



STATEMENT DR-165

## I BELIEVE...IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE FLESH

by Norman L. Geisler

Down through the centuries orthodox Christians have always confessed with the Apostles' Creed: "I believe...in the resurrection of the flesh." This affirmation of faith in the *believer's* resurrection is grounded in faith in *Christ's* resurrection. A major purpose of the latter resurrection was to make possible the former; thus they are both of the *same nature* (2 Cor. 4:14; 1 Cor. 15:20-23, 48; Phil. 3:21). The two doctrines are therefore interdependent, and will be treated as one doctrine in this article.

In spite of the historic church's unwavering belief in the resurrection of the flesh, there are those today who call themselves "orthodox" but do not adhere to the doctrine. In the past, those who deviated from this venerable truth of apostolic Christianity did so by denying the *reality* of the resurrection. Today, some veer from course by denying its *materiality*. What makes their view unique is that they affirm an "empty tomb" while ironically denying that a material body emerged from it. In short, while they deny the materiality of the Resurrection they confess its objectivity, and on the basis of this confession they conclude that their faith remains biblical.

Wolfhart Pannenburg is a case in point. He believes Jesus left an empty tomb behind but that the resurrection body was by nature invisible and immaterial. He declares that for Paul "the future body will be a different one from the present body, not a fleshly body — as he says — a 'spiritual body.'"<sup>1</sup> Southern Baptist professor E. Glenn Hinson agrees, adding, "Paul was convinced that the Christ who appeared to him belonged to another order of existence than the Christ the disciples had known in the flesh. The risen Christ has not a physical but a spiritual body."<sup>2</sup> Professor Murray Harris of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School provides yet another example. He argues "that after his resurrection his [Jesus'] essential state was one of invisibility and immateriality."<sup>3</sup> He adds that the resurrection body of Christians "will be neither fleshly nor *fleshy*"<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added). According to this view, Jesus' resurrection body was not the same physical body He had before His death, but a *second embodiment*.

Why should these men be classified as "unorthodox" for simply denying that Jesus rose in the *same* physical body in which He died? Why did Jesus have to rise in the flesh, as long as His tomb was vacated and death was conquered? The answer to these questions has both historical and theological components.

### THE CONFESSION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

First, the confession of the Christian church is instructive. The church has not only always affirmed the *immortality* of the resurrection body, but also its *materiality*. While it has agreed with the apostle that the resurrection body is a "spiritual" (i.e., spirit-directed) body (1 Cor. 15:44), it has never denied that it is a material body.

#### The Apostolic Testimony

The Christian church has from the beginning confessed that the same physical body of flesh that was laid in Jesus' tomb was raised immortal. This belief is based on several explicit New Testament references and extensive tangible evidence. Jesus Himself said His resurrection body was one of "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39; cf. 13:37). Speaking

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of the resurrection of Christ, Peter insisted that His "flesh did not see corruption" (Acts 2:31). Writing after the Resurrection, John declared that Jesus "came [and remained] in the flesh" (1 John 4:2; cf. 2 John 7). The body that emerged from the tomb on Easter morning was *seen* (Matt. 28:17), *heard* (John 20:15-16), and even *touched* (Matt. 28:9) on many occasions after the Resurrection. Moreover, Jesus ate food at least four times after the Resurrection (Luke 24:30; 24:42-43; John 21:12-13; Acts 1:4). He also showed His crucifixion scars on two occasions, once challenging doubting Thomas: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27).

### **The "Ante-Nicene" Testimony**

Following the apostolic testimony, the church down through the centuries has confessed its belief in "the resurrection of the flesh" — both that of Jesus in particular and of humanity in general. "Ante-Nicene" (i.e., before the 325 A.D. Council of Nicea) father Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) said plainly: "The resurrection is a resurrection of the flesh which dies."<sup>5</sup> As for those who "maintain that even Jesus Himself appeared only as spiritual, and not in flesh, but presented merely the appearance of flesh: these persons seek to rob the flesh of the promise."<sup>6</sup> Justin even insisted that Christ's ascension shows that it is possible "for flesh to ascend into heaven."<sup>7</sup> Tertullian (c. A.D. 160-230) declared the resurrection of the flesh to be the church's "rule of faith," saying it "was taught by Christ" and only denied by heretics.<sup>8</sup> In his treatise on "The Resurrection of the Dead" (ch. 3), second century Christian teacher Athenagoras concluded that God's "power is sufficient for the raising of dead bodies, and is shown by the creation of these same bodies. For if, when they did not exist, He made at their first formation the bodies of men, and their original elements, He will, when they are dissolved, in whatever manner that may take place, raise them again with equal ease: for this, too, is equally possible to Him."<sup>9</sup>

