the faith of many. The apostle Paul makes an important comment on the resurrection: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Phil. 3:20-21).

This passage not only establishes the important principle that the believer's resurrection body will be conformed to Christ's, but it also contrasts the humble condition of our present bodies with the glorious condition that will be ours in the resurrection. Our present bodies exhibit all the marks of sin and God's curse—

they are weak, decaying, fragile, and temporary. Our resurrected bodies will exhibit all of the marks and benefits of Christ's saving work—they will be strong, incorruptible, indestructible, and enduring.

A similar contrast is drawn in 2 Corinthians 5:1-9, where the believer's present body is described as an "earthly tent" that, after it is dissolved or torn down, is replaced by a "building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (v. 1). This passage then goes on to utilize another metaphor for the difference between the present body and the resurrection body. Just as the present body compares to the resurrection body as an earthly tent compares to a heavenly building, so it compares to the resurrection body as a being-clothed-with-mortality compares to a putting-on-the-clothing-of-immortality.

However, the one passage which most extensively draws the contrasts between the present body and the resurrection body is 1 Corinthians 15:35-49. Because of the importance of this passage to our understanding of the nature of the resurrection body, I quote it in full, and then make some observations based upon it.

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of

the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the earth, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

Without pretending to exhaust the complexity and richness of this passage, there are several themes that relate to the primary question with which the apostle Paul is concerned: "With what kind of body do they [those raised from the dead] come?"

First, the apostle uses the metaphor of the seed that is sown and its eventual germination and bringing forth of fruit to illustrate the connection between the present body and the resurrection body. However great the difference between the seed sown and the fruit that it eventually bears, the seed and the fruit are of *one kind*. Accordingly, the apostle elaborates at some length upon the obvious differences in the kinds of flesh that distinguish various creatures. The resurrection of the body is likened to the dying of a seed in order that it might thereby come to life in the form of its fruit. This means that the resurrection body is of a distinctively human kind. When God raises believers from the dead, their bodies, however new and changed, remain distinctively and peculiarly human, according to their kind.

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*All of these contrasts together combine to paint a striking picture of the glory of the resurrection body with which believers will be clothed at the last day. This body will be of a human kind, to be sure, but not like anything believers have seen or known in this life—a body no longer ravaged by sin and its consequences, a body that will be a fit and enduring building in which to dwell and enjoy unbroken (and unbreakable) fellowship with Christ and those who are His.*



Second, a series of contrasts are drawn between what the apostle terms this *natural* or earthly body and the *spiritual* or heavenly body. These terms are not used to draw a contrast between a body that is made up of “material stuff” with a body that is made up of “spiritual stuff,” as if to suggest that the resurrection body will be immaterial or non-fleshly. Rather, they are used to sharply distinguish the present body as one which belongs to the present age which is passing away and under the curse of God, and the resurrection body which belongs to the life of the Spirit in the age to come. The distinction is not between material and immaterial bodies, but between two kinds of bodies that answer to

the present age and the age to come. Consequently, as we shall see in a third observation below, the apostle bases his description of these two bodies upon the two respective heads of humanity—the first man, Adam, and the Second Man, Christ.

What is especially important for our purpose is to note the kinds of contrasts that are drawn between the natural and the spiritual body. Four contrasts are drawn. The earthly body of this present age is sown *perishable*, the heavenly body of the age to come is raised *imperishable*. When death, the final enemy, has been defeated and the consequences of sin and God’s curse have been removed, the liability of the body to perishing, to decay and corruption, to dissolution, will be vanquished. The earthly body is sown in *dishonor*, the heavenly body will be raised in *glory*. By contrast to the tarnished and dimmed condition of the present body, the resurrection body will be splendid and striking. The earthly body is sown in *weakness*, the resurrection body will be raised in *power*. The fragility and vulnerability to destruction of the present body will be replaced by the enduring and indestructible power of the resurrection body. And finally, the present body is *natural*, the resurrection body is *heavenly*. All of these contrasts together combine to paint a striking picture of the glory of the resurrection body with which believers will be clothed at the last day. This body will be of a human kind, to be sure, but not like anything believers have seen or known in this life—a body no longer ravaged by sin and its consequences, a body that will be a fit and enduring building in which to dwell and enjoy unbroken (and unbreakable) fellowship with Christ and those who are His.

