

# The Resurrection Sets the Agenda. Eschatology for a Post-Modern World

JAAP DOEDENS

Pápa Reformed Theological Seminary  
e-mail: jaapdoedens@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0003-4451-3871

**ABSTRACT:** In this article, *firstly* I discuss why it is important to have an exegetically sound biblical view on the resurrection for the attractiveness of the church. To attain this, theology – in both the Catholic and the Protestant tradition – should change its approach of eschatology as focusing on “going to heaven when you die” to a view of “participating in a new creation”. *Secondly*, I will give some examples of how the biblical message about the resurrection thus understood can make the mission of the church strong enough to have its own relevant and attractive alternative narrative in a world of competing narratives.

**KEYWORDS:** resurrection, resurrection narratives, empty tomb, eschatology, spiritualized eschatology, Parousia, perception, Artificial Intelligence, Dead Sea Scrolls, church fathers, mission, political correctness.

One of the slogans of the World Council of Churches was the dictum: “The world sets the agenda for the church”. This programmatic line of thought is understandable as a reaction to a complacent church, only dealing with internal discussions, focusing on the ‘wellness’ of its members or busy with maintaining its ‘rules’. Yet, however understandable this slogan may have been in the light of a self-centered Christian community, how can it prevent the church from becoming a puppet at the mercy of whatever political movement or media-hype is pulling the strings? On the contrary, the church should be an actor of the age to come within the present old age.<sup>1</sup> The world setting the agenda for the church means most probably that the biblical view of the age to come will be out of focus, to be replaced by one of the world’s utopias, whichever of them is in vogue at a given time.

It seems, therefore, better to insist that ‘the resurrection sets the agenda’. Why would I specifically propose the resurrection to be our touchstone? I suggest this

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting view is provided by Giorgio Agamben, (*The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2011]), who argues that according to the apostle Paul the present time is a kind of ‘in-between time’, a ‘messianic’ and ‘sabbatical’ time, in which everything is different during the interval between the past and the coming events. For an introduction and evaluation, see N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2015) 315–323.

both because of its strangeness and because of its strength: the resurrection is ‘strange’ enough to prevent the church from becoming complacent and at the same time ‘strong’ enough to let the church have its own character and independence in the face of all kind of demands being made by the world.

The themes I would like to touch upon are *firstly* why it is important for the attractiveness of the church to have an exegetically sound biblical view on the resurrection. *Secondly*, how can the biblical message about the resurrection strengthen the mission of the church to have an own relevant and attractive alternative narrative in a world of competing narratives. And wherever I say church, I could also make it less abstract by referring to people who try to follow the Messiah Jesus.

## 1. A Biblical View on the Resurrection and the Attractiveness of the Church

As N. T. Wright observed in many of his writings, in popular Christian thought eschatology, and thus resurrection, has become ‘spiritualized’ – or ‘platonized’, as he calls it<sup>2</sup> – especially in the Western churches, both Catholic and Protestant. In short, and very much simplified, this consists of the thought that the aim of being a Christian is ‘to go to heaven when you die’. This belief is perhaps not present everywhere: I grew up in a relatively small Dutch Protestant denomination that, by the way, would have rejected the term ‘denomination’ – which perhaps shows something of its theological courage. Anyhow, within this Reformed church, there was a strong theological accent on the importance of God’s covenant with his people. Whatever the disadvantages of this particular brand of theology may have been, its accentuating of God’s covenant resulted in a rather robust view on the resurrection and on the expectation of a new heaven and a new earth. In sermons, one almost never heard about ‘going to heaven’, but often about the coming age of the new creation. Perhaps this gave me a lifelong immunity against viewing the aim of believing in God solely as a means to ‘go to heaven when you die’. Yet indeed, being in Hungary now, I heard sermons and discussions on the theme of resurrection, in which ‘resur-

<sup>2</sup> See N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion* (New York: Harper & Collins 2016) 147. See also Wright’s reference to Ward Blanton (*A Materialism for the Masses: Saint Paul and the Philosophy of Undying Life* [New York: Columbia University Press 2014]), who asserts that the apostle Paul was not a Platonist and therefore Nietzsche’s assumption that Christianity was a kind of “Platonism for the masses”, is wrong; Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 311.

rection' and 'going to heaven' where practically synonyms.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is present in many of the songs of the Hungarian reformed hymnbook in which the eschatological perspective halts at 'arriving in heaven', while resurrection disappears behind the horizon.<sup>4</sup>

