



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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The Business of Resurrection

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In my Paper, “Another Story of the Cross”, I suggested yet another way to think about the crucifixion experience of Jesus. In a follow-up of that Paper, I want to discuss resurrection, and then the matter of our resurrection. It is the later to which this Paper is addressed. In our Christian belief, our resurrection is usually tied to that of Jesus, and is seen as an event promised after our death and/or at the end of the age. It also has to do with our belief about heaven, and our future abode there. In other words, we usually think of resurrection as a future event.

First, I refer you to some texts, quoting from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. They are all typically interpreted as having to do with our life after this life, and that may be exactly correct.

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. (Jn. 11:25-26)

Because I live, you also will live. (Jn. 14:19b)

Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Ro. 6:4b)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (II Cor. 5:17)

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:8-10)

God’s love was revealed among us in this way; God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. (I Jn. 4:9)

I believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. “He is not here, but has risen.” (Lk. 24:5c) I am keenly aware that the texts having to do with his resurrection leave the issue very clouded as to just what its form was. I don’t know that it is particularly important to try to establish the details. It is important to know in faith that Jesus is alive, even if I do not know all it means. By being faithful to all that he was and believed, he defeated all his enemies – even death. He is alive. And because he is alive, we, too, shall live.

I repeat. Our interpretations of the resurrection of Jesus, and of our own resurrection, are oriented to the future. Our faith in Jesus, the risen Christ, assures us that we have life after this life. I am keenly aware that there is very little information (like none at all) about that life, although there is a great deal of speculation as to its nature and form, and as to how it comes about. In many ways, it doesn’t make any difference. Since I believe that God is unconditionally loving, and since I believe that I relate to that

loving God in this life, I can safely leave the matter of the nature of life after death in God's hands.

Neither do I need to try to set aside the belief that resurrection has to do with what happens after we die, and with what occurs at the end of the age. However, I wonder what would happen if I took those scriptures about resurrection and interpreted them in terms of my life – here and now. Since resurrection, in its most basic meaning, has to do with moving from death to life – from being dead to being alive – what would happen if the message also means to come from death to life during my time on earth?

At the onset, it would be necessary for me to be clear about what I mean by death.

I tell myself that I am alive. My heart beats. My blood flows. My muscles work. I breathe. I eat. I sleep. I work. I play. I think. I feel. I have emotions. I am aware.

I may not be as lively as I wish I were all the time, but I'm sure that I am alive.

Am I?

Suppose that death also means not yet born, not yet alive, out of touch, with mixed up values, confused about both death and life. Suppose it means to be spiritually dead. And then suppose my deep-down-in belief is that I am not spiritually alive, and cannot be, until I do something to become spiritually alive. Suppose I must strive for my own resurrection.

“God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him.” (I Jn. 4:9) If I believe in Jesus, and live the right kind of life, I am assured of life after death. I come to newness of life. Does that happen only after I die? Is it only after I have finished my time on earth that I can know the true and full meaning of being alive? Suppose that, in this text, and in all the others about resurrection and newness of life, there is also a message about coming from death to life – now.

In what sense am I dead now, even though I am alive?

I think the answer is that, no matter how alive I may be in all other ways, the real issue is whether or not I am spiritually alive. And spiritual aliveness has to do with here and now as well as the future.

Jesus is quoted as saying, “You must be born from above.” (Jn. 3:7) The more familiar form of the quote is, “You must be born again.”

And Paul wrote, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (I Cor. 15:26)

There is – there must be – a way to become spiritually alive.

I raise the question again. What is life – and what is death? What makes a person alive – or dead? What is resurrection?

Suppose resurrection means to come to the realization that I am alive – fully alive – spiritually alive – right here – right now – today.

If I accept that meaning of resurrection, I no longer need to be pre-occupied with questions about life after this life. I do need to be occupied with issues about being alive during this life.

Before I see myself as alive, I must, in some sense, see myself as dead. What makes me dead?

It depends upon what I believe.

If I believe that I am not saved, then I believe that I am spiritually dead. If I believe that I have to do something to gain my life, I believe that I must do something to come from death to life.

When I am dead, one of my main concerns is to find some way to save myself from death. I am anxious, fearful, suspicious, and defensive. I can't trust anybody else. I can't even trust myself. I am never really sure of anything, and I seek some kind of security. I may try to accumulate enough material resources to make sure that I will always have what I need. As one way to protect myself, I may seek positions and power, and try to fix it so that people are beholding to me. I may immerse myself in good works, and be generous almost to a fault in support of the church and of charities. I may study the scriptures, spend long periods in prayer and meditation, seek the finest teachers to make sure that I am on the right track in my beliefs and practices. I may work diligently to put sufficient safeguards in place to assure that I will live. But nothing I ever do removes the anxiety, fear, suspicion, and defensiveness. I fear that I stay dead. No matter what I do, I can never be sure that I have assured my salvation. I don't know if I have done enough, or am good enough, or am worthy enough. I just don't know. I don't know.

