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## Brief Studies

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## BRIEF STUDIES

## I BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION

This brief study reproduces the substance of a paper delivered to the St. Louis City Pastoral Conference on Nov. 10, 1958.

The final, formal act of committing a dead body to a grave or to an urn is one of the frequent and difficult tasks ministers have to perform in the course of their pastoral duties.<sup>1</sup>

In itself and its surroundings there is little or nothing to relieve the gloom and sorrow of the occasion. One neither cares nor needs to describe this, because the language one would use, however choice or classic it might be, would still be morbid, biting, and very sad. The Christian minister, however, works here against a magnificent backdrop of historical fact and eschatological hope — Christ's resurrection and His return in glory to raise the dead. At burial services he speaks Biblical words that form a framework around the inexorable fact of death and the solemn act of burial. These words, whether they be those of his sermon text, the lections, or the passages from the Word of God read at the graveside, all allow him to say: "In the hope of the resurrection to eternal life."<sup>2</sup> Unless the resurrection of our Lord and of the dead who die in the Lord and are raised to life eternal is at the very heart of the service of burial in sermon and rite, as it must have been at the heart of the ministra-

<sup>1</sup> In 1960 the pastors of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod officiated at burial rites of 25,139 persons. Of these 2,000 were of preconfirmation age. The increase in burials (1,571) was 7 percent over the previous year. Baptized membership increased 3 percent. *Statistical Yearbook* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> *The Lutheran Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), pp. 67—102. *The Pastor's Companion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), pp. 67—98, esp. 94, 95.

tions to the dying and the bereaved, this ministry is not truly Christian and Biblical.

It is not necessary here to describe the acts of commendation or committal. Nor will we criticize the frequently distressing and degrading customs and ornaments that have been accumulating around the service of so-called Christian burial. These are in many respects the result of enterprise and of worldly, though no doubt well-meant, considerations on the part of the pastor's partner when he buries the dead — the funeral director. Nor is the intention here to give a historical summary of the use of the Christian committal passages in general or of Lutheran choices in particular.<sup>3</sup> It is much more profitable to examine the passages from the Bible which we do use in the home, the church, and at the graveside.<sup>4</sup> Of these many passages we wish to examine with some degree of thoroughness only one portion — 1 Cor. 15:42-44, 53-57.

## Translation

- 42 Thus is the resurrection of the dead. The sowing is done in corruption, the raising is done in incorruptibility.
- 43 The sowing is done in shame, the raising is done in glory.
- 44 The sowing is done in weakness, the raising is done in strength. Sown is a psychic [i. e., mortal] body, raised is a pneumatic [i. e., of the Spirit of God] body, for there is a psychic body, and there is a pneumatic body.

<sup>3</sup> John Schmidt, "Preaching at Funerals," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XIII (Aug. 1961), 249—254. Cf. John Schaller, *Pastorale Praxis* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1913), pp. 89 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *The Pastor's Companion*, pp. 67, 70—79, 94, 95.

- 53 For the perishable [that which is capable of decaying] must clothe itself in [or must put on] indestructibility and the mortal must put on immortality.
- 54 Then when this perishable puts on imperishability and this mortal puts on immortality, then will occur the word written: "Swallowed up was death in victory."
- 55 Death, where is your victory? Where, Death, your stinger?
- 56 The stinger of death is the sin, the power of the sin, the Law.
- 57 Thanks to the God, who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

As we approach the text we allow the words to speak to us as pastors, curates of our people, to whom we are ministers.

Ὡτως — Paul here refers to the analogies from the world of nature: the nature of sown grain, differing, as seed and harvest, in itself, with itself, sown and grown; the nature of the animal world, differing, on earth, in all its variety, but all animal; the world of heavenly bodies, stars, sun, moon, earth, differing in the heavens among themselves, but all celestial.<sup>5</sup> The analogies are just that. They do not want pressing, e.g., it would go too far to say that seed is little, that it rots and produces a plant larger than itself, full of many grains, and draw conclusions about the resurrection from that. Surely, in the case of the seed, the comparison is in the dying and living, not elsewhere. The variation is in the types of flesh: all animal, animated, but different — men, beasts, flies, fish — but all show inherent and continuing identity. The heavenly bodies are generally similar, but embrace vast differences in size, location, and purpose. This is his theme — sameness with change, variety with constant identity in nature and purpose. So, says

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 14:35-41.

Paul, is the resurrection of the dead, for great or small, for sun or satellite, for man or beast. So, in all its infinite mystery but empiric fact, in all its variety but substantive continuity with what goes before, is the resurrection of the dead.