### **The "Post-Nicene" Testimony**

In the fourth century, *The Second Creed of Epiphanius* (A.D. 374) confessed that "the Word became flesh,...the same suffered in the flesh; rose again; and went up to heaven in the same body;...is coming in the same body in glory to judge the quick and the dead."<sup>10</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315-386) considered any view heretical that claims "the resurrection of the Saviour was phantom-wise, and not real, not heeding Paul who says, 'Who was made flesh of the seed of David according to the flesh;' and again 'By the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord from the dead.'"<sup>11</sup> The preeminent theologian, St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), declared: "It is indubitable that the resurrection of Christ, and His ascension into heaven with the flesh in which He rose, is already preached and believed in the whole world." Augustine even held that God would reassemble in the resurrection body "all the portions which have been consumed by beasts or fire, or have been dissolved into dust of ashes...."<sup>12</sup>

### **The Medieval Testimony**

St. Anselm of Canterbury (A.D. 1033-1109) insisted on the material nature of the resurrection body. Speaking on the topic, "How man will rise with the same body which he has in this world," he argued that "if a man is to be perfectly restored, the restoration should make him such as he would have been had he never sinned....Therefore, as man, had he not sinned, was to have been transformed with the same body to an immortal state, so when he shall be restored, it must properly be with his own body as he lived in this world."<sup>13</sup> The great theologian, Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1224-1274), said of the resurrection: "The soul does not take an airy or heavenly body, or a body of another organic constitution, but a human body composed of flesh and bones and the same members enjoyed at present."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Reformation Testimony**

The Protestant Reformation continued the orthodox affirmation of the material nature of the resurrection body. The Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (A.D. 1576) reads: "We believe, teach, and confess...the chief articles of our faith (of Creation, of Redemption, of Sanctification, and the Resurrection of the flesh)...."<sup>15</sup> The *French Confession of Faith*, prepared with the help of John Calvin and approved by the Synod of Paris (A.D. 1559), pronounced that "although Jesus Christ, in rising from the dead, bestowed immortality upon his body, yet it did not take away from the truth of

its nature, and we so consider him in his divinity that we do not despoil him of his humanity."<sup>16</sup> *The Belgic Confession* (A.D. 1561), adopted by the Synod of Dort (A.D. 1619), declares that "all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their soul joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived."<sup>17</sup> Further, the *Thirty Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England* (A.D. 1562) confess that "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...."<sup>18</sup> And the *Westminster Confession* (A.D. 1647) proclaimed that Jesus "was crucified, and died; was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption. On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered; with which he ascended into heaven...."<sup>19</sup>

Even some who deny that Christ rose in the flesh admit that "until the time of the Reformation the creeds of the West spoke only of the resurrection of the flesh."<sup>20</sup>

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE FLESH**

Having examined the historical evidence, we must now turn to the theological question: What difference does it make whether Christ arose in the same body of flesh in which He lived and died? The New Testament's response is clear and unequivocal. Without Christ's physical resurrection there is no salvation (Rom. 10:9), for the Resurrection is at the very heart of the gospel by which we are saved (1 Cor. 15:1-5). The apostle Paul listed a litany of consequences that follow a denial of the physical resurrection. If Christ did not rise, then :1) Our faith is useless; 2) We are still in our sins; 3) Our departed loved ones are lost; 4) The apostles are false witnesses; and 5) We are the most to be pitied of all men (1 Cor. 15:14-19).

In addition to this sobering list of dire results for denying the literal resurrection, there are some crucial theological problems that follow failure to join the apostolic confession of "the resurrection of the flesh."

### **The Problem of Creation**

God created the material universe (Gen. 1:1) and pronounced it "very good" (v. 31). Sin, however, brought death and decay to God's creation: "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men...." (Rom. 5:12). Furthermore, because of man's sin "the creation was subjected to frustration...." (Rom. 8:20). Thus, the creation has been groaning and waiting "to be liberated from its bondage to decay" (v. 21). Likewise, believers "wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we are saved" (vv. 23-24).

Since God's material creation fell, it is clear that in order for redemption to be effective it must restore this material creation. Humans sin and die in material bodies and they must be redeemed in the same physical bodies. Any other kind of deliverance would be an admission of defeat. Likewise, just as the world God created and which subsequently fell was material, even so God will eventually deliver this material universe from decay by recreating a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1-4). If redemption does not restore God's physical creation, including our material bodies, then God's original purpose in creating a material world would be frustrated. As Professor Robert Gundry aptly noted, "Anything less than that undercuts Paul's ultimate intention that redeemed man possess physical means of concrete activity for eternal service and worship of God in a restored creation." So, "to dematerialize resurrection, by any means, is to emasculate the sovereignty of God in both creative purpose and redemptive grace."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Problem of the Incarnation**

The denial that Christ came in human flesh is called docetism. Hence, the denial that He rose in human flesh is a kind of neodocetism. Both diminish the full humanity of Christ, one *before* and the other *after* His resurrection. A similar doctrinal deviation existed in the first century. John addressed it when he warned against those who deny that 'Jesus Christ has come [and remains] in the flesh' (1 John 4:2). The use of the perfect participle ("has come") implies that Jesus came in the flesh in the past and He remained in the flesh when John penned these words after the Resurrection. In the parallel passage (2 John 7) John used the present tense, warning against those "who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh." This makes it even clearer that John considered it wrong to deny

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flesh of Christ either *before* or *after* His resurrection. The reason is obvious: human flesh is part of our true human nature as God created it. Hence, to deny that Christ was resurrected in human flesh is to deprive Him of full humanity.

