

STAND FIRM IN THE RESURRECTION HOPE (6)

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I am concluding a series on the resurrection body as found in 1 Corinthians 15. I am arguing for the position of historic Christianity that the resurrection body is a qualitatively transformed physical body rather than an altogether new spiritual body, as per Gnosticism.

The “problem” we face

In this article I will focus on 1 Cor. 15:44, which is an important verse that can easily mislead the incautious reader. This verse states of the physical body that dies and is resurrected that:

“It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”

Obviously the phrase “spiritual body” (Gr. *Soma pneumatikon*) is the source of confusion. But this statement does not speak of the substance of the resurrected body. Paul no more states that it is composed of spirit than the statement “*this is a Coca-Cola bottle*” speaks of a bottle composed of Coca-Cola. As James Ware puts it, here “*Paul refers not to a body composed of material spirit but to the risen body of flesh and bones given life by the Spirit of God.*” This is a commonplace interpretation, especially in Reformed theology (e.g., Geerhardus Vos, Richard Gaffin, etc.).

But how are we to understand this verse? It seems so clear. How could historic, orthodox Christianity have developed a doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body as a key component of the essence of its faith with this verse staring it in the face for 2000 years? Especially after Paul declares anyone contradicting his view of the resurrection is a “fool” (1 Cor. 15:36)!

The “spiritual body” explained

In the first place, we must recognize that Paul does not speak of a “*fleshly*” body and a “*spiritual*” body. Had that been his point, he would have called the unresurrected body a *sarkinos* (from Gr. *sarx*, “*flesh*”) body. But “*flesh*” and “*spirit*” are not being contrasted here. We can see this in the unusual fact that he compares a “*soulish*” (Gr. *Psuchikos* from *psyche*, “*soul*”) with the “*spiritual*” (Gr. *Pneumatikos*) body. The *psuchikos* body is clearly not a body made up of soul material, in contrast to a *pneumatikos* body made up of spirit material. Such would be absurd. And Gnostically oriented hyper-preterism is absurd.

What Paul is describing here by “*natural body*” is a body activated or driven by the human soul. Otherwise this would demand that Paul saw our current bodies as

made up purely of soul! This, then, would not be a body such as we live in now, a body of “*flesh and blood*” (as per v. 50).

Rather, the “*soulish/natural body*” and the “*spiritual body*” refer to the body’s source of its life and direction. A soulish body is a body controlled by natural life and its animal appetites and needs. Whereas a spiritual body is a body raised and driven by the Spirit of God. The “*spiritual*” body is the “*Spirit-raised*” and therefore “*Spirit-driven*” body.

In the second place, Paul has already anticipated this understanding earlier in this very epistle. For in 1 Cor. 2:14–15 Paul contrasts the *psuchikos anthropos* (translated “natural man”) with the *pneumatikos* man:

“But a natural man [psuchikos anthropos] does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual [pneumatikos] appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.”

Here Paul is surely not declaring that some men are made of “*spirit*” (*pneuma*) and are to be preferred over those who are made from “*soul*” (*psuchikos*)! Both of these persons are simply flesh-and-blood individuals; one is led by the Spirit, and the other has no concern for the things of the Spirit. That which makes the two different is just this important fact: one is led by the Spirit of God (to *pneuma tou theou*) (2:11), the “*Spirit who is from God*” (to *pneuma to ek tou theou*) (2:12). But the other is not.

In fact, nowhere in Paul’s writings does the adjective *pneumatikos* mean “*made of spirit*” (cp. 1 Cor. 2:15; 3:1; 10:3–4; 14:37). It always speaks of the activity of the Holy Spirit being somehow involved. Consequently, the “*spiritual body*” (15:44) is the resurrected body activated by the Spirit of God.

In the third place, the *soma pneumatikon* speaks of the body resurrected by the Spirit, i.e., given the fullness of eternal life by God’s Spirit. The Holy Spirit is often spoken of by Paul as the primary agent of the resurrection, both of believers and of Christ himself (Rom. 8:9–11, 23; 2 Cor. 5:4–5; Gal. 5:25; 6:7–8). In fact, this is the direct link between the believer and Christ, for “*if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you*” (Rom. 8:11).

Conclusion

In his conclusion to his insightful article on 1 Corinthians 15:36–54, Ware writes (in part):

“In conclusion regarding the soma pneumatikon of 15:44: the syntax of the passage, the lexical evidence of Paul’s key terms in their wider ancient context, Paul’s usage elsewhere in the letter, and the larger context of Paul’s own thought each preclude the notion that the adjectives. “Psychikos” and “pneumatikos” in this

passage refer to the body's composition. Rather, the term soma psuchikon describes the present body as given life by the soul, the life given by the very breath of God (1 Cor. 15:45a, egeneto ho protos anthropos Adam eis psuchen zosan, 'the first man, Adam, became a soul that is living' [echoing Gen 2:7]), but in Adam subject to mortality and decay (1 Cor 15:21–22). In the same way, the term soma pneumatikos describes the resurrected body as given life by the Spirit of God, the life given by Christ, the new Adam (1 Cor 15:45b ... 'The last Adam became a life-giving spirit'), and thus bestowing on the body a mode of existence that is immortal and imperishable (1 Cor. 5:20–26, 42–43, 46–49, 52–54). The soma pneumatikon in Paul's thought is not a body composed of ethereal pneuma but the body of flesh and bones endowed with imperishable life by the power of the Spirit."