Ἀνάστασις — almost uniquely Biblical and peculiarly Judaic, this word is also pretty well exclusively New Testamental. Parallels in the myths of whatever culture we might examine are not convincing; they are basically and terribly different. Ἀνάστασις, resurrection, is totally linked with that of Jesus, the only Source from which the possibility and fact of *our* resurrection, i. e., the resurrection of the dead, can proceed. Without His resurrection there will be no resurrection for anyone else.

Τῶν νεκρῶν — the dead. Are these male? female? neuter? Since we are now not going into the restoration or transformation of the νεκρῶν in the parousia of the ἔσχατον, it will be enough to say that the dead are people.

The heading, so to speak, of what we say at committal services, therefore is: Listen, you mourners and heavyhearted survivors! What we do here today is not done, as it appears to be done, with finality and hopelessness. Remember what happens in this ground, or any like it, on which we stand sowing, dying, growing, living. Remember the world of animal life, as it walks and flies about. This earth and this world end, and the flesh must be put off. Remember the skies above us and the earth, which is part of the solar, stellar, lunar system — skies that are ordered, glorious, variable, but unified in the creation.

The analogy is: Life in its widely diversified variety in unity is everywhere. So the resurrection is for all. It is the work of One who made all who will be in the resurrection. The resurrection is the work of One who remakes all.

Ἀνάστασις τῶν νεκρῶν — the resurrection

of the dead. This is one of the class of great, single, summarizing, incomprehensible statements of real historical truth with which God's Word assaults our credulity and our limitedness. Others are the creation of the world, the incarnation of the Logos, the redemption of the world, the election unto life everlasting, the oneness or wholeness of the church, the outpouring of the Holy Ghost.

The Bible is full of these sentences or expressions. By human standards they are grandiloquent, impossible. Yet all of them together are a chain which carries the revelation of God, a chain that ties us to Him and ties us together in the company of His children. So in this grand, universal fashion God remains consistent within Himself in the resurrection.

Σπείρεται — sown. The word is used four times in this period sentence. Of course, it means "sown," "it is sown," passive, 3d person singular. What is the subject? To borrow a German expression, it could be *man*, i. e., sowing goes on all the time. Or it could be "the body is sown." But when should this be understood to happen? Perhaps at burial, more likely throughout life, for "we die daily."

Ἐγείρεται — is raised. Again, the dead, the body. The word is clearly intended to express the parallel to "sown," namely, the harvest. Only that which is sown, i. e., dies, can be harvested, i. e., be raised.

In harmony with this opening note of promise by Paul that he is going to demonstrate the ἀνάστασις, there now begins a grand series of contrasts, which it will suffice briefly to place opposite each other with their meaning and under the proper heading.

## SOWN

φθορῆ	corruptibility
ἀτιμίᾳ	shame
ἀσθενείᾳ	weakness
ψυχικόν	psychic (mortal)

## RAISED

ἀφθαρσίᾳ	purity and incorruptibility
δόξῃ	glory
δυνάμει	power: not <i>σχύς</i> which means strength, but really power, which is from God. <sup>6</sup>
πνευματικόν	pneumatic, i. e., of the Spirit of God

Thus Paul heaps up his expressions in the most glaringly contrasting fashion available to him in the language he is using — and Greek is known to be rich in synonyms. The parallels are resumed in vv. 53—57.

φθαρτόν	a shame beyond computation that men should literally decay, rot.
θνητόν	capable of dying; not only <i>mortal</i> , but <i>mortible</i>
ἀφθαρσίαν	(see above) a gift beyond computation, that men shall rise and never again be subject to decay
ἀθανασίαν	incapable of ever dying again; not only <i>immortal</i> , but <i>immortible</i>

These verses are invariably read during the Lutheran service of committal. Here we have, then, a portrayal of men, before death, compared with believing men after death. He who is corruptible, shameful, weak, psychic (mortal) is moving in the direction of being no longer subject to decay, glorious, powerful, spiritual, deathless. Man's condition before death is almost indescribably

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the article on *δύναμις* in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, II, 286 to 318.

shameful — witness the variety of degradation to which he is subject or to which he subjects himself and into which he plunges. How much more indescribable is what awaits him, us, in the resurrection! The words sound through to us, as we read them aloud at the graveside, as pastors read them to us, or as we reread them in the Scripture. The full grasp and significance of what these words say must await eternity. Yet we can say some things now.

The picture is quite comprehensive when man is viewed in his fallen though redeemed state. We should look at our hands, our bodies, we should feel them, and realize, each one, "I die daily!" We could be dead in the very next instant. We look at the range of disease in this body, which is intended to be the vehicle of divine life, and we perceive that it is but a horribly weak, fragile shell. But — how will this body be later?