However, 'platonizing' or, for that matter, 'spiritualizing' the resurrection is not only the hallmark of an older western pietistic theological tradition, in which it only pertains to the resurrection of believers. It is alive, also, in a more liberal theological approach, yet phrased in modern scientific and epistemological terminology and pertaining to the resurrection of Christ as well. As an example, I take the view of Klaus Nürnberger. According to Nürnberger "the proclamation and the celebration of the presence of the crucified Christ in the fellowship, liturgy, and ritual of the community of believers was ... a fertile field for the growth of legendary and mythological motifs."<sup>5</sup> In his view, one of these legends was the tale about the 'empty tomb'. Nürnberger subsequently formulates his interpretation in the so called scientific theory of emergence, that is, these legends 'emerge' at the spiritual level of conscience<sup>6</sup> and not at the physical or biological levels. He adds that "[a]s an emergent reality, the spiritual level presupposes all lower levels of emergence, from quanta to brains, but it cannot be explained in terms of the latter."<sup>7</sup> It may be true that human conscience is predicated in some way on all the preceding levels from atoms to neurons and neurochemicals, yet cannot be reduced to these. However, these preceding levels cannot be done away with as a new kind of Wittgenstein's ladder.<sup>8</sup> As research in Artificial Intelligence discovered in the last decennia, perception is not so easy a process as was thought previously: it is more than simply looking around and

3 These lines of thought are perhaps rather 'folk-theology' than official systematic theology, see e.g. Jenő Sebestyén, "A feltámadás a református keresztyénség tanítása szerint", *Magyar református önismeret olvasókönyv: Válogatás a XX. század első felének református teológiai irodalmából* (ed. P. Németh) (Budapest: Kálvin kiadó 1997) 267 (originally published in *Kálvinista Szemle*, 1926 april 3 and 10), who explains that biblical Christianity not only teaches the immortality of the soul, but also the resurrection of the body.

4 For examples, see J. Doedens, "Reformáció és eszkatológia: Az Újszövetség eszkatológiai tanítása és a teológiai valóság N. T. Wright elemzésének fényében," *Igaz hit és megújulás: A reformáció teológiájának inspiráló hatása ma* (ed. T. Németh) (Acta Theologica Papensia 17; Pápa: Pápai Református Teológiai Akadémia 2017) 194, nt. 6.

5 K. Nürnberger, "Eschatology and Entropy: An Alternative to Robert John Russell's Proposal", *Zygon* 47 (2012) 986.

6 Nürnberger ("Eschatology and Entropy", 986) mentions "individual and collective conscience". However, it seems questionable whether collective conscience exists at all, at most this would be the unanimity of individual consciences.

7 Nürnberger, "Eschatology and Entropy", 986.

8 Of course, thinking about thinking is a difficult activity; according to the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher William James comparable to "seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks." W. James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Holt 1890) I, 244.

seeing objects. It appears that perception consists of the art of giving value to some and neglecting other objects. Moreover, it turns out that perception somehow has to be embodied. Without the limitations of some kind of framework or ‘body’, perception and subsequently taking intelligent decisions appears to be impossible.<sup>9</sup> Of course, human consciousness cannot be found by studying inorganic or organic patterns, but these patterns may form the ‘carriers’ or ‘latch pins’ for consciousness. The same ‘software’ can be present in different kinds of ‘hardware’, which already indicates that software is not to be reduced to its hardware. Yet without any kind of hardware software cannot exist. In this light, it is perhaps not without reason that the Christian tradition and theology underlined the importance of bodily resurrection and did not think in terms of a resurrection of disembodied souls. The spiritual level is important but it appears that in one way or another some sort of physicality is vital for humans to fully exist.<sup>10</sup>

