

Raised to Walk in Newness of Life

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Christ's resurrection guides us into "newness of life," which is life here and now, but with a new, eschatological dimension. We examine everything we feel, think, and do from a new perspective that takes our present bodies, our resurrectional bodies, and Christ's body (which is the Church) ever more seriously.

My dad asked quietly, "Are you ready?" It was the signal for me to draw a deep breath and pinch my nostrils shut with my right hand. Then he intoned "Buried with him by baptism into death" as he lowered me back and under the water's surface where I could not breathe. "Raised to walk in newness of life" he announced in a louder voice as he pulled me, gasping for air, back out. Because being baptized as a believer into the body of Christ is the most publicly vulnerable thing I have ever done (and, I suspect, that anyone could ever do), I remember it well fifty years later.

The baptismal formula my father used, drawing from Romans 6:3-4, portends that discipleship involves participating ever more fully in Christ's death and resurrection. In this article I will explore how Christ's bodily resurrection gives distinctive shape to the Christian moral life – which is to say, how believers ought to feel, think, and act in regard to one another, other created things, and God.

There is much mystery in that baptismal formula. The first part – being buried with Christ – entails that believers have "died to sin" (Romans 6:2). When they allow the "old self [to be] crucified" with Christ in baptism, the

Apostle Paul explains, they no longer welcome sinful “passions” or willingly yield themselves to be “instruments of wickedness” (6:6, 12-13). Of course believers keep messing up their lives through culpable ignorance, weakness, and inattention – we see this in our own experience as well as in the deplorably messy lives of the baptized Christians Paul was addressing – but, nevertheless, they have turned an important corner. Since believers are no longer “enslaved” partners with those distorted desires and sinful habits, they now can actively resist them; they have been “freed” to “present [themselves] to God as those who have been brought from death to life” (6:7 and 13b).¹ This new orientation toward their sinfulness is not their own accomplishment, but something so amazing that it reveals “the glory of the Father” in the same way Christ’s resurrection does (6:4). And that is why the baptismal formula goes on to proclaim, with Paul, that believers have been raised “so that [they] *might* walk in newness of life” (6:4).

This line of causation that runs from the event of Christ’s bodily resurrection to the divinely empowered life of his disciples is sometimes called “the spiritual resurrection of believers.”² Paul describes it as “the power of [Christ’s] resurrection” which enables him to “press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly [or, literally: upward] call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:10, 14). The central idea is that resurrectional power does not merely give believers a jump start for discipleship by freeing them from sin and making it possible for them to resist their distorted practices and desires, it also enables and guides their growth into Christlike virtues throughout their lives. The power of Christ’s resurrection not only breaks their entrenchment in a rebellious way of life, it also instructs them in a Christlike way of living.

In this article I will briefly explore three ways that this resurrectional power gives a distinctive shape to the Christian moral life: it calls believers to take their present bodies seriously, to take their resurrectional bodies seriously, and to take Christ’s body (which is the Church) seriously. Why do I focus on these themes? I think it is no accident that God’s power to enliven believers spiritually is ‘channeled’ to them (so to speak) through the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Christ’s resurrection sets the pattern for discipleship; and, therefore, the act of believer’s baptism, because it is a dramatic sign of our participating in Christ’s resurrection, becomes an augury of the entire Christian moral life.³ That is what I want to explore.

It will be clear in what follows that it is Christ’s *resurrection* – not his resuscitation, revivification, or reanimation – that informs the Christian moral life in distinctive ways. God did not bring Jesus back to (more of the same) life, as when Elijah revived the Zarephath widow’s son (1 Kings 17:17-24) or Jesus resuscitated his friend Lazarus (John 11); rather, God raised Jesus to new life of an eschatological order, to life that reflects God’s ultimate purpose for creation. Furthermore, it is important that it is *Christ’s* resurrection. By this I mean that the resurrection event is not self-interpreting,

but gets its layers of meaning from the fact that it is Israel's Messiah, or Christ, whom God raises to new life. For that reason we can discern how resurrectional power shapes the moral life only when we interpret the resurrection within the narrative of God's work through the people of Israel and the Church.

