

TENTS, BODIES, AND THE RESURRECTION

by D.A Carson

In recent years a number of competent evangelical scholars have suggested that Christians who die (before Jesus returns) receive their resurrection bodies at the moment of their death. I remain unconvinced.

The starting point for this view is a particular reading of 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. There Paul envisages the destruction of the earthly tent we live in, i.e., what happens when Christians die, when our physical bodies are destroyed. Our ultimate hope is “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” This cannot refer to existence that is immortal but immaterial, for Paul insists we groan; “earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven.” Thus clothed, “we shall not be found naked.” Indeed, the apostle reiterates, “not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life.” God has made us for this very purpose, i.e., for the consummated goal of resurrection life in the new heaven and the new earth. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit we have received is “a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” Thus when Paul says, “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord,” the body he is referring to is our natural, earthly body. But so strong is his horror of being “unclothed” that we should infer that Paul is arguing that we are *immediately* clothed with resurrection life. On this reading, at death we *immediately* receive our resurrection body, while our natural body decomposes in the grave, or is burned in a crematorium, or decays at sea, or whatever.

Although some who hold this view think that Paul changed his mind in order to reach this conclusion, more recently it has been argued that all of Paul’s letters can be read this way. Indeed, some argue that Paul, as a Jew and a Christian, would not have conceived of existence apart from the body: unbodily existence, they say, owes everything to Greek philosophy, and nothing to the Bible.

How shall we evaluate this interpretation of Scripture?

First, although this view must be sharply distinguished from “soul sleep,” which postulates that there is a cessation of existence between death and the resurrection, the tight connection between death and resurrection introduces another wobble. Although proponents of this view insist that what they envisage is a real resurrection body (a “spiritual body,” 1 Cor. 15:44), and immortal but not immaterial existence, it is difficult to see how “resurrection,” a coming-back-to-life of what has been dead, is the right word. The point of continuity between the pre-death person and the “resurrected” person lies on this view in personhood apart from body.

Second, the view that Paul as a Jew and a Christian could not conceive of existence apart from the body should be rejected out of hand. Quite apart from the enormous diversity of opinions

within Judaism, the apostle himself, a bare seven chapters later, relates an instance when he was caught up into the third heaven, whether “in the body” or “out of the body” he cannot say (2 Cor. 12). But whether or not he can say, he can certainly envisage existence that is out of the body.

Third, if there is no connection of any substantive sort between our pre-death bodies and our post-resurrection bodies, then in this respect our resurrection bodies are quite unlike Jesus’ resurrection body. In His case, the tomb was empty, and the *stigmata* – the marks of the wounds – were still apparent. Proponents of the new view acknowledge that in this respect our resurrection is unlike Christ’s, but perceive little difficulty in this discontinuity. Ours is not like His in every respect, they say. But this surely stretches the language of “firstfruits” deployed by Paul (1 Cor. 15:20) to connect Jesus’s resurrection with our resurrection. To my ears, it sounds like a quite different harvest.

Fourth, some passages apparently connect our acquisition of resurrection bodies with Jesus’ return: e.g. “But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming” (1 Cor. 15:23). The new view assigns the acquisition of our resurrection bodies to the time of our death. It thus dispenses with both the intermediate state and the link to Jesus’ parousia – but the cost appears very high.

Fifth, the new view is not really demanded by 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 anyway, and it introduces more problems than it solves. Paul may have deployed the strong “groaning” language about not wanting to be “unclothed” but “clothed with our heavenly dwelling” because he knows the inclination of these readers to dispense with the notion of resurrection (hence 1 Cor. 15). Therefore he keeps before them the *ultimate* state toward which we press and for which we groan, lest they lapse again into neo-Platonist error. The new interpretation sounds too much like an attempt to sort out the passage in an abstract way, without taking adequate account of the historical context the apostle is addressing.

D.A. Carson is author of a commentary on the Gospel of John (Eerdmans) and professor of New Testament at Trinity Seminary.