If we see resurrection solely as a spiritual event, the word ‘resurrection’ means that the crucified Christ lives on in celebration and proclamation. In that case, one kind of spiritual experience – proclamation and celebration – evokes the other spiritual experience of the belief in resurrection. In this view, both of these spiritual events caused the coming into existence of the narratives heavily predicated on the physical element – the stories about the empty tomb and people meeting with the risen Jesus. By the way, this appears to be something similar to saying that the Jewish yearly commemoration of the destruction of the temple gave rise to the belief that the temple had already been rebuilt. A quick reality check looking for wood and stones of a building would have prompted the answer that such is far too materialistic an approach and that at a spiritual level the temple is existing. Resurrection thus viewed on a spiritual level nicely avoids, of course, any collision with a scientific worldview. It has even a ring of truth: the reality of a spiritual experience can hardly be denied. The only problem is that such a view on the resurrection of Jesus goes against the grain of history. For why should already the *first* witnesses have spoken about resurrection? If belief in the resurrection of the Messiah came about along the lines of celebration of his *death*, perhaps *later* generations might have called such

9 See e.g. the congress volume on artificial intelligence exploiting principles that determine biological processes: L. Steels – R. A. Brooks (eds.), *The Artificial Life Route to Artificial Intelligence: Building Embodied, Situated Agents* (London: Routledge 1995) 2: “Cognition depends on the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities.”

10 This physicality might also be viewed in the – speculative but insightful – way as suggested by C. S. Lewis, in his short novel *The Great Divorce*, in which eschatological physicality is described as far stronger than the present physicality which is displayed as only a shadow-like existence compared to the reality of a new creation. Lewis’s view, as mentioned, is speculative but perhaps fits the description in the Gospels about the risen Jesus appearing through closed doors. (See C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* [New York: Macmillan 1946]).

a celebration an ‘acted out’ narrative about ‘resurrection’,<sup>11</sup> although even this is not the most logical development. Yet why would the *first* witnesses have used the term ‘resurrection’ if nothing of the sort had happened and ‘celebration’ had not even begun to arise?

If the story of the ‘empty tomb’ really were a legend grown on the fertile soil of proclamation and celebration of a crucified – and therefore dead – Messiah, why should Jesus’s grave necessarily have been empty according to these legends? Such would probably even complicate the proclamation and celebration of his death. Jews held the graves of the patriarchs and kings in great respect, exactly for the reason that those graves were *not* empty.<sup>12</sup> And besides, an empty burial site is as such not really a miracle. Egyptologists, for example, regularly experience this phenomenon, such to their great dismay. Moreover, if the ‘empty-grave-legend’ has to be considered as a later development, why would the Gospel of John, commonly seen as the latest canonical gospel, tell us that Jesus’s tomb was not empty at all? We should notice that according to John 20:4–9 the grave was not empty on that Easter Sunday morning. When John, outrunning Peter, reaches the tomb, he stoops to look in and sees that the linen clothes were there. We can imagine a relieved reaction: the story of Mary Magdalene is not true; happily, Jesus’s body is still here. Subsequently Peter arrives, he does the closer inspection by going into the tomb. Only then it turns out that what looked like a body is actually an empty cocoon of textile, because the linen cloth that covered the head is lying apart. John 20:7 describes it in a seemingly redundant way as: “rolled up in one place by itself”.<sup>13</sup> The other gospels use the same verb to describe how Joseph of Arimathea wraps the body of Jesus in a clean linen cloth.<sup>14</sup> When we remember that John already told that Nicodemus brought a hundred pound mixture of myrrh and aloes for the burial,<sup>15</sup> John’s way of describing the appearance of the linen cloths in the tomb becomes clear. The spices soaked up in the textile gave it the form of a body. No wonder that John calmed down by having a quick look upon arrival at the tomb. The real shock came when the two men discovered that the bandages around the body were separated from the covering of the face and, moreover, they were like an empty cocoon. Yet why would anyone in his right mind take away a corpse without the shroud in which it was

11 As the Gnostics did by calling the escape from earthly fetters ‘resurrection’, see e.g. B. Layton, *The Gnostic Treatise on Resurrection from Nag Hammadi* (HDR 12; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press 1979).

12 See e.g. Acts 2:29.

13 John 20:7 “ἐνετετυλιγμένον εἰς ἓνα τόπον”.

14 Matth 27:59 “Καὶ λαβὼν τὸ σῶμα ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἐνετύλιξεν αὐτὸ [ἐν] σινδόνι καθαρᾷ”; Luke 23:53 “καὶ καθελῶν ἐνετύλιξεν αὐτὸ σινδόνι”.

15 John 19:39–40. Mark 16:1 and Luke 24:1 only tell that the women prepared spices to anoint Jesus’s body after the Shabbat. This is not necessarily a contradiction; the flow of information among Jesus’s followers was in all likelihood not quite optimal during and after the crucifixion.

wrapped? And even if such a distasteful thing would have happened, how could these textiles still have retained the form of the body?