Third, in the closing section of this passage, the apostle bases his description of these respective bodies upon the contrast between the two original bearers of

these bodies—the first man, Adam, and the Second Man Christ. There is an intimate and close correspondence between the first man, Adam, who is “from the earth,” and the earthly bodies of those who bear his image. Likewise, there is an intimate and close correspondence between the Second Man, Christ, who is “from heaven,” and the heavenly bodies of those who bear His image. Adam and Christ represent two humanities. The first humanity is under the dominion and liability of sin—meaning, it is subject to perishing, dishonor, weakness and death. The second humanity is under the dominion and blessing of salvation—meaning, it is the recipient of imperishability, glory, power and never-ending life.

This passage, though in a more extensive and detailed manner, confirms the teaching of the Scriptures on the nature of the resurrection. When Christ returns at the end of the age, the dead will be raised. Some, the unjust and unbelieving, will be raised unto judgment. Others, the just and believing, those who belong to Christ, will be raised unto glory. The nature of this resurrection will be like a seed that is sown and dies, and is raised, according to its kind, in newness of life. The resurrection body of believers will be conformed to the glory of Christ's. This body will not be wholly dissimilar to the present body. There will be similarity and continuity. It will be *the body as it has now been raised or glorified, not an altogether new and unrelated body*. Furthermore, it will be a real body, material and fleshly, not immaterial and spiritual in a sense that denies the continuity between the present body and the resurrection body. However, it will be a body so conformed to the image and glory of Christ that no vestige of the power and destructive effects of sin will remain. As the apostle so eloquently puts it at the close of 1 Corinthians 15:

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 54-57).

### THE RESURRECTION/RENEWAL OF ALL THINGS

One of the concomitants of the second advent of Christ is the renewal of all things, the cleansing of this sin-cursed creation and the (re-)creation of a new heaven and earth. Though we will have occasion in a forthcoming article to consider this event, the relation of the resurrection of the body to this renewal of the creation merits brief attention here. The kind of continuity between the pre- and postresurrection body of the believer that we have discussed in the preceding finds its counterpart in the continuity between the present and the renewed creation.

In the biblical understanding of the future, the resurrection glory of the believer will coincide with what might be called the *resurrection glory of the new creation*. Not only do these realities coincide, but they are also closely linked in their significance. If the salvation of believers includes the restoration of body and soul to a state of integrity and wholeness, then it must also include the full restoration of the creation. Just as man was originally formed from the dust of the earth and placed within the creation-temple of God in which he was called to serve and glorify the Creator, so also will man in redemption be restored to a place of life and service, under the headship and dominion of the Second Adam, in a *newly cleansed* creation temple.

For this reason, Romans 8:18-23 describes the cre-

ation as being under the same "slavery of corruption" that afflicts believers in their present bodies of humiliation. The term used to describe the corruption of creation in Romans 8 is used in 1 Corinthians 15:42 and 50 to describe the corruption of the body. Accordingly, the creation's present groaning under the power and curse of sin mirrors the groaning of the believer. The creation itself likewise waits eagerly for the revelation of the sons of God, because the redemption of God's children is a redemption *in which the creation itself participates!* The future liberation of creation from its present corruption and bondage will occur only in conjunction with the believer's liberation from corruption and death. The link between the resurrection of the believer and the renewal of the creation is an intimate one. The renewal of the creation is the only context or environment within which the resurrection glory of believers in fellowship with Christ can be appreciated and understood. Without the glorification of the creation, the glorification of the new humanity in Christ would be an isolated and strange event.