TAKING PRESENT BODIES SERIOUSLY

It is interesting that one of the briefest and, therefore, possibly earliest of the Christian baptismal confessions says only this:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
and in his only begotten Son
our Lord Jesus Christ,
and in the Holy Spirit,
and in the resurrection of the flesh,
and in the holy catholic church.⁴

After professing the Trinitarian God, the catechumen proclaims belief "in the resurrection of *the flesh*." This is not a proclamation of Christ's resurrection, though surely that historical event would be in the catechumen's mind and be believed. Rather it is a claim that rising from the dead—both Christ's resurrection which has occurred already and the believer's own resurrection which is promised for the eschatological future—is not to existence as

a disembodied soul, but to life with a body. This clear affirmation of the importance of the human body in the economy of God's redemptive plan is common in early Christian baptismal formulas, worship liturgies, and theological writings.

Kevin Madigan and Jon Levinson describe the political implications that early Christians and rabbinical Jews drew from their belief in the resurrection of

the flesh. Precisely because it meant that the human body "would be a locus of redemption," they could believe "the redeemed life began in the here and now, with the life of discipleship (Christians) or the life of Torah (Jews), and would come to its spiritual fulfillment with the general resurrection and the eternal life that resurrection would inaugurate."⁵ On a practical level this meant that some believers were drawn more closely

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together into communities to care for one another's physical needs. Amazingly, the early Christians in Jerusalem were willing to share their possessions (even if only for a short time) so that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). Luke explains that this miraculous spirit of fellow feeling unfolded during a time when "with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:33). Furthermore, whenever wayward religious structures, cultural practices, or political regimes threatened God's intentions for embodied life together "in the here and now," the people of God had reason to stand up to those "principalities and powers" and to be fearless of death at their hands. We can glimpse this political dynamic in the running controversy over resurrection between the Pharisees (who were the forebears of rabbinical Judaism and were politically closest to the early Jesus movement) and the Sadducees (Acts 23:6-8 and 24:20-21; cf. Acts 4:1-3 and Matthew 22:23-33//Mark 12:18-27//Luke 20:27-40). Belief in the resurrection of the flesh "was embraced and expounded by the Pharisees, a popular-level pressure-group insisting on law-based reforms" in the society, N. T. Wright explains, but it "was rejected by the Sadducees, the Jerusalem based aristocracy" who had much to gain by truckling to the Roman authorities.⁶

So, here is the first way that resurrectional power gives distinctive shape to the Christian moral life: it calls believers to treat their own and other human bodies with the great respect and care they deserve as a prime locus of God's redemptive work. For many disciples this takes the form of providing urgent or long-term care directly to particular human bodies in need – for instance, to those who are unborn, very young, disabled, sick, or dying. But it also involves their working to correct the broken social systems that endanger many human bodies – such as material poverty, unjust and unhealthy food production, disordered constructions of sexuality, or predatory warfare. Not all of their work will be corrective or defensive, as those examples might suggest; some disciples will employ the creative arts, literature, teaching, or counseling to encourage a rightly ordered appreciation of the human body. These are just a few ways that believers honor and care for present human bodies. They realize that precisely because the resurrection of the flesh is (in N. T. Wright's words) "about the Creator God reclaiming, judging, and renewing the created world," their "working for God's kingdom in the present is... 'not in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:58)."⁷

TAKING RESURRECTIONAL BODIES SERIOUSLY

When early Christians professed belief "in the resurrection of the flesh," they were not thinking that their rotting, dismembered corpses would simply be revived, but hoped that in some mysterious way those physical bodies would be involved in God's raising to life their resurrectional bodies. Where did they get this notion?

The Gospels report Jesus saying very little about the general resurrection or about resurrectional bodies, but what he says is intriguing. During the final week of his life some Sadducees approached him with a trick question: if a certain woman has been married in sequence to seven brothers in this life (according to the laws of levirate marriage in Deuteronomy 25:5 ff.), which one will be her husband “in the resurrection” (Matthew 22:23-33// Mark 12:18-27// Luke 20:27-40)? Jesus answers that resurrected human beings “neither marry nor are given in marriage” because they are “like angels.” We do not know much about angelic life, and probably there is not much that Jesus could tell us about it that we would understand. Nevertheless, his cryptic comment suggests that while the woman and the brothers would be in the same place and recognize one another (i.e., “in the resurrection”), their needs, desires, and (therefore) caring relationships would be different. This is consistent with Paul’s teaching that while resurrectional bodies will be continuous in some way with present bodies, they will be quite dissimilar from present bodies in their needs, desires, and powers – something like mature plants that have far outgrown their origin as seeds (1 Corinthians 15:37-38). Resurrectional bodies will be “heavenly,” “spiritual,” “imperishable,” and filled with appropriate “glory” and “power” (15:40-44), as God wants them to be.⁸ These teachings by Jesus and Paul fit well with the descriptions of Jesus’ resurrected body. It was dissimilar to his earthly body in having unusual powers (like appearing and disappearing very suddenly in the entombment garden, a locked room, or the open countryside) and not being immediately recognized by his closest disciples. Nevertheless, Jesus could easily reveal his identity to them through the stigmata and some characteristic bodily gestures – like blessing and serving their dinner bread (Luke 24:30), calling them by name (John 20:16), and graciously supplying their needs (John 21:6-7) – by which he had expressed his love for them over the years.