The whole narrative in the Gospel of John about what happened that Easter morning looks more like the report of an eyewitness than like a later pious legend. If true, Jesus's resurrection must be more than only a spiritual experience of his followers, while his body remained in the tomb. This was simply not what was meant in the first century CE by the word 'resurrection'. We know this, because the importance of physicality connected with the belief in resurrection is also present in Second Temple Jewish thought. One text among the Dead Sea Scrolls refers to "the new creation".<sup>16</sup> Other descriptions in the scrolls mention the "eternal enjoyment with endless life"<sup>17</sup> for the ones who live righteously and for the ones who do evil "permanent terror and shame without end with the humiliation of destruction by the fire of the dark regions".<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the clearest allusions to resurrection, eternal life, and the renewal of creation can be found in the Psalms from Qumran, the so called *Hodayot*.<sup>19</sup> There, eternal life is not another way of describing 'authentic life',<sup>20</sup> but authentic life results – by the grace of God – in eternal life. However vague these eschatological descriptions

16 1QS col IV,23–26 "Until now the spirits of truth and injustice feud in the heart of man: 24 they walk in wisdom or in folly. In agreement with man's inheritance in the truth, he shall be righteous and so abhor injustice; and according to his share in the lot of injustice, he shall act wickedly in it, and so 25 abhor the truth. For God has sorted them into equal parts *until the appointed end and the new creation* (אל עד קץ בהרצה ועשות חדשה). He knows the result of their deeds for all times 26 [everlast]ing and has given them as a legacy to the sons of man so that they know good [and evil ... and] to cast the lots of every living being according to his spirit in [... until the time of] the visitation." For text and translation, see F. García Martínez – E. J. C. Tigchelaar (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill 2000) 78–79.

17 1QS col IV,7: "ושמחת עולמים בחיי נצח", see Martínez – Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 76–77.

18 1QS col IV,12–13, see Martínez – Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 76–77.

19 1QH<sup>a</sup> col XIX,10–14: "For the sake of your glory, you have purified man from offence, so that he can make himself holy 11 for you from every impure abominations and guilt of unfaithfulness, to become united wi[th] the sons of your truth and in the lot with 12 your holy ones, to raise the worms of the dead from the dust (להרים מעפר תולעת מתים), to an ever[lasting] community and from a depraved spirit, to [your] knowledge, 13 so that he can take his place in your presence with the perpetual host and the spirits [...], to renew him (להתחדש) with everything 14 that will exist, and with those who know in a community of jubilation." Martínez – Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 188–189. See further 1QH<sup>a</sup> col XIX,25–27: "25 for ever and ever they bless you, to the extent of [their] knowledge, [day after d]ay they proclaim together, 26 with a joyous voice. There will be neither anguish nor sighing, and injustice [will not be found anymore]. But your truth will be displayed 27 for endless glory and eternal peace," Martínez – Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 190–191; 1QH<sup>a</sup> col XXI,12–17: "For 12 [...] you have [gi]ven to the ear of dust, and you have inscribed for ever what is to happen in the heart of 13 [stone ...] you have made stop, to bring into the covenant with you and so that he will stand 14 [in your presence ...] in the everlasting residence, in the light of perfect light for ever, without darkness 15 [... with]ut end, and eras of peace without li[mits ...] 16 [...] And I, creature of dust [...] 17 [...] I will open [...]" Martínez – Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 194–195.

20 See Nürnberger, "Eschatology and Entropy", 990: "Eternal life for us can only mean authentic human life."

in the Psalms of Qumran may be, they witness that there is hope for the people of God, even beyond death. Moreover, eternal life is viewed as more than a spiritual experience in the present or in the future.

