



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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You Will Live – Meaning What?

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At the beginning of our conversation that day, Jo didn't seem to be particularly happy. As he has done on other occasions, he said, "You have confused me again. Last time we talked, we were focusing on the issue of death. You kept saying over and over 'You will die - meaning what?' Now you tell me you want to talk about living. 'You will live – meaning what?' I'm not sure I knew where that comes from."

I smiled and said, "Oh, I can certainly understand that confusion. I don't know how clearly we discussed the issue of dying, nor do I know how clearly we may discuss the issue of living. However, if you are willing, let's give it a try."

Jo seemed a little reluctant, but he agreed that this could be the subject of our discussion.

"You know, Jo," I said, "that I have quoted Jesus on a number of occasions as telling us that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. Then he died on a cross, and after three days, the disciples and others proclaimed that 'He is risen!' I simply wonder what that means."

"You're not alone in that," Jo said. "I have often wondered about it myself. As a matter of fact, the whole issue of the resurrection leaves me wondering sometimes – actually more than sometimes."

"You know Jo," I said, "I have commented to you before that what we find in scripture having to do with Jesus' resurrection intrigues me, not only because of what it says, but also, because of what it doesn't say. I am very frank with myself. I recognize that I really do not know what the message of the scripture is when it is talking about Jesus' resurrection from the dead."

"That makes two of us," Jo commented, "but I don't have anything but the scriptures and the interpretation of the scriptures that I read to give me much guidance."

"Neither do I, for that matter," I replied, "except that I also try to work out a meaning and context that makes some sense to me; that gives me some kind of indication of the power in the message that the disciples and others were getting. In this case, I try to work out what it was that moved them to the extent they seemed to have been moved. As a matter of fact, it led me to doing a bit of word study again."

"Word study?" Jo responded. "Resurrection means resurrection, doesn't it?"

"Yes, only I need for you to tell me what you believe resurrection means," I said.

"For one thing," Jo replied, "The Apostles Creed makes a very clear statement. It says, among other things, 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.'"

"Yes, Jo," I said, "it is a clear statement. But what does it really mean? Maybe it would help if we talked about what the word 'body' means."

“Body?” Jo seemed surprised that I raised the question. “Body means body. You know. I have a body. I breathe. My heart beats. My blood circulates. In that sense, I am a living being. If this process stops, I am dead. If this process starts up again, then my body comes back to life. I am resurrected.”

“Yes, Jo, that would be true. I wonder if that is the only meaning that we give to the word ‘body’.”

Jo paused for a moment, then said “No, that isn’t the only meaning. There is a body of people referred to as the Congress of the United States. There are congregations, or assemblies of people that believe certain things in common. When I think about it, I realize that I am not at all clear as to what the statement, ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body,’ might possibly mean.”

“Jo,” I said, “let’s go back to some word meanings and see whether that will cast light on the subject or simply add more confusion. I was surprised to discover that the basic meaning of the Greek word in the Bible that we translate ‘resurrection’ is ‘to stand up’ or ‘to raise up.’ Potentially that basic meaning can be applied far beyond referring to the physical body restored to its functioning.”

“I was intrigued, and my imagination began to work overtime. I began to see so many ways that we use the word ‘resurrection,’ or its equivalent, in our thinking, speaking, and imagery. After the crucifixion, it was very clear to the disciples that in some sense, Jesus was alive. ‘He is risen!’ they proclaimed. But it is not clear to me what they meant. Did that mean his physical body, flesh and blood and heartbeat, in which he had been living, was raised up again or restored? Could it mean that what he taught and exemplified as he lived among them had a life-giving meaning that they had not understood before his death? Or could it mean that they began to see everlasting and eternal meaning in what Jesus had been living and teaching in their presence? Is it all of these? Or something else that we haven’t brought to light? A resurrected body? How did it give the disciples, and many others around Jesus, such strength of being and meaning that they were able to stand against the religious leaders of their time, even as Jesus had done?”

“A resurrected body,” Jo responded, “would not attract me with any particular loyalty. I would certainly need more than that. I would need to see something about that resurrected body, about that life; that was more than it had been, with more meaning and significance than just a body functioning again. I would need to see an outlook on life, a consistency of living, an attitude, which I had not seen before that made sense to me. I would have to see a great deal more meaning than just that his body is alive again. I would need to see all that his body is alive again. I would need to see all that he stood for was so profoundly of truth and light it made even crucifixion a meaningful experience.”

Jo continued, “Oh, you quoted Jesus saying, ‘I come that you may have life and have it more abundantly.’ (John 10:10) It seems to me you are suggesting that Jesus disclosed much more than a physical body that God restored to its physical being. Jesus

was raised up among us. A living being that could not be destroyed, no matter what happened to the body; a living emblem of the life to which God has called us all.”

“That makes a lot of sense to me,” Jo said. “What do I do with the inconsistent teaching of the church that it was the body of Jesus, the physical body of Jesus, that was raised from the dead?”

“Frankly, Jo, I don’t know quite what to make of the issue of the resurrection of the physical being. Sometimes I see it fitting into our tendency toward believing in an escapist theology where we seem determined to hang on to an identity that already was, as well as to keep God responsible for seeing that it happens. Examining physical resurrection also raises questions about being mortal and immortal and eternal. The 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians deals with this with some explicitness, and it is worth careful study. As I have already said, the scripture says little about the restoration of the physical body as such. For instance, Paul’s writing talks about mortals putting on immortality. If I have, or put on, immortality, then that is vastly different than the issue of my physical body being restored. The same thing is true about being eternal.

I’m aware that, once I begin to become steeped in the philosophy, attitudes, teachings, and behavior Jesus, issues of immortality or eternal life are constantly raised up before me. I cannot escape them. Immortality or eternity means something vastly different than the preservation or restoration of the physical body. When I think about what Paul has said about immortality and eternal life, I begin to think in terms of present and future. I get into the issue of what do I do to obtain eternal life, if it is my task to do that. Maybe it isn’t my task. My being eternal is one of God’s gifts of love to me.

Suppose, for instance, it is not possible for me to live without having significant influence on the lives of those whose lives I touch. For instance, Jo, suppose the situation is, that because we have come into contact with each other, neither of us is the person we would have been without that contact. I suggest that each of us is eternally changed. I don’t know what you do with whatever my influence on you is, but you have to do something with it. Whatever that is makes you a different person than you would have been had we not had the contact. Does that mean, then, that I am eternal in your life?”

“I’m going to have to think long and hard about this,” Jo said. “I don’t know where I am going to come out. You have suggested that there is vastly more to the concept of living and to the concept of resurrection than whether or not a physical body is restored to its physical functioning. This may be as much as I can handle today.”

“Perhaps so, Jo. If that be the case,” I responded, “why don’t we just stop this discussion for today and see what emerges the next time we come together. I am very aware that I have done little more than scratch the surface on the potential for this subject and its meaning and application. In any case, I see it having truly given life to the Apostles, even as I want the gift of life from it, and believe that God has given it to me also.”