

## THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CHURCH

### Introduction

When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day

(Matthew 28:12-25, NIV)

The passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus are recurrently mentioned in churches during Easter. However, few believers know in depth the meaning and implication that these terms have in their lives. Evangelical churches are crucicentric.<sup>1</sup> Preaching, evangelism, and worship revolve around the Cross of Christ. It is common to hear many believers emphasize that Christ died for our sins. However, they left to one side the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection is as relevant as the crucifixion to understand the meaning of the atonement.

The resurrection is a topic seldom preached in churches. Few evangelists talk extensively about the resurrection when preaching the gospel to a non-believer. It seems to be a subject that many Christians prefer to sweep under the rug. Matthew 28:12-15, the introductory pericope, records the first attack on the resurrection. When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to

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<sup>1</sup> Michael F. Bird *Evangelical Theology, A Biblical and Systematic Introduction. Second Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 493.

give notice of Christ's resurrection to the disciples, a group of soldiers reported what had happened to the chief priests. However, they bribed them to change their statement to make it appear that the disciples had taken his body. This narrative serves to explain the origin of the false rumor that the disciples of Jesus stole his body<sup>2</sup>, denying His resurrection.

To deny or try to hide the resurrection is to preach and teach the message of the Bible half-heartedly. The resurrection is a frequent theme in the Bible. It appears at the end of all the gospels. Acts 26:22-23 speaks that the prophets and Moses said Christ would rise again. Furthermore, Paul speaks frequently in his epistles about the resurrection. Therefore, the Church should be aware of the need for a thorough knowledge of the resurrection and its implications for believers. In a brief reflection, some questions come to mind: What is the resurrection? What are the beliefs surrounding the resurrection? What is the significance of the resurrection in the Church? This essay is an attempt to answer these questions by delving into Systematic Theology and scholars' commentaries.

The first section will present the biblical references to the resurrection of Christ and the scholars' approaches to this subject. The second section will analyze the significance of the resurrection for the Church. The final part of this essay will present a conclusion on the importance of Christ's resurrection.

### **Bible and Resurrection**

The Old Testament does not deal extensively with resurrection. There are only three resurrections of people linked to the miraculous work of Elijah and Elisha: the son of the mistress of the house (1 Kings 17:17-24), the son of the barren woman (2 Kings 4:18-37), and

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, A handbook on the Gospel of Matthew, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 881.

the man buried above Elisha (2 Kings 13:20-21).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the poetic books make occasional mention of the resurrection. Psalms 71:20, for example, mentions that God will raise the psalmist again from the depths of the earth. This expression seems to refer to resurrection but is somewhat ambiguous. The context mentions in the poetic books refers to a request for help during crisis and illness, and the meaning points to the salvation of life (Psalms 6:4; 22:20; 199:25; and others). In addition, there are references to the resurrection and restoration of Israel in the prophecy of the dry bones of Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Isaiah 26. On the other hand, Daniel 12:1-3 refers to the future human resurrection for condemnation or eternal life.

Lexham Theological Wordbook mentions the following regarding the resurrection in the Old Testament:

“The notion of a general resurrection of the dead, either as a restoration of the righteous alone or as a resurrection of all the dead for final judgment, is uncommon in the OT, where many of the reflections on death and the afterlife use resurrection language primarily to lament the finality of death and the feeling that resurrection is impossible (2 Sam 12:23; Job 14:1–22; Psa 49:6–15; Eccl 9:4–10; Isa 26:14).”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this assertion, the Old Testament has passages that indirectly teach the resurrection of Christ. Isaiah 53:8-11 speaks of the sufferings of 'the servant of God.' The servant was plucked from the land of the living (53:8b), but he will see 'the light of life' (NIV). The Masoretic Hebrew text does not include an object for the verb 'he will see.' However, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint detailed 'light' as the object of that verb. It could be an error in the Masoretic text.<sup>5</sup> If that were the case, the implication would point to the resurrection of God's

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<sup>3</sup> William D. Mounce, Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 587.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Mangum and Joshua Spoelstra, «Resurrection», ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Theological Wordbook, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Graham S. Ogden and Jan Sterk, A Handbook on Isaiah, ed. Paul Clarke et al., vol. 1 & 2, United Bible Societies' Handbooks (Reading, UK: United Bible Societies, 2011), 1521.

servant— Jesus. Although in its immediate context, this episode indicates the restoration of Israel after the exile, it does not exempt the meaning of the future resurrection of the person that best fits the context of Isaiah 53.

