

Article: JAF100

## FUNERAL FAUX PAS: AVOIDING MISSTATEMENTS ABOUT DEATH

This article first appeared in the Effective Evangelism column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 29, number 2 (2006). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Funerals can be a prime opportunity for believers to share the gospel with unbelievers and comfort grieving believers with the promise of being with God, the hope of a future resurrection. This opportunity is sometimes lost, however, when people make incorrect statements or blend worldviews indiscriminately. I, like most of us, have attended a number of funerals in my life. Something said at one Christian funeral I attended struck me as very odd: "Today, God has given your loved one a new body." I looked at the casket and thought to myself, "I know the body is still in that casket. How could he be resurrected?" After hearing this, I began to pay special attention to what people say at funerals. Many well-meaning people, in an attempt to comfort grieving family and friends, say things that misrepresent the true nature of humans and what happens to us when we die. These misstatements, or theological "faux pas," can confuse believers as well as unbelievers regarding the truth about death.

**Body and Soul Faux Pas.** Platonism and Gnosticism are different worldviews, yet they have a similar understanding of the human body and soul. Platonism considers the body to be a cage, and aims to free the immaterial soul—the true self—from this material prison. Gnosticism views the body as evil, even unnecessary, and the spirit as good, or the true reality. These worldviews hold that the immaterial soul or spirit is the essential or good part of a human being and that the physical body or material aspect is restrictive or evil. This is not the biblical understanding of humans, nor is this the biblical understanding of what occurs at death. It was a Greek philosopher (Plato), not a Hebrew prophet, who longed to be a disembodied soul.<sup>1</sup> This view of the human body and soul has, however, infiltrated our conversations about death.

I was asked to preside over my first funeral recently and I went to [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com) to view some online samples of funeral sermons. As I was reading through them I was struck by the numerous statements that reflected just such a view of the human body and soul and of death. For instance, a generic sermon for a deceased Christian contained such lines as: "We are here only to bury the covering. \_\_\_\_\_ is not here. This here is only the covering. The important part, the soul, the being that made \_\_\_\_\_ went to be with the Lord."<sup>2</sup> The same sermon later says, "Death is not a defeat but a victory."<sup>3</sup> In one sermon, the writer, commenting on the deceased, said, "\_\_\_\_\_ lived the last years of his life a prisoner in a body that was filled with sickness."<sup>4</sup> Another gentleman, speaking on the meaning of death, said, "We look upon death as an enemy, but really death takes us to a better place."<sup>5</sup>

Believers should not view the physical body as a cage, bad, or unnecessary. The Bible actually has an extremely high view of the body as good and valuable. When God created humans, which included their bodies, He said they were "very good" (Gen. 1:31).<sup>6</sup> God's prohibitions against murder (Gen. 6:9; Exod. 20:13) also confirm the value He placed on the human body. The Bible further teaches that our bodies will one day be resurrected: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). Jesus Himself came as a human, in a physical body, and still retains that same physical, now glorified, body (John 20:25–27; 1 John 4:2–3).

We believers should avoid blending unbiblical views of the body into our conversations with those who mourn the death of a loved one, even though it may be easy to downplay the value of the physical body when we are discussing the death of someone who had experienced great physical suffering. We should focus instead on God's love and grace, His provision of strength and peace.

**Resurrection Faux Pas.** Other misstatements made at funerals may easily confuse people as to when we, particularly believers, receive our resurrected bodies. One funeral sermon entitled “To Die Is Gain,” for example, said, “What do we gain? We gain a better body—a glorified, immortalized, resurrected body.”<sup>7</sup> Another said, “[God has] already done that for \_\_\_\_\_. He has reformed him and given him a new body and a new name in a new place.”<sup>8</sup> Yet another sermon, speaking about where the deceased now resides, said, “In heaven all things are made new. \_\_\_\_\_ has been given a new home. She has been given a new life. \_\_\_\_\_ has been given a new body. A body that does not know sickness or pain. A body that does not suffer from \_\_\_\_\_ or any other physical impairment.”<sup>9</sup> These kinds of statements imply that we receive our resurrected bodies immediately on death; but this is not the biblical view.