This intimate link between the believer's resurrection and the renewal of the creation allows us to see the unity between what we have called individual and general eschatology. It also joins together the salvation of the church and her members with the great events of cosmic renewal that will accompany Christ's return at the end of the age. Indeed, there is a legitimate sense in which the *justification* and *sanctification* of the believer find their parallels in the justification and sanctification of the heavens and earth in the new creation. Just as the Lord declared the first creation in its state of integrity *very good* (Gen. 1:31), so the renewed creation will be worthy of the same judgment. And just as the first creation was perfect and holy in its consecration to the

Lord, so the renewed creation will be one "wherein dwells righteousness" (cf. 2 Peter 3:10-13). Justified and sanctified saints will dwell then in a justified and sanctified creation. A people holy unto the Lord, a royal priesthood, will enjoy fellowship with the Lord in the sanctuary of His renewed creation.<sup>6</sup>

#### A RECENT DEBATE

There are two further matters that I will address regarding the resurrection of the body. The first matter concerns a recent debate within North American evangelicalism regarding the resurrection of the body, a debate provoked by the writings of Murray J. Harris, professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois. This debate has raised afresh and is illustrative of a number of important questions regarding the resurrection of the body. The second matter has to do with some of the pastoral questions that often arise in connection with the biblical teaching regarding the resurrection.

Some of the issues relating to the subject of the resurrection of the body have been highlighted in the debate between Murray J. Harris and Norman Geisler, dean of Southern Evangelical Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina. Not only has Geisler charged that Harris' doctrine is heretical, but he has also been joined by a number of cult-watching groups that have compared Harris' views with those of the cults, particularly the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>7</sup>

In a number of works on the subject of the resurrection, Harris has described the resurrection body of Jesus as being "immaterial," "nonfleshly," and "invisible."<sup>8</sup> Though Harris maintains that Jesus' resurrection body retains its essential humanity, even becoming visible and fleshly at will (for example, in the accounts of Jesus'

postresurrection appearances to the disciples), he insists that the glorified body of Christ is significantly different in kind than the preresurrection body. The personal identity of Jesus Christ, according to Harris, is not imperilled, but through the resurrection the body of Christ has undergone a significant change. To say that the body of the risen Christ is fleshly or comprised of "flesh and bone" strikes Harris as to diminish the significance of the glorification that occurred through His resurrection.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, based upon his reading of 2 Corinthians 5, Harris argues that believers receive a "resurrection body" during the intermediate state, while their physical bodies remain in the grave. When Christ returns, all believers, whether living or dead, will undergo a resurrection of the body in which their physical bodies will be transformed or raised from the grave as spiritual bodies like that of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

In his criticisms of Harris' position, Geisler objects both to Harris' teaching that believers will receive a kind of interim resurrection body between death and resurrection at the last day and to his teaching that the resurrection body is nonfleshly or immaterial.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to Harris' suggestion that believers receive a kind of interim resurrection body between the time of death and resurrection at the return of Christ, Geisler claims that this is inconsistent with the biblical testimony that the resurrection of the body occurs at the time of Christ's return. Geisler also notes that, in the passage to which Harris appeals for his idea of an interim resurrection body, 2 Corinthians 5:1-9, the believer's circumstance at death is one that is variously described as being "naked" (v. 3), "unclothed" (v. 4), or "absent from the body" (v. 8). These descriptions correspond to the common teaching of Scripture that, in the period between death and resurrection at the time of Christ's

return, the believer is in a provisional state of fellowship with the Lord awaiting the future resurrection of the body.

With respect to Harris' view of the nature of the resurrection body, Geisler objects particularly to three distinct emphases: that the resurrection body of Christ is *immaterial*, that it is not *numerically identical* with his pre-resurrection body,<sup>12</sup> and that it is *not a part of observable history*.<sup>13</sup> According to Geisler, the biblical testimony and the confessions of the historic Christian church require that we affirm the material—the flesh-and-blood-nature—of the resurrection body. The continuity between the present and resurrection body, furthermore, requires that we speak of the *same* body which dies being raised from dead. When, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15:35-44, we read of the seed which dies and subsequently bears fruit, then we can only conclude that there is a numerical identity between the body which is sown in dishonor and raised in glory.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, though it may be true that we do not acknowledge the truth of the resurrection apart from faith—it is not observable to the naked eye in that sense—this does not mean that the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances of Christ are nonobservable features of some kind of trans- or nonhistorical reality.

