

Some thoughts regarding the resurrection

A paper that I put together to seek to put the resurrection more central in the proclamation of the Gospel. In it I consider some of the implications of ensuring that the resurrection is not separated from the cross.

Martin Scott

1. The Resurrection: central to the gospel

The resurrection is a cardinal doctrine of the NT, Paul stating the centrality of it in some of the following statements:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3,4)

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ? whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor. 15:13-19).

Who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Rom. 4: 25).

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. (Rom. 10:9,10).

I suggest that when Paul proclaimed the gospel he places his emphasis more centrally on the resurrection than do many evangelicals. It is not abnormal, in current practice, for the proclamation of the Gospel to be cross centred in a way which leaves the resurrection simply as an act which means that 'death could not hold him' and 'he is alive today'. However, I suspect that Paul's narrative world meant that the resurrection carries much more meaning than that.

I suggest that it is important to examine this aspect as it will also shed light on the meaning of justification. Too often justification has meant that we are right and others are wrong, leading to a pride. (Perhaps a little reminiscent of the Jewish pride in their election.) By emphasising Jesus' resurrection, I suspect that we can end up with a greater emphasis on the vindication of Jesus, rather than our personal vindication - but more later.

To explore this whole theme it is necessary to go into the biblical narrative world a little, in order to place the resurrection within that story, and then to examine it theologically. (In the following my indebtedness is to N.T. Wright, and any misrepresentation of his views would be my own misdoing.)

is wrong - but affirming that Jesus has been declared right, he has been set forth and our response to him will determine our future.

9. Amazingly the resurrection means that dust is now within the Trinity.

Jesus has taken creation itself into the Godhead - the most incredible and irrevocable commitment to this world. A belief in the burning up of the *kosmos* must have serious implications on the very existence of the Trinity. This God is the redeemer of creation.

10. Hence by repositioning and giving a new paradigm to the proclamation of the Gospel there is the continual need for a **proclamation** of the risen Jesus. Resurrection however demands an **incarnation** of the message, as it is an 'earthy' doctrine. We cannot be judgmental of others, but bold in our proclamation that it is this Jesus that God has set forth as the answer, it is this Jesus that he has vindicated. We do not need to deny the validity and goodness of justice activities by anyone, regardless of faith, for that can be seen as a work of the 'universal' Spirit of God. However, we cannot with integrity speak of the 'anonymous Christian'. So we should be free of judgmentalism, but left free to proclaim boldly within a holistic-life-presentation. And **there should be no need to go down the route of the false dualism that separates justice off from the gospel. A belief in the resurrection means a commitment to both aspects - that of calling and working toward justice for there is a just world that is coming (and one that has been guaranteed only by the resurrection), while proclaiming that only in Jesus is there salvation. Both aspects being testified to by the resurrection.**

© Martin Scott
1997

new order of heaven and earth. But this is more than an improvement, for the resurrection means a finality is brought to bear. **The resurrection makes permanent what was temporary.** Once the resurrection takes place (at the *parousia*) there will be no return to evil / fallenness. (In John's vision he states it this way: a new heaven and a new earth, but no more sea.)

2. **The resurrection establishes the end.** That end time event has triggered the second end time event - the outpouring of the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit is essential for authentic Christian life.

3. **Chronology for the Christian becomes in some ways superfluous** - if all (since Pentecost) are living in the end times then there is effectively only one generation, the generation who are living in the post-Exilic period. We stand **alongside** all who have gone before, for in that sense they have not gone before. We are of the same generation as, e.g., Paul.

4. The resurrection gives us the Christian experience of the end having come and it yet the end is yet to come. **God has intervened but there will be a future final intervention.** Although this world order continues its days now are numbered - the resurrection has inaugurated the final countdown. (This is why the apocalyptic language is not exhausted by the fall of Jerusalem - each passing expression of world domination is but a foreshadow of the final judgment, so apocalyptic language can, e.g., be re-applied to Rome in the book of Revelation.) There is then the expectation of a final (and irreversible) day.

5. **The resurrection affirms this-worldliness.** Our faith is not in a living Saviour, but in one who is alive in a certain mode of being - **bodily**. This is clearly emphasised through Jesus' participation in eating meals with his disciples post-resurrection. No longer because he is hungry, and certainly not so as he would stay alive(!), but in order to communicate God's affirmation of creation.

6. It also indicates that **there is a future awaiting us** - our experience of salvation is not yet complete.

7. Then to one of the key points indicated above: **the resurrection is God's affirmation of Jesus.** The justifying act of God (always eschatological in Scripture) has already taken place in Jesus. He is affirmed 'son of God by the resurrection' (Rom. 1:4). In that sense God has declared Jesus as the one who is justified.

8. The question now is, **'Who will now place their 'yes' where God has placed his'**. Those who do so will be saved - otherwise we are left in our sin. So Paul states that those who confess that Jesus is Lord and that God has raised him from the dead will be saved (Rom. 10:9, some very weighty theological (and political) themes, indeed). So this does not allow us to rest back claiming some distorted personal justification - I am right, everyone else

(Please note this is simply a draft paper, with no footnoting, it is intended to stimulate discussion.)