The New Testament has a more direct message about the resurrection, especially the resurrected Jesus. The four gospels deal with the resurrection of Christ from the least to the most. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John are the ones that narrate the resurrection best. The Gospel of Mark is the most puzzling.<sup>6</sup> Many ancient manuscripts do not contain Mark 16:9-20 and leave Mark's resurrection account with a strange ending: the women fleeing from the empty tomb without saying anything to anyone. Differently, Matthew mentions two appearances of Jesus (appearance to the two Marys and to the eleven disciples) after the resurrection. These accounts provide a greater sense of resolution and vindication.<sup>7</sup> For his part, Luke offers three accounts of resurrection appearances (women at the tomb, Luke 24:1-12; two disciples on the road to Emmaus, 24:13-35; and eleven disciples in Jerusalem, 24:36-49). These accounts highlight two teachings about the resurrection: the preaching of the risen Jesus and the bodily resurrection of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the Gospel of John presents Jesus's resurrection with six appearances (Mary Magdalene, 20:1-2; Peter and beloved disciple, 20:3-9; appearance to Mary 20:10-18; Disciples, 20:19-23; Disciples and Thomas, 20:19-23; and in Galilee, 21:1-23). The most salient teaching of John is Jesus' blessing of those who believe without seeing, applicable to

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<sup>6</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Four portraits, one Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 193.

<sup>7</sup> Strauss, 238.

<sup>8</sup> Strauss, 280.

all ‘Thomas’ believers of all times.<sup>9</sup> All the gospels share one truth: Christ is risen and shows Himself to His disciples, whether women or men.

Finally, the book of Acts, the Pauline letters, the Petrine letters, the letter of Hebrews, and Revelation also speak of the resurrection. The book of Acts mentions many times the resurrection of Jesus (1:22; 2:31-33; 4:33; 26:23) and the promise of the resurrection of the dead (17:18, 32; 23:6, 8; 24:15, 21; 26:8). The Pauline letters such as Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, 2 Timothy also speak on these two themes at length (Romans 1:4, 3:24; 4:25; 6:5; 1 Corinthians 15:12-13, 20-21, 29, 35, 42; Philippians 3:10-11; and 2 Timothy 2:18). The letters of Peter, as an eyewitness,<sup>10</sup> also give attention to the resurrection of Christ (1 Peter 1:3 and 3:21). The letter to the Hebrews mentions the resurrection of the dead (Hebrews 6:2 and 11:35). Revelation also speaks about the first and second resurrection (Revelation 20:5-6).

### **Approaches to the Resurrection**

The historicity of the resurrection has been a topic of discussion among theologians. Some biblical scholars have leaned toward a physical resurrection. Others have rejected this idea and postulated some non-physical or imaginary resurrection theories. Among these theories are the Subjective Vision Theory and the Objective Vision Theory.

The Subjective Vision Theory postulates that “the disciples, as a result of their extremely strong longing for their dead Master, imagined that they saw him and heard him speak to them.”<sup>11</sup> This theory points out that the Gospels' authors wrote hallucinations, illusions, or

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<sup>9</sup> Strauss, 326.

<sup>10</sup> N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic; SPCK, 2019), 757.

<sup>11</sup> Moisés Silva and Merrill Chapin Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, Q-Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 2009), 100.

visions instead of real-life events. Furthermore, those who defend this theory mention that the biblical authors had a subjective experience that did not occur in reality but only in the disciples' eager minds to be with Christ again. This theory is unacceptable since it does not fit the biblical accounts of the resurrection. Luke 24:30, 42-43 narrates that Jesus, after the resurrection, shared food with His disciples. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 15:4-6 mentions that Jesus, after the resurrection, was seen by more than five hundred people at a time. If the apparitions of Jesus after His crucifixion were only hallucinations, this would be the most relevant case of mass hysteria in history.

The Lexham Bible Dictionary, about the resurrection, mentions that “these narratives describe the death and resurrection of the Lord in terms of a body that could be seen, felt, recognized, and experienced in fellowship (1 John 1:1–3). Each of the narratives records the empty tomb, the confusion of the disciples, and their transformation after the resurrection.”<sup>12</sup> A vision or illusion cannot empty a tomb, nor feed a person, much less transform the lives of a group of despairing people after the death of their leader. The Subjective Vision Theory completely lacks biblical support.

On the other hand, the Objective Vision Theory suggests that “Jesus’ immortal soul or the spiritual Christ who was the continuation of Jesus of Nazareth granted the disciples some objective but immaterial vision, showing that the Lord was still spiritually alive.”<sup>13</sup> This theory postulates a spiritual resurrection of Jesus, not in 'skin and bones.' Under this premise, the disciples only saw the spirit of Jesus. This theory is blatantly contrary to all the statements in the Gospels that emphasize a physical, material resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:39, 41; John 20:17,

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<sup>12</sup> J. Lanier Burns, «Resurrection», ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Silva and Tenney, 100.

18; 21:9-14). Furthermore, this theory is against John's teaching of Thomas' unbelief (John 20:24-29). Jesus encourages Thomas to put a finger in His hands and thrust it into His side. If Christ had risen as an incorporeal existence, the teaching of Thomas' unbelief would make no sense.

Following these affirmations, believers should not doubt that Jesus' resurrection is genuine and that His disciples saw His physical and tangible body. They were visible witnesses of Christ's body, with wounds and scars from the cross, now resurrected. Based on the descriptions of the resurrection in the Gospels, the Church can have complete certainty that Jesus, the Savior, really rose from the dead. Moreover, He overcame death and its effects on the physical body.