Resurrectional power gives distinctive shape to the Christian moral life: it calls believers to treat their own and other human bodies with the great respect and care they deserve as primary locus of God’s redemptive work.

A new perspective on the human body emerges from these scriptural teachings and stories. On the one hand, how believers treat present human bodies – how they honor and care for them, and develop in them habits of love – becomes even more important because one day their resurrectional bodies will be informed in appearance, habits, and loving gestures by the embodied lives that they are living now. On the other hand, preserving their present bodies at great cost

becomes much less important because believers are promised resurrectional bodies that will be wonderfully different—more glorified and powerful, and totally incorruptible. This is why Jesus can say rather bluntly to some disciples who are shying from the “wolves” who twist political and social systems to persecute them: “Do not fear those who can kill the [present human] body but cannot kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28; cf. Luke 12:4).

So, here is a second way that resurrectional power gives distinctive shape to the Christian moral life: it calls believers to take their resurrectional bodies seriously, which permits them to revalue their present bodies from a fresh, eschatological perspective. Within the larger story of God’s redemptive purposes, believers can see their present embodied lives as wonderful gifts from God which they, in turn, can donate to one another and back to God. Indeed, the primary value of their present bodies is to be “seeds” that become formed in the ways of receiving and giving love in this life, so that they may serve as embryonic platforms for more glorious forms of love and intimacy with God and one another “in the resurrection.” When they look at their present bodies from this perspective, modern-day disciples will be empowered to resist the ways that culture sexualizes young bodies, denigrates aging ones, siphons off medical resources to preserve advantaged persons’ lives with extreme measures, and so on. And in those places where “wolves” of social and political persecution still roam, disciples will be empowered to courageous acts of service to others and even to martyrdom. As believers embrace this eschatological perspective, they do not value their present bodies less than they should, but value them rightly because they have taken their resurrectional bodies seriously.

TAKING CHRIST’S BODY SERIOUSLY

The final statement of the brief baptismal confession cited above is belief “in the holy catholic church,” which is the unity of Christian believers across all times and places. I do not know why the early catechizers coupled that doctrine with a belief in the resurrection of the flesh, but the close pairing of them is certainly consonant with the Apostle Paul’s view on the matter. For instance, when he instructs the Roman disciples who have been raised from the waters of baptism to “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God *in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 6:11), he is using a phrase—“in Christ Jesus”—that is his favorite designation for believers’ membership together in the Church. He calls the Corinthian disciples “the church (*ekklesia*) of God in Corinth...who have been sanctified *in Christ Jesus*, called to be saints” (1 Corinthians 1:2); and he instructs them that since they have been “called *in the Lord*” (7:22),⁹ they are now “*the body of Christ* and individually members of it” (12:27).¹⁰ Paul is certainly not applauding the believers in Rome and Corinth for constructing warm and supportive communities; indeed, in his correspondence to them he harps on the fractured nature of their lives together. Rather, with these designations—“sanctified in Christ Jesus,”

“called in the Lord,” and being in “the body of Christ” – Paul is reminding these believers of their true identity and urging them to live into it. Luke Timothy Johnson explains, “It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Paul’s understanding of the church involves a deep and mystical identity between the community and the risen Jesus mediated by the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ In other words, the believers’ identity in Christ is not their own choice or accomplishment, but an effect of the power of Christ’s resurrection through their incorporation by baptism into Christ’s body, the Church.