Perhaps the most critical issue that emerges in the context of this debate between Harris and Geisler has to do with the *confessions* of the historic Christian church. Do these confessions tell us anything about the resurrection and the nature of the resurrection body that might help to clarify this debate and determine whose view lies closer to the truth? Since I have elsewhere dealt with the biblical witness regarding the resurrection of the body, I will restrict myself in evaluating this debate to an appeal to the historic creeds of the churches.

In my judgment, the confessions do provide us with considerable help at this point and generally tend to favor the position espoused by Geisler in this debate. Most of us are familiar with the article in the *Apostles' Creed* that says, "I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body." What we often do not know, however, is that the historic language of this creed was that of the resurrection of *the flesh*.<sup>15</sup> The language with which we are familiar, though unobjectionable and true in its own right, became the received text of the creed only in 1543. In the original language of this creed, the church deliberately sought to oppose any gnosticizing or spiritualizing tendency to minimize the reality of the resurrection. The *Belgic Confession*, one the great confessions of the Protestant Reformation, affirms that "all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived" (Article 37, emphasis mine). In the *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, Article 4, "Of the resurrection of Christ," we read:

Christ did truly rise again from death, and took again his body, with flesh, bones, and all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sits, until he returns to judge all men at the last day (emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, in its exposition of the resurrection of Christ, declares the following:

Christ was exalted in his resurrection, in that, not having seen corruption in death . . . and having the very same body in which he suffered, with the essential properties thereof (but without mortality, and other common infirmities belonging to this

*life*), really united to his soul, he rose again from the dead the third day by his own power (Q. & A. 52, emphasis mine).

A cursory reading of these classic confessional statements regarding the resurrection of the body, particularly the resurrection of Christ, clearly shows their teaching to be that the resurrection body is substantially the same as the present body, at least in so far as it is material, or flesh and blood. The properties belonging naturally to the body remain true of the resurrection body, though all of those features of the "body of our humiliation" (Phil. 3:21) that are owing to sin and God's curse are utterly removed. The viewpoint espoused by Harris, in other words, can find little or no support in the language and viewpoint of the historic confessions of the church. Consequently, the evidence seems to support the argument of Geisler that Harris' position deviates significantly from the orthodoxy of the historic church. To teach that the resurrection body is immaterial, that it is not comprised of flesh and blood, that it is not the same or proper body of the dead, now raised in glory, and that it is unobservable and invisible—to teach any one, let alone all, of these emphases, is to compromise in important ways the doctrine of Scripture and the church.<sup>17</sup>

#### PASTORAL QUESTIONS REGARDING THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY

When we consider the Bible's teaching regarding the resurrection of the body, many pastoral questions arise. Most believers, when they face the reality of their own death or the death of fellow believers, confront questions of a pastoral character that are unavoidable. These questions, among others, are: What do the Reformed confessions say about the resurrection of the body?

What implications does the confession of the resurrection have for the way Christian believers should treat and regard the bodies of those who are deceased? Will the resurrection body be sufficiently similar to our present bodies that they will be recognizably ours? What about the resurrection of bodies which have been utterly destroyed through cremation or some other means? And what about the resurrection of those who die in infancy, or whose bodies (and minds) were deformed or handicapped through illness and disease?

Rather than ignore these questions, I would like to conclude our treatment of the resurrection of the body by identifying some of these questions and offering tentative answers. There is, of course, great risk that, in asking and answering these questions, we go beyond what is taught in the Scriptures. However, many of these questions may be answered in terms of the Bible's teaching we have summarized and those "good and necessary" consequences that follow from its teaching.

