

Born to Win

On Death & Resurrection #1

by Ronald L. Dart

I was reading a theological argument recently about people the author called “Primitive Christians”. I’m not sure why, but that term bothered me; so I looked it up. “Primitive” means...

1. of or existing in the beginning or the earliest times or ages; ancient; original

Webster’s New World Dictionary - “primitive”

Now, I decided I could live with that; but then there was another definition that followed that one. It was two-fold:

2. a. characteristic or imitative of the earliest ages
b. crude, simple, rough, uncivilized, etc.

Webster’s New World Dictionary - “primitive”

Now, this I think is why the term bothered me. True, some of the disciples may have been rough men, some were fishermen, but they were no more uncivilized than a couple of rednecks in a bass boat, you know. They knew how to do what they were doing. Now, to be fair, the author I was reading was using the word in the first sense—he meant “original”—but I think a lot of theologians think of primitive Christians in the second sense—that is, crude, unknowledgeable, unsophisticated—and that gives them (in their own mind) the latitude to improve or refine the *message* of the New Testament.

Now, to get away from the ambiguity of the word “primitive”, I will speak in terms of “the First Christians”. The First Christians were ordinary people just like us. What made them extra-ordinary was their *day-to-day contact with Jesus*. These very first Christians walked up and down the roads with him, they slept on the ground at night out with him, they watched him, they listened to him, they heard his messages.

The author I was reading underlined something I had thought of but I hadn’t brought it to the refinement that he developed it. His name was Oscar Cullmann. He was a Swiss theologian who died at the age of 97 in Chamonix in Switzerland. The book I was reading was published in 1956, and it was titled *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?: The Witness of the New Testament*. Cullmann was a theologian in the Lutheran tradition, which made his book all the more surprising. He’s an example, in a way, of the kind of things scholars do. They can’t get anywhere by hewing to the line of this or that doctrinal statement or creed. If they’re worthy of the name “scholar”, if their research takes them down a road, they have to follow it where it goes. They can’t decide, “Well, I don’t believe that; I won’t go down that road.” Now, this has results good and bad depending on who we’re talking about and who is doing the talking;

but the best of them are merely telling you what they think they have found. They are making the argument, and it's up to you to decide what you're going to do with it.

The timing of my finding this book was serendipitous in that I had just come across a book by the Anglican Bishop of Durham which came to some of the same conclusions, advanced the same heretical idea: that Christians don't go straight to heaven when they die—at least not in the conventional sense. Lamentably, much of the work of scholars never finds its way to your pulpit...for two reasons: One, your pastor doesn't have a lot of *time* to read theology. It's hard work. Two, it's a lot easier not to disturb your complacency and then have to deal with all your questions. And you probably could figure that out for yourself. And so they keep on teaching what your church has always taught, and they hew to the line of your creeds, and they don't bother disturbing you with things they may have discovered or found. But since I am not your pastor, I can take a chance at kicking over an anthill and seeing what we find.

Now, if you've been blessed with a good Bible teacher, or some good books about the Bible, you *already* know that a lot has been said about the influence of Greek philosophy on the Christian faith. Some of it is even true. After all, the New Testament was written originally in the Greek language, and the language reflects a Greek worldview to that extent. That said, every author of every book of the New Testament appears to have been *Jewish*, and it's a *Jewish* worldview that is seen in the pages of the Greek text. And so you have this little combination of things from the first century that you have to work with when you sit down to read through the New Testament. There are, though, *two* Greeks whose ideas *did* have a considerable influence among 2nd- and 3rd-generation Christians. Their names are familiar: Socrates and Plato. Socrates was a philosopher; and what we know of his philosophy we learn from Plato and his works like the *Phaedo*. Oscar Cullmann calls it:

[...] perhaps the highest and most sublime doctrine ever presented on the immortality of the soul.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

(I thought that was kind of a strange argument when you consider the immortality of the soul is a fundamental *Christian* doctrine, and it's a Greek philosopher who gives us the most sublime presentation of the whole thing.)

Now, the arguments offered for the immortality of the soul are well known and they may even sound familiar to you. They line up this way: First...