### **The Significance of the Resurrection for the Church**

The resurrection has several implications for the Church. First, the resurrection proves that Jesus was who He claimed to be. During His ministry on earth, Jesus presented Himself as the Son of God (John 10:22-42). Romans 1:3-4 mentions that His resurrection proved His status as the Son. Jesus made clear His ties to the Father. If all that He said had not been true, His words would have remained unfulfilled.<sup>14</sup> Without the resurrection, His promise to raise the temple (His body) in three days (John 2:19) would have been empty words. However, the resurrection was proof of His identity. Furthermore, it was proof that His redemptive work satisfied the wages of humankind's sins (1 Peter 3:18) and that His sacrifice was accepted to satisfy divine justice (Romans 4:25). By raising Him from the dead, the Father gave undeniable

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<sup>14</sup> L. L. Morris, «Resurrection», ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., New Bible dictionary (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1012.

proof that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, believers can confidently approach Him as the sure way to the Father.

Romans 4:25 also emphasizes that the resurrection is the guarantee for the justification of the Church. Thielman mentions that “the resurrection of Christ, then, provided the basis for the justification of believers because it gave a concrete, if unseen, object for their hope and for their trust in God.”<sup>16</sup> Christ secured the basis of justification in His obedience unto death. Believers can safely trust that justification rests on a sure foundation, Christ, and not on their earthly merits.

Furthermore, the resurrection is the sign of the new creation. Bird mentions the following about this affirmation:

“Jesus’s resurrection also brings with it the beginning of a new world. The raising of Jesus implies an ultimate state with a renewed heavens and earth. Resurrection is really an act about and for creation. God made the world good, but it has gone bad, so God intends to renew creation through a cosmic resurrection. That cosmic vivification was intimated in Jesus’s resurrection, and its fulfillment will mark the end of dystrophy, death and decay in the created world.”<sup>17</sup>

The Bible clearly states that creation was subjected to a curse against its own will and is awaiting the day it will be delivered from death and decay (Romans 8:20-21). Thus, creation is suffering with humanity the consequences of the Fall. However, the Lord has promised humanity a glorious freedom unimaginable today. The resurrection of Jesus is proof that one day, humanity and creation will be free from the suffering of sin and death (1 Corinthians 15:55). It is a foretaste of the transformation of everything with the coming of the new heavens and the new

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<sup>15</sup> Silva and Tenney, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Thielman, Romans, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 254.

<sup>17</sup> Bird, 495.

earth. The Church can rely on the transforming power that resurrected Christ. This power will make all things new.

Finally, the resurrection of Christ is the guarantee of the future resurrection of the Church. Many passages in the Bible (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:20-28, 47-49; Philippians 3:21; and 1 John 3:2) deal with this future resurrection of believers. This promise has its assurance in Christ since through Him the resurrection has entered into all men (1 Corinthians 15:21). He is the firstborn of the resurrection (Colossians 1:18). Believers can rest assured that their eternal future does not end in a grave in an unknown cemetery. On the contrary, the Church will be resurrected and glorified. Moreover, the creation will end its corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.<sup>18</sup> The same God who raised Christ from the grave promises the resurrection and transformation of His children. In the face of such trials, the Church must surrender to His feet and live lives that show a conviction rooted in this truth.

### **Conclusion**

Resurrection is a theme mentioned in the Bible, with greater emphasis in the New Testament. The resurrection of Christ is the most widely recorded theme of a resurrection in the Bible. His resurrection is not a secondary or unpostponable theme in the teaching on the atonement. It ties in strongly with the crucifixion. Christ's death on the cross paid the price for sin. However, Christ's resurrection is the guarantee that His sacrifice justifies humanity. Crucifixion without resurrection makes Jesus a martyr, makes Him the defender who gives His life for the ideal of human salvation. In addition, resurrection without the cross makes Jesus's sacrifice a miraculous event and takes away its true meaning. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are primordial parts of the plan of redemption for humanity.

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<sup>18</sup> Bird, 497.

Approaches to the resurrection have tried to explain an event unknown to mortals: returning from death to life. The idea of a risen Christ, genuine and tangible, has no place in human reality in the face of death. Humanity has faced death since the entrance of sin into the world. It is a path of painful separation, uprooting, and utmost sadness. However, Christ's resurrection is the hope that all does not end behind a grave. Jesus's teachings about His crucifixion and resurrection were not a dead letter. He rose again, and this is an undeniable certainty. The same God who raised Him from the dead seeks to reestablish the bond broken with humanity in the Fall. Neither death, sin, nor Hades can overcome Almighty God.

The implications of Christ's resurrection for the Church—a new creation, a guarantee of justification, a sign of the future resurrection of humanity—should make believers question their daily actions. The Church must live on the premise that Christ's death justified her and that the resurrection to eternal life is imminent. The trait of a Church that has understood this message is its sincere surrender and vocation to God. The Church's witness to the world should evidence her status: God already raised the Church with Christ and seated her with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6, NIV).

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