#### HOW SHOULD WE REGARD THE BODY OF DECEASED BELIEVERS?

One question that often surfaces in the face of the death of believers is: How should we understand or regard the body of deceased believers? Sometimes this question arises in the context of considering cremation or other alternatives to burial. On other occasions this question is provoked by the way some comfort fellow believers at a funeral home viewing with such words as, "This is not your loved one, but *only* a body." When this kind of comfort is extended to believers, it is prompted by a genuine desire to assure those who mourn that death does not disrupt the fellowship we have with Christ, but ushers believers into the presence of the Lord with whom they are now "at home." However, it sug-

gests something about the body of the person who has died that may not be altogether consistent with the hope for the resurrection of the body.

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*Furthermore, to say that the body of a believer is only a body, that it is in no respect to be identified with the one who has died, is perhaps misleading. Because our redemption includes the restoration and reintegration of soul and body, the body remains an essential part of our identity. The comfort which is ours in the face of death is not simply that we go to be with the Lord, but that we anticipate seeing God "in our flesh" (cf. Job 19:26).*



Upon the basis of our understanding of the Bible's teaching regarding the resurrection, it seems to follow that Christians ought to treat the body of a deceased believer with the utmost respect and care. The way we view and handle, even the way in which we lovingly commit the body of a believer to the grave by way of a committal service, should testify to our convictions about the resurrection of the body. Though I do not wish here to go into the question of the legitimacy of

cremation, it should not surprise us that this practice in modern times has its roots often in an unbelieving denial of the resurrection of the body. Furthermore, to say that the body of a believer is *only* a body, that it is in no respect to be identified with the one who has died, is perhaps misleading. Because our redemption includes the restoration and reintegration of soul and body, the body remains an essential part of our identity. The comfort which is ours in the face of death is not simply that we go to be with the Lord, but that we anticipate seeing God "in our flesh" (cf. Job 19:26).

Support for this way of regarding the bodies of deceased believers is found in a remarkable statement in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. & A. 86). Speaking of the communion in glory of Christ and those who are united to Him, this catechism makes the following affirmation:

The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls.

#### WILL THE RESURRECTION BODY BE RECOGNIZABLY OUR OWN?

A question that sometimes arises in connection with the resurrection of the body and the final state is: Will the resurrection body be recognizable? Sometimes it is maintained that there will be no recognition of fellow believers in the new heavens and earth because this would be incompatible with the unimpaired joy of the

final state. The recognition of one another, so it is argued, requires the sad remembrance of sins committed in this present life and call attention to the absence of some who were not saved. Furthermore, some appeal to Jesus' teaching in the gospels that in the kingdom of heaven "they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). If there were such continuity between the present and resurrection body that believers would be recognizable to each other, then this would not only imply the remembrance of the sins and shortcomings of this life, but it would also distract from the kind of exclusive attachment to Christ, surpassing all earthly relationships (including marriage and family relationships) as we now experience them. Doesn't the language of this passage—they "are like the angels"—require the conclusion that the resurrection body will be so unlike the present body as to be unrecognizable?

None of these arguments, however, can withstand careful scrutiny. When Jesus speaks, for example, of believers in the resurrection being "like the angels," the point of comparison given in the context has to do with marriage and marriage relationships. Because there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, those who are raised in the resurrection will be *in this sense* like the angels. This should not be understood, however, to deny the continuing reality of the created difference between male and female. Nor does it require the conclusion that the personal identity of believers, including their bodily form and uniqueness, will be substantially altered. The biblical testimony regarding the resurrection appearances of our Lord Jesus Christ convincingly demonstrates that He was recognizable to the disciples. To maintain that the resurrection body would not be recognizable or identifiably our own militates against the

biblical teaching of continuity between the present and resurrection body. Strictly speaking, were believers in the resurrection unrecognizable to one another in the wholeness of their persons, they would literally *cease to be the persons they presently are!* This would mean that, in the resurrection, our persons are not restored or healed, but *replaced* by persons whose identity and form is wholly different than our present identity and form.<sup>18</sup>

