

Resurrection Muddle

Christianity Today, in its April 5th issue, allowed space for a discussion of what it called “The Mother of All Muddles.” The issues at stake were those raised by Professor Murray Harris’s analysis of resurrection in the New Testament. Norman Geisler alleged that Harris’s position on the resurrection was unorthodox because he affirmed that believers are resurrected at death. Millard Erickson and other consultants at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School pronounced Harris’s view orthodox.

Our second installment of Oscar Cullmann’s *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* provides a necessary clarification of the muddle surfacing in the current debate. There is a solution to the tension caused on the one hand by Geisler’s traditional view of a disembodied intermediate state and on the other by Harris’s postulation of resurrection at death. The latter view, we are bound to think, arises because of Harris’s justifiable aversion to the idea of conscious existence in a state of disembodiment. We see here the beneficial influence of the biblical theology movement which has undermined the popular notion of survival apart from the body. This leaves Harris with the problem of the intermediate state. His solution is to posit two moments for the reception of a new body—at death and again at the Parousia. But this only adds to the muddle.

Cullmann is right to re-emphasize the notion of sleep as the proper description of the state of death. II Corinthians 5 does indeed talk about investiture with the new body. Against Harris, however, we of the radical reformation tradition insist that II Corinthians 5 should not be read in contradiction to I Corinthians 15. Paul always expected to be clothed with a new body *at the Parousia*.

As Cullmann says, the dead are not outside time, nor have they yet received the spiritual resurrection-body. The problem is that mainstream Christian thinking has for too long vilified the doctrine of the sleep of the dead, although it is found in Scripture in the words of Job, David, the

Preacher, Hezekiah, and unmistakably in the teachings of Jesus in John 11:11, 14. Cullmann, as a distinguished New Testament exegete, puts his finger on the real source of the muddle: the intrusion of Greek philosophy and its disturbance of the Hebrew view of man as a psychosomatic unity.

The same alien influence is to be detected in the traditional notion of the endless punishment of the wicked. But for the idea that man is innately immortal, it is unlikely that total destruction would have been replaced by endless suffering. Mark Mattison exposes the weaknesses of the standard argument that perpetual torment is to be the fate of those outside the will of God. We are encouraged by the trend already initiated by John Stott and Clark Pinnock (see the latter’s “Destruction of the Finally Impenitent,” *JRR*, Fall, 1992).

We are pleased to be able to reprint Marian Hillar’s fine survey of the development of Anti-Trinitarianism in Poland. He traces the principle of freedom of conscience in America to the influence of Locke, an admirer of the writings of the Polish brethren.