All this spiritualizing of the resurrection is more than a mere theological debate without much consequence, whether in a traditional form of the eternal immaterial life of the soul or in a modern form of ‘living on in God’s memory’.<sup>21</sup> In the traditional view the present disappears out of sight, while in the modern view the future evaporates. This has far-reaching consequences, especially for the missionary strength of the church. When we define the aim of believing in God as ‘this is how you go to heaven’, the message of the church automatically becomes associated with death and dying. By itself, this theme is not quite a popular perspective to ponder on. Most young people think therefore that ‘church’ is something for elderly people. Of course, they know everyone has to die, but probably not today. They think it is early enough to deal with thinking about God and church when death becomes inevitable. Moreover, if they happen to go to church, seeing mostly older people strengthens them in this opinion. This whole mindset appears to have become the default approach inside and outside the church in western society in the course of the last centuries. Just as an illustration: recently a British newspaper published an article entitled: “Fears for Church of England’s Future as People No Longer Turn to God in Old Age”.<sup>22</sup> The hidden premise is, of course, that such is what you are supposed to do in old age, when you have got no other options, and that the aim of being a Christian is ‘to go to heaven when you die’. As an antidote to the thought that such a last-minute conversion will be sufficient, some evangelization methods visualize rather vividly – and perhaps morbidly – that who thinks that he or she can still become a Christian at five to twelve, may die in an accident at eleven o’clock. All considered, this seems to be more a form of pious blackmailing than sharing the Good News. However, these ‘evangelization’ methods share the common assumption that the reason for becoming a Christian is ‘to go to heaven when you die’. In short: spiritualizing the resurrection is hardly Good News.

Yet how did this spiritualizing tendency enter Christian theology at all? One can point at the influence of ‘Neo-Platonism’ and this is certainly true. Yet, would this philosophy have had a chance if there were no elements in the New Testament that seemingly pointed into the direction of the ultimate aim for humans of ‘going to heaven’? We can think of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11 about the appearance of Christ, when the ‘dead in Christ’ will rise and the ones alive at that moment will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in

21 See e.g. Nürnberger, “Eschatology and Entropy”, 991: “Having been part of the ongoing ‘life of God’ its cosmic significance – sometimes conceptualized as the ‘memory of God’ – can never be lost.”

22 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/06/fears-church-englands-future-people-no-longer-turn-god-old-age/>

the air.<sup>23</sup> However, with sufficient knowledge of the Greco-Roman culture, it is clear that in Paul's metaphor about "meeting the Lord in the air",<sup>24</sup> the word he uses here for 'meeting', ἀπάντησις, is a shorthand for going out to welcome an arriving king or emperor, and subsequently going on together into the direction this head of state was already traveling (1 Thess 4:17).<sup>25</sup> Which direction in the case of Jesus's *Parousia* is the earth and not the heaven.

Another candidate for the origins of concentrating on a disembodied heavenly life as the mode of resurrection are the words of Jesus about becoming like the angels in the resurrection. We find this saying in Luke 20:36 and parallels, in which Jesus states that "the ones who are deemed worthy to the coming age and the resurrection,<sup>26</sup> ... will be *like angels*."<sup>27</sup> Because angels were thought of as having no corporeal substance,<sup>28</sup> the conclusion could be drawn quickly that if the people who participate in the resurrection are like angels, they, too, will be disembodied souls.<sup>29</sup> Even recent biblical scholarship explains the saying about being equal to the angels in this way that resurrection means receiving some kind of angelic existence.<sup>30</sup>

23 1 Thess 4:17 "ἔπειτα ἡμεῖς οἱ ζῶντες οἱ περιλειπόμενοι ἅμα σὺν αὐτοῖς ἀρπαγησόμεθα ἐν νεφέλαις εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἀέρα".

24 1 Thess 4:17 "εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου εἰς ἀέρα".

25 See J. van Eck, *Paulus en de koningen: Politieke aspecten van het boek Handelingen* (Franeker: Van Wijnen 1989) 83–85.

26 Interestingly, resurrection is referred to only with respect to its positive side, and not, as in Dan 12:2, and in IQS col IV,2–14, where there is a resurrection both as vindication of the righteous and of eternal punishment for the wicked.

27 Luke 20:36: ἰσάγγελοι, cf. Matt 22:30 „ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ εἰσιν,” Mark 12:25 „εἰσιν ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς”.

28 The earliest tradition still considered the angels to be of a very light ethereal substance, cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Quaestio 50:1–2; 51:1, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Rome: Forzani, 1920) I, 398–402, 406–408.