Undoubtedly, it is difficult for us to imagine how believers can enjoy fellowship with each other in the eternal state, recognizing each other in the state of glorification, without their joy being impaired by the remembrance of sin in this present life. It is also somewhat difficult to imagine a circumstance in which, though family and marriage relationships in this life are not forgotten or unknown in the life to come, the institutions of marriage and family do not continue as they now exist. But these difficulties notwithstanding, there are ample biblical and confessional reasons to insist that in the resurrection there will be a mutual recognition and fellowship among believers and with Christ that will be the perfection, not the denial, of this present life.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE RESURRECTION OF BODIES THAT HAVE BEEN UTTERLY DESTROYED?

In the light of a number of my comments in the preceding, there may be some who are asking the question: What about the resurrection of bodies that have been utterly destroyed? If the resurrection body is in substantial continuity with the present body, if it is the "self-same body," to use the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, how can that be in the case of bodies that have been utterly destroyed through one or another means? Indeed, the decay of the body after death, its

return to the dust whence it came, compels the conclusion that, in many cases, the resurrection of the body represents a kind of act on God's part that is *tantamount to a new creation out of nothing.*

If I may be permitted the use of some rather abstract language at this juncture, the difficulty this question poses has to do with whether *the material "particles" or constituents of the present body must be identical with those of the resurrection body.* Nothing in the biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body requires that this be the case. It may be the case—after all, it is certainly possible that God could form the resurrection body from the same, identical particles as the present body. But this need not be the case in order for there to be a substantial and personal identity between the resurrection body and the body of the present. If I may be permitted an analogy, we commonly regard our bodies as the *selfsame* bodies, even though they undergo considerable change because of age and infirmities, even being comprised of wholly new cells every number of years! If our present bodies are one and the same with our bodies many years ago, then there does not seem to be any problem with an affirmation of the resurrection of the *proper* bodies of those whose earthly bodies have been wholly destroyed.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE BODIES OF UNBORN CHILDREN, INFANTS OR THOSE WHO DIE PREMATURELY?

Another question that can arise in a pastoral context among believers is: What about the bodies of unborn children, or of infants and others who die prematurely? This question is related to a more fundamental question, namely, are believers justified in being confident of their salvation?<sup>19</sup> However, I will restrict my comments to the issue of the resurrection of the bodies of such

children. With respect to the resurrection of the body, the specific focus of this question is upon the *kind of body* with which such children will be raised. Though these children die in a state of immature development, physically and otherwise, will they be raised bodily in maturity?

If believers may be confident of the salvation of such children, then it follows that they too will share in the resurrection of the body. Furthermore, since the final state is one of complete perfection and glorification, it must be the case that all who share in this perfection, including that aspect of it known as the resurrection, will do so in a state of full maturity. There will not be anything, in the final state of God's eternal kingdom, like the process of growth and maturation as we now know it. Just as they will neither marry nor be given in marriage, so there will be no distinction between adult and child, between mature and immature, at least not as we now know these distinctions. Hard as it may be for us to imagine or conceive, we should be confident as believers that we will enjoy fellowship with all the saints, including those children who die under the circumstances described, in the fullness of mature and perfected life.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE BODIES OF THOSE WITH SEVERE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL IMPAIRMENTS?

One final question that is of a pastoral nature respecting the resurrection of the body is: What about the bodies of those with severe physical and mental impairments? Obviously, this is a question that many believers ask when they and fellow believers witness the ravages of sin and the curse upon these bodies of our humiliation.

To this question, we have an answer in the familiar

words of Psalm 103:2-3, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons all your iniquities; *who heals all your diseases.*" When the Lord wipes away every tear from our eyes, when He expels from His sanctified creation every remainder of sin and its curse, when He grants us bodies like unto the glorified body of the Lord Jesus Christ—then we may be confident that the resurrection body, raised in glory, will be beautiful in appearance and form, rid of every defect and impairment which sin and the curse have brought. Though it is unwise to speculate carelessly about all the features of the resurrection body, it seems to me to follow from the biblical testimony that these bodies will be altogether lovely in every appropriate sense. What that means precisely, no one knows. But that it will be so seems undeniable.