Here, then, is a third way that resurrectional power gives distinctive shape to the Christian moral life: it calls believers to take seriously their identity and growth as members in Christ’s body. They must no longer regard their other identities of family heritage, nationality, race, and gender (cf. Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11) – and we might add to the Pauline list such things as wealth, social status, and political affiliations – as establishing the ultimate norms for their behavior, but they should examine all of these with a wary eye. Furthermore, through “the holy catholic church” Christ is resurrectionally present to believers as he instructs and corrects them, and his Spirit empowers them to walk in newness of life. Or, as Frederick Dale Bruner puts it, “Jesus has everything the Father has to give, and he gives us this everything in the unlikely place called baptism in the church.”¹²

This should not lead believers to withdraw from the world – that is, to learn only from other church members or to serve the world only through church institutions – because God’s Spirit can work in their lives through channels other than the Church. However, the Church remains the fundamental locus of their moral lives in the following ways: only through its worship and practices can believers learn to inhabit their true identities, and only in concert with other members can they form the specific commitments and habits that enable them to discern and embrace the work of God in the world. As believers embrace this ecclesial perspective, they do not value their other identities and morally formative relationships less than they should, but value them rightly because they have taken the body of Christ seriously.

As members in Christ’s body, believers must no longer regard their other identities of family heritage, nationality, race, gender, wealth, social status, and political affiliations as establishing ultimate norms for their behavior, but should examine these with a wary eye.

CONCLUSION

The results of our exploration into how Christ's bodily resurrection gives distinctive shape to the Christian moral life—that is, how it informs believers' feelings, thoughts, and actions toward one another, other created things, and God—can be summarized in the familiar formula of believer's baptism, "raised to walk in newness of life."

First, through the power of Christ's resurrection believers have already been "raised" after their death to sin. They have received a new identity in Christ, which means, in part, that they no longer 'identify' with their sinful habits and desires, but are empowered to grow in Christlike virtues.

Second, the power of Christ's resurrection guides believers into "newness of life," which is life here and now, but with a new, eschatological dimension. This involves scrutinizing everything they feel, think, and do from a new perspective that takes their present bodies, their resurrectional bodies, and Christ's body (which is the Church) ever more seriously.

NOTES

1 In another context Paul says the baptized "have died" and "have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed [themselves] with the new self" (Colossians 3:3, 9). They have been "raised with Christ" (3:1). Nevertheless, he urges believers to "put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)" (3:5). We see the same pattern: the orientation of the old self is destroyed in the waters of baptism, but the new self struggles to resist the flotsam of bad habits, stratagems, and desires left behind.

2 Richard N. Longenecker, "Resurrection," in Joel B. Green, *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 677-680, here citing 679. Longenecker cites Romans 6:4-17 and Colossians 2:12 as descriptions of the present spiritual resurrection of believers. Two other types of resurrection statements in the New Testament look backward to the bodily nature of Christ's resurrection (e.g., Romans 6:9) or forward to physical resurrection of believers from death to new life (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:52).

3 For more on believer's baptism as a sign of Christ's death and resurrection, and, therefore, as an augury of the entire Christian life, see Eric Howell, "How the Tomb Becomes a Womb," *Death, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 48 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013), 11-18.

4 Quoted in D. H. Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 81. While admitting "the exact date of the confession is unknown," Williams believes "its simplicity suggests sometime in the second century."

5 Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2008), 236-237.

6 N. T. Wright, "Resurrection of the Dead," in Kevin J. VanHoozer, et al., eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 676-678, here citing 677.

7 *Ibid.*, 678.

8 When we read these teachings by Jesus and Paul in their contexts, it is clear why each one chooses to emphasize some important *discontinuities* between resurrectional bodies and earthly bodies. Jesus is correcting the Sadducees' mistaken assumption about marriage relations following the general resurrection, and Paul is assuring the Corinthian believers that through the resurrection they will be preserved by God from every ruler,

authority, and power in the universe—and especially from death (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). But we should not lose sight of the fact that Jesus and Paul assume believers will enjoy resurrectional *bodies*, rather than the sort of ethereal figments that populate some popular movies and novels. Perhaps Paul calls these resurrectional bodies “spiritual” because (at least) they will be fully attuned to God’s life-giving Spirit and “heavenly” because (at least) they will fully share in the life of God.

9 Cf. Galatians 5:10, where Paul refers to the community of baptized believers as “you in the Lord.” One modern translation, the Good News Bible, puts it this way: “Our life in union with the Lord makes me confident....”

10 Cf. Romans 12:5, Colossians 3:15, and Ephesians 4:12, et al.

11 Luke Timothy Johnson, “Paul’s Ecclesiology,” in James D. G. Dunn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 199-211, here citing 207.

12 Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: A Historical/Theological Commentary on Matthew 1-12* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 94, quoted in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, “The Gift of the Church and the Gift God Gives It,” *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2004), 13-27, here citing 15.



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