29 See e.g. Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion*, III, 9: "He has promised that He will one day form men into angels, who once formed angels into men", transl. Schaff, *ANF* III, 543; Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 26 (Schaff, *ANF* III, 986); Origen, *Against Celsus*, IV, 29: "angels are superior to men; so that men, when made perfect, become like the angels" (Schaff, *ANF* IV, 888); Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitions* III, 30: "[A]ngels, who are spirits, see God; and therefore men, as long as they are men, cannot see Him. But after the resurrection of the dead, when they shall have been made like the angels, they shall be able to see God." (Schaff, *ANF* VIII, 197); Pseudo-Clement, *Homilies* XVII, 16: "for in the resurrection of the dead, when they have been changed, as far as their bodies are concerned, into light, and become like the angels, they shall be able to see Him." (Schaff, *ANF* VIII, 574–575).

30 See Philip R. Davies, "Death, Resurrection, and Life after Death in the Qumran Scrolls", *Judaism in Late Antiquity, IV, Death, Life-After-Death, Resurrection and the World-to-Come in the Judaism of Antiquity* (ed. A. J. Avery-Peck – J. Neusner) (Leiden: Brill 2000) 195: "The possible difference between Enoch and Daniel over whether the dead are raised bodily (Daniel) or in spirit (Enoch) is less important, however, than what they share: a belief that the righteous will live for ever in some (quasi-?) angelic form," followed by a footnote reading "See Luke 20:36 for an even more explicit statement in this regard: 'like angels' (Greek *isaggeloi*)."

However, Jesus's statement that those who will attain the resurrection will be equal to angels is definitely not about becoming a disembodied soul.<sup>31</sup> The context is that Sadducees, who are known to have denied the resurrection,<sup>32</sup> question Jesus on this belief. By a rather exaggerated example of a levirate marriage prescribed by the Torah, they try to demonstrate how the resurrection could lead to severe juridical complications of seven brothers sharing one wife. According to the story they present to Jesus, these men had been the woman's subsequent husbands during their earthly life, yet in the resurrection, all of them simultaneously could claim to be her rightful husband. It is, by the way, not quite sure whether the other way around, that is, one husband having seven wives at the same time would have posed a similarly unsurmountable problem for them. This in Old Testament times acceptable and in the view of some men perhaps even enjoyable situation might, however, have turned out to be not so easy to handle in practice, as the same Old Testament regularly indicates. Anyhow, Jesus shows that if they think resurrection will result in absurd situations and is therefore absurd by itself, their view on resurrection is too naive. They are simply applying the rules

31 In some of the churchfathers this exegetical approach to Luke 20:36 can also be found, see e.g. Methodius, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, 1,12: "[W]hen He says that the saints shall in the resurrection be like the angels, we do not understand Him to assert that they will then be actually angels, but approaching to the condition of angels. So that it is most unreasonable to say, 'Since Christ declared that the saints in the resurrection appear as angels, therefore their bodies do not rise'," (Schaff, *ANF* 6, 618); Jerome, *Letters*, LXXV,2: "Now when it is said that they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are as the angels in heaven, there is no taking away of a natural and real body but only an indication of the greatness of the glory to come. For the words are not 'they shall be angels' but 'they shall be as the angels': thus while likeness to the angels is promised identity with them is refused. 'They shall be,' Christ tells us, 'as the angels,' that is like the angels; therefore they will not cease to be human", transl. Ph. Schaff *et al.* (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1991) 332.

32 See Luke 20:27. According to N. T. Wright (*The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1992] 211–212), there might have been political reasons, too, for the Sadducees' denial of resurrection. For those belonging to, or at least associating with the governing class, the idea of resurrection with its built-in concept of being brought to account is usually not the most attractive theological concept. It is, however, also possible to have a more positive stance towards the view of the Sadducees. Perhaps their non-acceptance of the resurrection was connected to their rejection of a common ancient Near Eastern view on death and afterlife, in which deceased persons lived on in a way that hardly could be described as life. It was more a subhuman way of existence in the netherworld, going on as spirits who had to toil on immortally among ooze, decay and slime. See T. J. Lewis, "Dead", *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. van der Toorn – B. Becking – P. W. van der Horst) (Leiden – Grand Rapids, MI: Brill – Eerdmans 2000) 225–227. It is obvious that they knew the Old Testament texts referring to resurrection, but they allegedly preferred the Torah, where they did not find evidence about resurrection. This explains Jesus's creative reading of the Torah, when he explains that God, when meeting Moses at the burning bush, presented himself as being the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Luke 20:37–38. Jesus asks their attention for the fact that this saying is in the present tense, God *is* (and not was) the God of the patriarchs, for he is not the God of the dead, but of the living. Thus, he affirms that resurrection is not a concept that is strange to the Torah.

of the present age onto the age to come. Jesus tells them in what way the reality after the resurrection differs from the present one. Marriage will be not necessary anymore, for people “cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and sons of God.”<sup>33</sup> The reference to being like the angels is, therefore, not a statement about what form the righteous will receive following the resurrection, but an affirmation that they will become *immortal* – in that way equal to the angels.<sup>34</sup>

## 2. Resurrection and the Alternative Narrative of the Church

The resurrection sets the agenda. I think this is important, because there are too many cases in which the church readily accepts the political or the social agendas.