#### CONCLUSION

With these pastoral questions addressed, we come to the close of our consideration of the biblical teaching regarding the resurrection of the body. Without a doubt, we have not been able to do this teaching justice. The testimony of the Scriptures to the certainty of the resurrection is clear. However, many things are not told us that we might like to know. It may even be that, in addressing some of these pastoral questions, I have exceeded the boundaries of what is given to us to know in the Scriptures.

Perhaps enough has been said, however, to appreciate afresh the hope of which the apostle Peter speaks:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heav-

en for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5).

One conclusion that cannot be denied is that the resurrection of the body strikingly confirms the Christian doctrine of the integrity and goodness of our creatureliness. When the triune God redeems His people, He redeems them body and soul. Redemption does not deny but rather restores our creatureliness.

#### Author

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema is the dean of faculty and professor of doctrinal studies at Mid America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, Indiana. He is the author of *But For the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordt* and *What We Believe: An Exposition of the Apostle's Creed*. He is married and has four children. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. This article, which is part of a larger on-going work on the subject of eschatology, has been published in a different form in the magazine *The Outlook*.

#### Notes

1. Charles Hodge, "Concomitants of the Second Advent," in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 3:837-80.
2. In many dualistic worldviews which sharply distinguish the spiritual and the material (Manichaeism, some forms of ancient Greek philosophy), and in many monistic worldviews that deny the ultimate reality of the material world (Gnosticism, Hinduism, Buddhism), the teaching of a resurrection of the body has no legitimate or proper place. The biblical teaching of the resurrection of the body has an appropriate home within the framework of the biblical understanding of creation and redemption as a restoration and renewal, and not a denial, of creation.
3. For example, the Bible says very little about the resurrection of unbelievers other than to affirm that it will occur. That unbelievers will be raised has already been shown from the passages cited above (e.g., John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). This resurrection is not an act of Christ as Redeemer, but an act of Christ as Judge. Unbelievers are raised *in order that they*

might be judged and consigned to punishment. Believers are raised *in order that* they might fully share in all the blessings of salvation that are theirs through fellowship with Christ, the Mediator.

4. See e.g.: Exodus 3:6 (cf. Matt. 22:29-32); Psalm 16:10; 17:15; 49:15; 73:24-25; Proverbs 23:14; Hosea 6:1-2; Ezekiel 37:1-13. Without denying the progressive disclosure of the truth regarding the resurrection, or the radical significance of Christ's victory over death in His resurrection, it may be said that the great comfort of the covenant of grace, salvation and life in fellowship with the living Lord, could never be diminished or ultimately vanquished in death, the wages of sin. However dim and sketchy may have been their view of it, Old Testament saints are typified in the faith of Abraham who "was looking for the city, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10; cf. vv. 13-16, 19).
5. Some of these differences are suggested in the accounts in the Gospel of John. When Mary Magdalene first recognized the risen Lord and clung to Him, John records the Lord's words to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." Subsequently, when the disciples were gathered on the evening of the day of Christ's resurrection and "the doors were shut . . . for fear of the Jews," Jesus suddenly comes and stands in their midst. Similarly, in the other accounts of Jesus' resurrection appearances, He comes and goes at will. Too much should not be made of these accounts, so far as the nature of Christ's resurrection body is concerned. The circumstances are unique. Christ is in a transitional period between the time of His resurrection and ascension/glorification at the Father's right hand. However, these accounts allow us to see that it is the same Jesus who died who is now alive. And yet, He is now existing in the glory and power of the resurrection.
6. Norman Shepherd, in his article "The Resurrections of Revelation 20" (*Westminster Theological Journal*, 37:1 [Fall, 1974], 34-43), links the first resurrection enjoyed by believers in fellowship with Christ with the implied second resurrection which he takes to be the creation of the new heavens and earth. This linking of two resurrections, one of the believer and the other of the creation itself, is warranted by the teaching of passages like Romans 8:18-23 (compare 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1; 1 Cor. 15:42,50).
7. For a brief and popular account of the debate, see: "Trinity Prof Attacked for Resurrection Teaching," *Christianity Today* 36:13 (November 9, 1992), 62; and "The Mother of All Muddles," *Christianity Today* 37:4 (April 5, 1993), 62-66. It should be observed that Harris has been exonerated of the charge of heresy by his institution, denomination (Evangelical Free), and a committee of evangelical theologians.  
In this same issue of *Christianity Today* Harris adds: "But let me go on record as saying if I were starting over again, there are words that I would not use. One is the word immaterial, because it's so open to misunderstanding; and another would certainly be that phrase essentially immaterial, because its like a red flag to a neo-Thomist."  
A Reaffirmation statement was issued in 1996 by the Evangelical Free Church of America which basically resolved this long controversy. Nor-

