No More Potemkin Theology

Perhaps no other biblical text reminds me that I do not live in the world of the first century more than the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, which discusses resurrection. Here Paul delivers a response to the skeptics of the Corinthian community. Evidently some believed that they had received genuine access to the power and presence of God and were already living as “resurrected” people. The power that they felt and exerted over others in the community demonstrated this new life.

Paul does not deny that the Corinthians already participate in the vital breath of the God of Israel. But he argues that the story is far from over. He first notes what most people in the ancient world assumed: that seeds actually die after they are sown (1 Cor 15:36) and that every blade of grass that sprouted, every plant that appeared, came about through divine agency, which provided a new body for the plant after the death of the seed. (Thus a plant differs so from its seed.) Where ancients saw divine abundance breaking out, moderns see an organic continuation from seed to plant.

Paul also plays upon another ancient assumption: that the bodies above the earth are composed of light, not matter. Philo even says that the stars are intelligent minds. Roman coinage highlights the comet seen at Julius Caesar’s funeral. He had become that shining spirit. In the ancient world, no one would have equated a comet with an orbiting ball of rock and ice or a star with an ongoing thermonuclear explosion. Thus, when Paul declares that “the dead will come to life like that” (1 Cor 15:42), that they will be raised with a “body fit for life in God’s new world” (1 Cor 15:44), Paul means that the Corinthians will share in the same condition Jesus now enjoys. They will share the “likeness of the heavenly man” (1 Cor 15:49). In short, they will become stardust.

And this is where I feel so alien from that first-century text. When Galileo peered through his telescope and saw our moon and then the four largest moons of Jupiter, he changed our vision of space. The world of spirit has come tumbling down like a dying satellite ever since. The “heavenly fire” (Donne) has gone out.

And it does no good to retreat to what has been Western culture’s traditional take on the resurrection: the delectably solid bodies of the Renaissance. So many of us imagine the resurrected body to fit those anatomical dreams. But they too fall away once we realize that we live in a radically different cosmology. Our world, crafted by Galileo, Newton, Einstein, Noether, and Hawking belongs to neither the first nor the sixteenth century. When we look up we do not see spirit but bodies of light receding away from us.

In fact, this gets us back to what Rudolf Bultmann recognized at the beginning of the twentieth century. If we do not simply toss away such ancient witnesses, if we sense that there is something there for us, we cannot retreat back into that smaller, earlier world. We cannot go home again pretending that in twenty centuries nothing has happened to the way the world is understood.

Indeed, Paul constructs his entire mission to the nations, to those looked down upon by his Jewish brethren as lacking in full humanity, by stressing his paradigm shift. He discovered that the God of Israel did not play the competitive games of Rome. He detected a God who does not give up on the abandoned. Out of this vision Paul walked through the world. He did not deny what had happened to him or the experience of the communities he engendered.

And then there is this added note. When Paul uses the language of resurrection (literally “to stand up again”), he is maintaining the Jewish quest for justice: the notion of resurrection derives from the Jewish sages’ speculation on how their God could finally answer the injustices committed against so many innocent ones. Thus, to say that Jesus was “caused to stand up again,” that the Corinthians “will come to life like that” was an investment in hope, a confident claim that justice will be found.

And this is where we stand now. Are we still moved by the hope that Reality is ultimately compassionate? Do we imagine that what we do plays out over the long run? Do we recognize that life is not an adolescent game of survival but something far more mysterious and intricate? Have we had any experience that catches us by surprise because we are overwhelmed by an unexpected gift? Have we ever dared to give ourselves away? Have we found wisdom in unwanted and unheard of places?

We cannot go back again. We cannot use the Bible to construct a Potemkin village, to keep from asking if there is anything there, as well as to keep from making a genuine response to the complexity and contours of life on this planet.

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It could well be a progressive mantra for the Christian community today.

**Being Christian Today**

Being Christian today calls for new models of ministry anchored in a liberating, transformative faith community. We need a different linguistic narrative along with a different set of cultural practices to give expression to this task. This means a new understanding of the Eternal Reality we call God, a new meaning of community, and new approaches to the personal moral and ethical choices we make in our everyday lives. This also means a reconstruction of the language and symbols used in public worship by the Christian community (including the meanings attached to communion, the ways we read and respond to scriptural texts, and the words we use in sermons, hymns, congregational prayers, and other forms of Christian liturgy).

Here are some guidelines:

- **On religious humility.** No one person has all the answers and no religious system can encompass the Eternal. We must recognize that each of us, no matter how different from one another, is a reflection of the Divine. As Christians, we should be seeking to emulate the divinely human Jesus in the idioms of our postmodern culture.

- **On new religious narratives.** These are not about the literalness of faith or belief. They are about being a good shepherd—to family, friends, community, and to those we dislike or condemn—no matter what you imagine your flock to be.

- **On scripture.** It’s about meaning, not history. Our interpretation of scripture, like our reading of church doctrine and tradition, our personal religious experiences and rational understanding of these experiences, is an ongoing conversation. Nothing is permanent.

- **On forgiveness and healing.** We need to forgive for our own sake. True forgiveness is a selfish act. It sets us free from the bondage of our past and allows us to get on with our lives. It does not mean that we have to pretend nothing is wrong, but true forgiveness can become real for us when we discover we have already absolved our offender. Thus we begin the healing process by letting go of the hurt.

- **On the power of speech.** What is crucial is what comes out of our mouth. Since we believe human beings are made in the image of God, the divine image resides in part in our ability to speak. How we choose to use this divine power is of ultimate importance. Spreading gossip, lies, and rumors, or even false praise, is considered a major sin (against the Ninth Commandment) in the Jewish tradition.

- **On being a good disciple.** The essence of discipleship is to let go of the familiar and walk away. Beware of what you’re comfortable with, get outside your comfort zone, live in the present but look always for ways to serve others and to help repair the world.

- **On empowering the powerless.** Engage with those who suffer. We live in a “can do” and “can fix it” culture, and we view negatively a person who is “helpless” or “powerless.” On the other hand, we praise compassion. We can show compassion by giving time and money to causes, and it gives us a sense of power. But the Latin root of our word “compassion” means “to suffer with,” and thus it embraces powerlessness. It is not doing or giving anything. It is the willingness to be with and feel with the one who is suffering.

- **On prayer.** We need to understand prayer ultimately as a personal conversation. It is primarily a nonverbal act, being aware of and open to God in silence, in love, in the natural world. In this sense, then, we should pray without ceasing.

- **On living a simple life.** Live intentionally as if the Kingdom of God were here now. You need only what money and possessions you require to live in that kingdom. For one interpretation of how one should live in the kingdom, see Micah 6:8.

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But we can take some tips from our ancestors. Because we cannot stay in the past, let us determine to move out, to take part in an *exodus* that exceeds the original trek. Even our older brother Paul could learn something new. Let us take up the fragments of our traditions and use them like flint to fire up new campfires, where strangers like dreams are welcome, where new worlds are unearthed with each new friend, and where each moment trembles at the birth of creation.