### **The Problem of Salvation**

Among other things, salvation is victory over death (1 Cor. 15:54-55). Since the death which resulted from sin directly involved the material body, the body that is raised again must be material for there to be real victory over death. Failure to confess that Christ rose in a material body undercuts the very gospel itself.

In his definitive work on the nature of "body" (Greek: *soma*) in the New Testament, Professor Gundry noted that unless Christ rose in the same physical body in which He died, then "the relationship of the two bodies to each other is extrinsic and to that degree unimpressive as a demonstration of Christ's victory over death."<sup>22</sup> Hence, "the resurrection of Christ was and the resurrection of Christians will be physical in nature."<sup>23</sup> Anything less undercuts God's redemptive purposes for the human race.

### **The Problem of Deception**

There is also a serious moral problem. Some claim that Christ's appearances were merely "materializations" aimed at convincing the disciples of His *reality* but not His *materiality*. But Jesus said: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:27). Jesus challenged Thomas to put his finger into the scar in His hand and to put his hand into the wound in His side and "stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27).

Given the identity of the scars with His preresurrection body, the only impression these words could have left on the disciples' minds was that Jesus was claiming to have resurrected in the same literal, material body in which He died. However, if He did not rise in this physical body, He was intentionally misleading His disciples. In short, either Jesus rose in the same material body in which He died, or else He lied.

### **The Problem of Immortality**

A denial of the material nature of the resurrection body is fatal for Christian immortality. Unlike the ancient Greeks, Christians believe true immortality involves the *whole* person, including the body; not just the continuing existence of the soul. But if Christ did not rise in the same physical body in which He died, then we have no real hope that we will ever attain true immortality either. Paul declared that Christ "has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10). It is only through Christ's victory over physical death that believers can proclaim: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). Otherwise, as Paul informed the Corinthians, "if Christ has not been raised...those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost" (1 Cor. 15:18).

### **The Problem of Verification**

A nonmaterial resurrection has no evidential value. If Christ did not rise in the same material body placed in the tomb, then the Resurrection loses its value as an evidence for His claim to be God. However, Jesus often offered His resurrection as a proof of His claims (John 2:19-22; 10:18). On one occasion He offered it as the unique sign of who He is, declaring that no other sign would be given to that unbelieving generation (Matt. 12:40).

The apostles also offered Jesus' resurrection appearances as "many convincing proofs" (Acts 1:3). They used the Resurrection as the basis of their fearless preaching of Christ over and over again (Acts. 2:22-36; 4:2,10; 13:32-41; 17:1-4,22-31). Paul told the philosophers of his day that God "has given proof...to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

There is a very good reason for this repeated connection between the fact of the physical resurrection and the truth

of Christianity: there is no real evidential difference between an immaterial resurrection and no resurrection at all. An immaterial body has no verifiable connection with a material body. The only objective way the world could know that Christ rose was if He rose in the same material body in which He died. As the poet John Updike powerfully stated,

Make no mistake; if He rose at all  
it was as His body,  
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the  
molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindle,  
the Church will fail.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wolfhart Pannenburg, *Jesus — God and Man*, 2d ed., trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 75.

<sup>2</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, *Jesus Christ* (Wilmington: Consortium Books, 1977), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Murray Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 53.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Martyr, *Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection*, ch. 10. (All citations from the Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers can be found in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vols. 1-14 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985], and Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vols. 1-14; Second Series, vols. 1-14 [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983]).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics*, ch. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Athenagoras, *The Resurrection of the Dead*.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Cyril of Jerusalem: Catechetical Lectures*, XIV, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 12, ch. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Curus Deus Homo*, Book 2, ch. 3, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, 2d ed., trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle: Open Court, 1962), 241.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, 153, in *Saint Thomas Aquinas Philosophical Texts*, selected and trans. Thomas Gilby (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 278. See also *III Summa Contra Gentiles*, 79, in *Saint Thomas Aquinas Theological Texts*, selected and trans. Thomas Gilby (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1982), 405.

<sup>15</sup> Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 98.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 368-69.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 176,181-82.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 176.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 182.