One example of this I experienced this summer when during worship suddenly at the place of the Apostles’ Creed appeared a ‘Confession of the Migrant’, which the pastor introduced by saying that he found it on the Internet and he liked it. This confession recalled that Joseph and Mary, with the infant Jesus, were refugees in Egypt. Moreover, it described the Holy Spirit as ‘the eternal Migrant’. While listening, my theological conscience woke up and I tried to figure out why I felt uneasy. After all, no concrete political statements were made, and most of the contents of this confession were not untrue. Until it deemed to me, that the mere fact of such a confession was a political statement by itself. Anyone present who thought that the political stories and the media-coverings of the theme of ‘migration’ are oversimplified and more complex than just saying that we should accept anyone who chooses to leave his or her country for whatever reason, becomes a kind of heretic. According to what this ‘confession’ implied, God automatically chooses the side of migrants. The question is whether in our theological approach we learned anything from the past. Perhaps it is true, as a historian once phrased paradoxically, that “from history we can learn nothing, and not even that.” Anyhow, we have had already theological schools of thought with similar statements that God is always on the side of the poor and the oppressed. This is the God-in-favor-of-the-victims theology. The only problem is, however, that we can divide humanity into an endless amount of groups, oppressed ones and oppressors, along ethnic, social, cultural, or religious borders. If we adapt our confession of faith to the latest fashion, we hardly can escape participating in the tribal wars of the present age between all those groups. For we will see that in cultures where the gospel of Jesus Christ is disappearing from public discourse,

<sup>33</sup> Luke 20:36.

<sup>34</sup> It appears that Jesus at the same time subtly criticizes another unbelief of the Sadducees, namely their not believing the existence of angels, see Acts 23:8: “For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledged them all.”

tribal wars are coming up anew. Those conflicts seem to me a consequence of what we could call alternative religions, but what the Bible calls idolatry. So my question is: How can the church have its own stance in these clash of worldviews, if we give up our own narrative? Interestingly, the older literature on missiology did not talk about ‘dialogue’ with the world, as if all worldviews were equal, but about an ‘*elenctic*’ approach of unmasking false religion and idolatry, and convincing the world of the truth. This sounds less friendly, yet interestingly enough, Jesus mentions ‘unmasking’ as one of the activities of the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup>

A similar phenomenon of taking over the narrative of the world appeared during the height of the so called ‘me too’-movement. Suddenly pastors suggested on Facebook to dedicate a Sunday service to the theme of the abuse of women by men. Besides the fact that to me this is more a case of so called ‘virtue signaling’ – the church trying to say to the world: ‘we too’ – it also skews the Christian teaching that both men and women are sinners. Why should only men be depicted as brutes and potential abusers? Why does the church play the same tune as the world with its identity politics? Whom do we want to please by doing so? Why don’t we see that this ‘me too’-movement fits into a far more complex propaganda, with aims that are rather vague<sup>36</sup> – and probably on purpose so?

So my main question is: Why does the church not propose its own alternative biblical narrative, without espousing unreflectively the political left or right? That narrative does not have to be as true-but-boring as I mentioned above, in the way that the church can do no more than stating that all humans are sinners and that God ‘does not show favoritism’.<sup>37</sup> In many ways an own alternative attractive narrative is a more effective strategy than only fighting against an opposite narrative. Fighting evokes usually only hostility, while a narrative can be inviting and kindle a desire to know more. Exactly the belief in the resurrection may result in an attractive narrative, in which all kinds of group divisions and the accompanying ‘tribal wars’ can be overcome. Because we believe that every human is created in the image of God. This is far more fruitful an anthropology than seeing every human only as an avatar of his or her social group. At the same time, this narrative of the church can refute idolatry in whatever form.