**The Biblical View of Resurrection.** Scripture does not teach that believers’ bodies will be resurrected immediately at death. Scripture instead teaches that we will receive our resurrected bodies at Christ’s second coming (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28–29; 6:39–40; 11:24; 1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 2 Tim. 2:18). Theologian Wayne Grudem points out that “the redemption of our bodies will only occur when Christ returns and raises our bodies from the dead.”<sup>10</sup> He explains from Paul’s teaching in 1 Thessalonians that “the souls of those who have died and gone to be with Christ will come back and be joined with their bodies on that day.”<sup>11</sup>

A passage that is often used to support the notion that believers receive their resurrection bodies at death is 2 Corinthians 5:1–10. This passage does teach the comforting truth (that can legitimately be used at funerals) that believers’ disembodied souls go into the presence of the Lord at death (v. 8). It also speaks about an “earthly tent” and a “heavenly dwelling,” and about being “unclothed” and “clothed.” While exploring a broad picture of Paul’s understanding of resurrection, theologian J. A. Schep observes, “If we attribute to Paul the idea of a ‘resurrection’ of the ‘body’ immediately after death, then we are not only depriving 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff of any meaning, but we implicitly declare that the apostle is capable of denying in the name of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1) that which he elsewhere (1 Thess. 4:13ff) proclaimed as divine truth in the name of the same Lord.”<sup>12</sup>

The unbiblical notion that a believer receives a resurrection body immediately after death can also easily cause confusion as to when Jesus was resurrected. If Jesus is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20) and “the firstborn from among the dead” (Col. 1:18), then Jesus is the example—the prototype—of the resurrection for believers. Jesus did not, however, receive His resurrection body immediately on His death; rather, He was resurrected three days later, on Sunday, the first day of the week. Christian apologist Norman Geisler notes, “One cannot have it both ways. Resurrection cannot occur while someone’s body is still in the grave.”<sup>13</sup> If Jesus is the prototype of our bodily resurrection, then surely we are not given our new bodies immediately on death, but, as Scripture says, on Christ’s return.

**Comforting with Sensitivity and Truth.** Physical death plagues us because of the fall. It is an event that each person will face, first as a bereaved family member or friend, and finally as a victim. Our hope, however, as we are told in Scripture, is that death itself will be defeated (1 Cor. 15:54–55; Rev. 21:4). Funerals are an opportunity for believers to proclaim the truth of the gospel and the hope of a resurrection, but we must be aware of what we are saying when we seek to comfort people. Statements such as, “She is looking down on us,” are untrue and do more harm than good. The realization of the gospel and its resurrection hope will comfort those who have lost a believer and bring a new difficult reality to light for those who have lost a nonbeliever. Our guiding principles while we proclaim these truths must be sensitivity and love. We should be aware that hurting people at funerals come from many different situations and backgrounds. Our responsibility as we seek to comfort them is sensitively but truthfully to direct them to the believer’s hope of a *future* bodily resurrection.

— Matthew Cable

## NOTES

1. Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed Versus McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 158.
2. Joseph Wallis, "Funeral Sermon," SermonCentral.com, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=43582&ContributorID=7162>.
3. Ibid.
4. Howard McGlamer, "To Die Is Gain—Funeral Sermon," SermonCentral.com, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=55370&ContributorID=9010>.
5. Barry Hidey, "Funeral—Meaning of Death," SermonCentral.com, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=32996&ContributorID=5317>.
6. All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
7. McGlamer.
8. Wayne Major, "Funeral Sermon for Michael Ragsdale," SermonCentral.com, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=42991&ContributorID=5865>.
9. David DeWitt, "Funeral Meditation no. 3," SermonCentral.com, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=41415&ContributorID=3397>.
10. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 828.
11. Ibid, 829.
12. J. A. Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrection Body* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 207–8.
13. Norman Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 182.