2. Israel's story

The world owes its existence to the Creator God, Yahweh. However, creation has gone wrong with alienation being the common experience. It has gone wrong through disobedience which is understood as crossing the boundaries that God had set in place (a mark of creation being that of setting boundaries, of separating light from darkness etc.). However, this creator God is also a redeeming God and has chosen Abraham as the father of a nation whose call (and in him, Israel's) is to bring redemption to the world. The chosen nation is therefore a redeeming nation. They are to walk in such a way before God that they honour their side of the covenant and act as a light to the nations. When they do so then the nations too will be converted to Yahweh and will experience a future hope.

So Israel has a call and there is future hope (eschatology). One day the world will be put right, through the people of Israel. Where Israel encountered enemies these had to be defeated and brought into submission, but the overall thrust of her hope was for a future era when this evil world order would be put right. Israel had mixed fortunes as far as fulfilling her priestly calling, but once the 10 northern kingdoms were taken by the Assyrians and then Judah fell to Babylon there had to be a major reshaping (or better, a reworking) of her hopes.

Even with a measure of return from Exile (Nehemiah / Ezra) the overall feeling was that Israel was lost and in Exile. Until first the Greeks and then the Romans would be driven out and her own leaders become faithful how could it be said that her Exile had ended. So the NT opens with the nation that has been called to redeem in need of redemption herself. Both the Gentile nations and Israel, the chosen nation, are locked up in sin: both need salvation. The Jews need a representative Messiah, so as she can be saved, for until she is saved how can the world be saved.

I will use two Scriptures to illustrate this narrative world:

2.1 Matthew - the opening pages of our New Testament

It is the above outlined narrative world that shapes up Matthew's opening chapter (and also his use of OT Scriptures). Matthew can trace the history of his people from Abraham to David, and from David to the Exile, and from the Exile to the Messiah. In other words, the history of Israel runs from origins, through kingship and united people, through Exile and on to the Messiah - he does not consider that the Exile had ended prior to the Incarnation. He then presents Jesus as Messiah, the one in whom the Exile will end:

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations (Matt. 1:17)

The hopes of all the Jewish people are to be fixed on Jesus. He uses two very 'end of Exile' phrases to describe the experience that Jesus will bring: 1) it will mean 'forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 1:21) for the Exile has taken place simply because the nation has sinned (NB: Matthew says specifically that he will save **his people** from their sins), and 2) the presence of God will be with the people.

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Matt. 1:23).

The life of Jesus was the very embodiment of Israel. Where she had failed in the wilderness over a forty year period, he passes in a forty day period. He truly inaugurates a new Exodus, he announces the end of Exile, the return of the Prodigal, the forgiveness of sins. He then takes on the curse of Exile very directly as he bears the wrath of God (not to be understood as personal anger, but persistent love that must deal with sin) on the cross, hence the Godforsaken cry from his lips. Such a life and death is redemptive. He does not die for his own sins but for the sins of his people (and by extension the sins of the world).

2.2 Pauline language: he became a curse for us

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" – in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:13-14).

Here again the narrative world comes through. Israel are under a curse therefore the blessing promised to Abraham for the nations cannot be fulfilled. The curse must be broken off Israel first, then the blessing can flow out to the nations. So Paul says he became a curse **for us (Jews)** so that the blessing promised through Abraham can come to the Gentiles. The end result is the eschatological blessing of the Spirit to both Jew and Gentile.

So for the NT people Christ fulfilled Israel's call, and it is now appropriate to see how the resurrection fits within that narrative world.

2.3 The resurrection

When God restores the future of Israel there is left a very practical problem. Israelites who have been faithful in the past will not be present to experience the blessing of the new age. The problem is most acute when it involves Israelites who might have experienced exile from the land because of the sins of the people. However, a belief in a faithful God meant that this God would

raise those faithful Israelites up on the last day so as they would not miss out. For God not to do that would mean he was unfaithful to his covenant. So the great hope was of the resurrection of the dead.

We can note here how different that is to the hope of a ticket to heaven, to a spiritual existence beyond the grave. Such hopes and expressions are Greek not Hebrew in origin. We can also note that Paul adopts this very same framework in answer to the question that we could state this way: 'what about the fate of those who have died in Christ and therefore will not be on earthy at the *parousia*'. Paul states that they will not miss out **then** for they will be raised. The future hope is not one that is centred on life beyond the grave, but on resurrection on that great future day. (See 1 Thess. 4:13-16).

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

2.4 Justification

Justification is tied to the resurrection for both are eschatological themes. On the day of judgment the righteous will be justified (vindicated by God), the indication of which will be the resurrection from the dead. So for the Jew, strictly speaking, justification was future, and that sense continues for the Christian. One day those who follow Christ will be vindicated in their belief that Christ was none other than the only Saviour of the world. However, justification is also present due to the fact that what God will do for Christians in the future (resurrection) he has already done in, and for, Christ in the midst of time. It is understanding the resurrection of Jesus in this context that I suggest is the most helpful. The resurrection of Jesus is nothing less than God's vindication of his life and death. It is the stamp of God's approval that he has won the victory over all evil, that all curse is broken, that the eschatological blessing promised to Abraham is now available for all who receive this Messiah as God's answer to sin.

3. The resurrection

Having examined the narrative world view and the centrality of the resurrection to that world view, I now want to give some summary points as to how the resurrection is an essential belief.

1. Although it is highly doubtful that many Jews believed that the day of Yahweh would mean the destruction of the world, we should not conclude from that there will be no end. This world as we know it will end, and there will be a