35 John 16:8 “Καὶ ἐλθὼν ἐκεῖνος ἐλέγξει τὸν κόσμον περὶ ἁμαρτίας καὶ περὶ δικαιοσύνης καὶ περὶ κρίσεως”. It is also the task of the ἐπίσκοπος, according to Tit 1:9, and of Titus himself, Tit 1:13.

36 Moreover, this ‘movement’ hands over judgment into the hands of the general public and/or the (‘clickbait’ dependent) media, and, in doing so, it deems unnecessary the carefully balanced legal system evolved in western societies, in which the accused is considered to be innocent until the contrary has been proved. Civilization is leaving this behind to its own peril, which can easily result in a postmodern form of mob lynching.

37 See Rom 2:11 “οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν προσωποληψία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ”; Ef 6:9 “εἰδότες ὅτι καὶ αὐτῶν καὶ ὑμῶν ὁ κύριός ἐστιν ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ προσωποληψία οὐκ ἔστιν παρ’ αὐτῷ”; Col 3:25 “ὁ γὰρ ἀδικῶν κομίζεται ὁ ἠδίκησεν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν προσωποληψία”; 1 Peter 1:17 “εἰ πατέρα ἐπικαλεῖσθε τὸν ἀπροσωπολήπτως κρίνοντα κατὰ τὸ ἐκάστου ἔργον”.

Maybe at first sight a worldly narrative in churchly outfit does not seem untrue. On closer inspection, however, it turns out to be out of focus, in a similar way as when someone who reads the story about Noah building the ark, comments that God's command to coat the ark inside and outside with pitch (Gen 6:14) is not quite an environmental-friendly way of painting. That is true, but it is not to the point.

The problem with a worldly narrative in theological attire is that it mostly presumes human goodness and is aiming at some kind of utopia. That is why these narratives entering theology are sometimes difficult to unmask – utopias are somehow reflecting wished-for situations, even if we know that they perhaps can never be achieved. Here, the theological dictum about the 'already but not yet' could be helpful. As followers of Christ, we could theologially defend that we should strive for a global society in which everyone is accepted equally, underlining the 'already' part of the sentence. This makes Christians innocent as doves. One could also stress the 'not yet' part, and argue that there is a lot of malevolence in the world, cautioning us not to be naive. This makes Christians wise as serpents.<sup>38</sup> Yet perhaps the 'already but not yet' dictum could be viewed more clearly in the light of the resurrection. Seen in the light of the resurrection of Christ, we know that our Lord has risen from the dead, he lives and cannot die anymore. This is the 'already' part. We, as his followers, will be resurrected, by the grace of God. This is the 'not yet' constituent. As far as we are 'in Christ', the life-power of the Messiah influences our lives in a way that we act out the strength of the future within the present. Here, the 'already' and 'not yet' come together.

'Not yet' says: there is hope. The 'already' tells us that this hope is more than a kind of 'opium for the masses', wishful thinking, or a last resort, if no other options remain when being confronted with the end of life. Quite the opposite: it includes participating in God's project to bring about a new creation, seeing how the coming age begins to permeate the present age. Such a narrative is far more exciting and stimulating, for people of all ages.

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, viewing the position of Christians within a post-modern world from the perspective of the resurrection of Christ has the following requirements and can have significant advantages:

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<sup>38</sup> See Matth 10:16 "γίνεσθε οὐν φρόνιμοι ὡς οἱ ὄφεις καὶ ἀκέραιοι ὡς αἱ περιστέραί".

- The resurrection is surprising enough to keep the church away from complacency and at the same time fortifying Christians to tell the biblical narrative as an appealing alternative within the world of competing narratives.
- The resurrection of Christ has to be viewed as more than a pious tale originating from the spiritual experiences of the celebration of the meaning of Jesus's life within the early church; it has to be accepted – based on the testimony of witnesses from the first century A.D. – as a historical encounter with the resurrected Messiah.
- Christian theology and life permeated by the resurrection can correct 'platonizing' ways of believing according to which the aim of Christian faith is 'to go to heaven when you die'. Alternatively, it can concentrate on – and act accordingly to – the overarching motif within the biblical narrative that it is God's aim to restore his creation and bring heaven and earth together again.
- By its future-opening character, the resurrection of Christ can strengthen the mission of the church in the world, reminding the church that there is no need to adapt its message to the agendas, the varying utopias, and the political correctness of a post-modern society.

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