It will be forever enlivened and no longer available as prey to disease, age, mortality. It will be glorious with a glory suitable to it, but similar to that which permeated Jesus' body at His transfiguration; so will the body be at the resurrection. It will be powerful, in a divine sense. The δύναμις is never ascribed in the New Testament to man. In God it is an inherent, not a derivative power, more than strength or brute force. This power will pervade and animate the resurrection body. The body will be deathless. It will not be able to die again. Indeed, there will be no death.

Rising on the Last Day will be like changing clothes (v. 53) from rags to spangles, like changing our condition from filth within and without to immaculateness. All this, because we have not yet experienced it, at present presages and prefigures putting on or being put on with an unspoilable body in the resurrection (middle voice with passive connotation). Even as death is the most devastating witness in evidence of our fallen state,

so resurrection will be our most potent witness to our permanent state of ultimate redemption.

And this, of course, is the truth. Subtly free quotes from Is. 25:8 and Hos. 13:14 now follow in v. 54. Even in the sense of these ancient words the quotes indicate a great transformation as an expression of the New Testament hope. This hope is based on the New Testament events described in the closing chapters of each of the Gospels, namely, the resurrection narratives with their sequels.

"Ὄταν-τότε, "when" — "then." The extreme tension of these words is almost unbearable: Then, when — when, then. The future is thought of as already present, the present is thought of as already future. Death is "gulped down" — into victory. Death is not changed, it is removed.

The epical, lyrical address to death in v. 55 leads us to ask: How could anyone speak more strongly or dramatically than by apostrophizing death? It is as if Paul is looking, and as if we can look, directly into the terrifying face of death without quailing. He did — we can.

Κέντρον — stinger. Like a buzzing, inescapable, poisonous insect, death here almost receives a personality, although death is basically a negation, and it is difficult to personify a negative. But death strikes and strikes. Yet, even as the insect, having struck, leaves his stinger behind and is finished as a stinging insect, so death, not by striking, but by the resurrection of Christ, is left powerless to harm. Here and now a man can really die in hope. The victory, of course, is Christ's. What happened once — resurrection — will happen again — resurrection. Who will deny the death-dealing character of this stinger? It could, it did kill even Jesus Christ. But it is done with once and for all in the resurrection. Because in the death of Christ all died and therefore all sins were taken away, so in His

resurrection also all do and shall rise. This is the victory. For this victory we now give thanks as though it were already completely ours. It is ours even now, in a sense, namely, in the sense that Christ is risen. But our thanks will be eternally spoken by us and be accepted by God when we are with Him and with His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Such is the Word of God, in perfect harmony with everything else the Scriptures tell us about the resurrection. This Word of God we read and speak at the graveside. On those inevitable occasions in the ministry of the parish when the shepherd has to console the weeping, mourning, sometimes almost inconsolable members of his flock, these and similar things are what he should be saying. If he wants to speak of other things, in the obedience of faith they must all be brought under examination in the light of such passages as 1 Cor. 15.

We are all aware that a very frequent question asked is "Where are our dead?" The import of this question is usually "Where are they now?" No doubt it means "Where are they, what are they, how are they, during the time in which we are still on earth and during which they are dead, buried?" Now, the Scriptures tell us "they are with God." Paul says, "I have a longing to be with Christ." Jesus said to the man on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise." This can only mean that when he died his everlasting destiny, fate, future was settled at the time of his dying. Together with this, it can mean, that in God's eternal NOW, which is ever present, in which there is no yesterday nor tomorrow, but only a permanent TODAY, it is already as if the resurrection has taken or had taken place. Paul, or the thief, or anyone who dies in

Christ is with God. The blessedness of one who dies in the Lord, i. e., in the faith of Christ and in the hope of the resurrection of the dead, is "from henceforth." That can surely only mean that as far as they or God are concerned only one thing awaits them after death, only one thing awaits us after our death — life eternal, light eternal, victory eternal, to be with God and Christ. The comforts which we sometimes attach to the so-called "lesser hope" of a being with God in a provisional condition apart from, or prior to, resurrection must not in any way be allowed to shorten the resurrection promises. Pastors should not try to paint pretty word pictures or other types of pictures about the time the dead may be spending prior to resurrection which in any way reduce the force of the resurrection promises. The *status medius* or the intermediate state is brought in rather hesitantly by the church's teachers who try to stay with the Biblical emphasis of the resurrection fact and the resurrection hope as these, the fact and the hope, are given us in the Scriptures.<sup>7</sup> If it is enough for Christ Himself and His blessed apostles, if it is enough for the church's teachers over the years to point to the living Christ as the Source and Guaranty of our salvation, our resurrection, and of our eternal bliss, it should be enough for us. As it is, it is far more than we deserve. For really we deserve nothing. It is all God's gracious gift to mortal man in whom, by His gift, there lives the life of the redeemed in Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> F. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1920), III, 574—578. A. Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House), IV, 225—239.