When I believe that I am alive, the anxiety, fear, suspicion, and defensiveness are alleviated. I can be about the business of being alive instead of being dead. I don't have to spend time and energy trying to save myself.

Re-read the texts that I quoted. Try interpreting them in the present tense. All of them can be understood in terms of living in the present.

And there are other texts. For instance, the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger brother, you remember, took his inheritance and went to a far country where he really “had fun” until his money was all gone. To his dismay, no one was there to help him in his poverty. He ended up feeding the pigs. In that desperate situation, he “came to himself” and decided it was time to go back home, even if it meant to be a servant in

his father's household. You know the story. The father welcomed him back, and threw a big party for him. When the elder brother was upset by all this, the father pointed out to him, "This brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." (Lk. 15:32)

The younger brother was dead and has come to life. Could that mean from spiritual death to spiritual life while he was physically alive? If so, what made him spiritually alive? Was it that he "came to himself" (Lk. 15:17) and knew who he really was – son of his father, worthy and worthwhile from the beginning.

It was said of Jesus, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people." (Jn. 1:4)

Jesus said of himself, "I am the resurrection and the life." (Jn. 11:25) And, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (Jn. 10:10)

In Jesus' prayer with his disciples just before his death and the resurrection, he said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (Jn. 17:3)

Was Jesus spiritually alive before his death and resurrection? If so, how does he exemplify what it means to be spiritually alive?

Jesus believed that his life came from God – a gift from the beginning, and not something he earned. He did not gain spiritual life. He was alive spiritually all the time, and he lived and spoke accordingly.

Maybe I have been spiritually alive all the time.

Maybe believing in Jesus means that I believe he was spiritually alive all the time, and that his life on this earth is the spiritual life to which all of us are called. Maybe, believing in Jesus, I choose to follow the example of his beliefs, his goals, his values, his teachings, and his manner of life.

Jesus summed up the commandments of God, quoting from the Old Testament, "Love God...and your neighbor as yourself." (Mk. 12:29-31) He also said, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." (Mt. 5:44)

When they brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, he said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (Jn. 8:7) When no one condemned her and no stone was thrown, he said to her, "Neither do I condemn you." (Jn. 8:11)

And Jesus told his disciples that taking care of the stranger, the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned was taking care of God's family, and indeed, taking care of

Jesus himself. (see Mt. 25:35-40) Certainly Jesus exemplified that kind of caring for people.

Maybe all this is included in what it means to be raised with Christ. If it is, then the teachings of Jesus, the insights of Paul, indeed the whole Bible, become a guide book for living the resurrected life here and now.

As I said at the beginning, I do not wish to suggest anything that seems to set aside our beliefs about the resurrection life after this life. I do want to emphasize just how rich and full this life can be.

Even though the biographical material about Jesus in the New Testament is pretty sketchy, what there is of Jesus' beliefs, teachings, outlook on life, and activities, points the way to being spiritually alive now. Like Jesus, I believe that I am alive – spiritually alive – because God made me that way, and not the result of achievement or reward.

My task in life, then, is to decide just what I want to do with this life God has given me. Do I decide to love my neighbor as I love myself? Do I decide to minister to the stranger, the hungry, the homeless, imprisoned, and sick according to their need and my opportunity? Do I decide to love my enemies, and pray for those who persecute me? Do I decide to study – learn – the philosophy of life by which Jesus lived and died, and put it into practice in my own life?

If I do, I do not have to spend time and energy trying to save myself. I can use that time and energy living fully the life God has given me. I experience being raised to newness of life. What happens when this life is over and is in God's hands.

I trust God. I trust both the now of my life, and the then, to God. I focus my attention and my energy on living this resurrection life all the days of my life – now.

I first knew about the bit of writing that follows on page six of this BURNEY'S PAPER very early in my ministry – perhaps forty-five years ago. It means a great deal to me, and I want to share it with you.

A Brief Description of a Short Life

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman.

He grew up in another obscure village.

He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then, for three years, He was an itinerant preacher.

He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.

He had no credentials but himself. He had nothing to do with in this world except the naked power of his divine manhood.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him.

His friends ran away. One of them denied him. Another betrayed him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial.

He was nailed on a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was dying – and that was his coat.

When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone, and today he is the center-piece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress.

I am far within my mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that where ever built, and the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kinds that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that ONE SOLITARY LIFE.

- Author Unknown -

The person here described – in his life and death and resurrection – was truly spiritually alive. “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” (Jn. 1:4) I paraphrase and say, “The life was the life of all people.” Through the grace and gift of God, I am alive – spiritually alive – now, and Jesus shows and teaches me how to give expression to that aliveness.