- man Geisler has noted that the matter has been resolved, in his estimation, by the EFCA Reaffirmation Statement, cf. *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1996, 45.
8. Harris has written extensively on the subject of the resurrection, the following sources being most important: *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); *East-er in Durham: Bishop Jenkins and the Resurrection* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985); and *From Grave to Glory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).
  9. The following statements from Harris's *Raised Immortal* are fairly representative of his view: "An analysis of the Gospels suggests that the risen body of Jesus was unlike his pre-Easter body in some important respects. To begin with he was *no longer bound by material or spatial limitations*" (p. 53); "The Resurrection marked his entrance upon a spiritual mode of existence, or, to borrow Pauline terminology, his acquisition of a 'spiritual body,' which was both immaterial and invisible yet capable of interaction with the world of time and space" (57-58).
  10. *Raised Immortal*, 44, 100.
  11. I am summarizing Geisler's criticism of Harris' view from the following of his writings: *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989); and "In Defense of the Resurrection: A Reply to Criticisms, A Review Article," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 34:2 (June 1991), 243-61.
  12. Though this language tends to be rather abstract and obscure, the point Geisler is making is that the body of the risen Christ is not *another* body than the one in which He was crucified. Though through the resurrection, this body has been glorified, it remains the same (numerically identical) body.
  13. "In Defense of the Resurrection," 247-48.
  14. This is what Geisler has in mind when he uses the awkward expression, "the numerical identity" of the pre- and postresurrection body. He is not insisting that the body in each instance be made up of the same material "particles," though this is possible and held by some Christian theologians. He is only insisting that it is the *same* body, that there is an identity of person, also bodily, between the believer before and after he undergoes the resurrection of the body.
  15. In the Latin versions of the creed, the term is *carnis*. In the Greek versions, the term is *sarx*. See: Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House reprint, 1931), 2:45-46.
  16. Mark A Noll, ed., *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 214.
  17. This being the case, it is troubling to note that even so trustworthy an expositor of biblical truth as J. I. Packer maintains that Harris' view is "orthodox" and in accord with "Scripture and with the consensus of the world church." In this observation, Packer glosses over the language of the confessions that I have cited above, especially the language which speaks of the "proper" or "same" body, as well as of the "flesh and

- bones" of the risen Christ. This is the language of historic confessional orthodoxy, and it is precisely this language that Harris seems to repudiate.
18. See: William Hendriksen, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 66-70; J. Aspinwall Hodge, *Recognition after Death* (New York: American Tract Society, 1889). In the second interesting little book, Hodge addresses this pastoral question and convincingly shows that communion with the Lord and with each other depends upon our unique identities as persons comprised of soul and body. Some Bible passages seem to imply rather clearly that this is the case: Luke 16:19-31; Matthew 8:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20; Isaiah 14:12.
  19. For an affirmation of the salvation of the children of believing parents, see the *Canons of Dort*, I:17. The *Westminster Confession* speaks differently (though not contradictorily) of the salvation of "elect infants" in Chapter X, iii.