Our body is only an outer garment which, as long as we live, prevents our soul from moving freely and from living in conformity to its proper eternal essence. It imposes upon the soul a law which is not appropriate to it. The soul, confined within the body, belongs to the eternal world. As long as we live, our soul finds itself in a prison, that is, in a body essentially alien to it. Death, in fact, is the great liberator. It looses the chains, since it leads the soul out of the prison of the body and back to its eternal home.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

Now, mind you, this is coming from a *Greek philosopher*.

Since body and soul are radically different from one another and belong to different worlds, the destruction of the body cannot mean the destruction of the soul, any more than a musical composition can be destroyed when the instrument is destroyed.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

Thus, he reasoned that the real man—the *inner* man, the soul—could not be destroyed. Now, that’s not far from the belief, I think, of an awful lot of Christian people; and yet here we have these Christian theologians who come along and say, “Hold on a minute.” Cullmann goes on to say:

Although the proofs of the immortality of the soul do not have for Socrates himself the same value as the proofs of a mathematical theorem, [...]

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

In other words, he doesn’t feel that they’re locked in.

[...] they nevertheless attain within their own sphere the highest possible degree of validity, and make immortality so probable that it amounts to a ‘fair chance’ for man.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

Well, you can kind of see why a philosopher would *want* to think that way, and why many people to our own day *do* think that way. They think, “Surely there is something beyond this pale. Surely there’s something.” And, of course, they realize that there is something like a soul or a spirit in man. “*Surely* it must live on.” Well, Cullmann said:

And when the great Socrates traced the arguments for immortality in his address to his disciples on the day of his death, he did not merely *teach* this doctrine: at that moment he lived his doctrine. He showed how we serve the freedom of the soul, even in this present life, when we occupy ourselves with the eternal truths of philosophy. For through philosophy we penetrate into that eternal world of ideas to which the soul belongs, and we free the soul from the prison of the body. Death does no more than complete this liberation.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

This is the argument that Socrates advances.

Plato shows us how Socrates goes to his death in complete peace and composure. The death of Socrates is a beautiful death. Nothing is seen here of death’s terror. Socrates cannot fear death, since indeed it sets us free from the body. Whoever fears death proves that he loves the world of the body, that he is thoroughly entangled in the world of sense. Death is the soul’s great friend. So he teaches; and so, in wonderful harmony with his teaching, he dies—this man who embodied the Greek world in its noblest form.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

You know, until I read Cullmann’s summary of the death of Socrates, I only had the vaguest notion of Socrates’ philosophy and death. The problem with this man was that his...

[...] Paradoxical wisdom made the prominent Athenians he publicly questioned look foolish, turning them against him and leading to accusations of wrongdoing. Socrates defended his role as

a gadfly until the end: at his trial, when Socrates is asked to propose his own punishment [*Wow.*], he suggests a wage paid by the government instead, to finance the time he spends as Athens' benefactor. He was nevertheless found guilty of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens and sentenced to death [after rejecting exile] by drinking a mixture containing poison hemlock.

Wikipedia - "Socrates"

Now, why is this important and how does it relate to Christian doctrine? The next thing Oscar Cullmann does is to contrast the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus. He says:

And now let us hear how Jesus dies. In Gethsemane He knows that death stands before him, just as Socrates expected death on his last day. The Synoptic Evangelists furnish us, by and large, with a unanimous report.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

Now, here we come up against a fundamental question: What did the First Christians believe about *death*? Did it comport at all, did it compare or match up with Greek philosophy in any way? The fact is, their beliefs would have been formed by their experience, by the reading of the Old Testament, but more than anything else by the example and the teaching of Jesus. How does it vary from the death-view of Socrates? Take Mark 14—his description of the events in the Garden of Gethsemane—beginning in verse 32:

Mark 14

NIV '84

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."

³³ He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.

³⁴ "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

³⁵ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.

He is *not* at peace. He is *not* comfortable in the face of death. He's not looking forward to it as a liberation—as a release—from the body. Matthew's account—in chapter 26, verse 36:

Matthew 26

AKJV

³⁶ Then comes Jesus with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, Sit you here, while I go and pray yonder.

³⁷ And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy.

³⁸ Then said he to them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even to death: tarry you here, and watch with me.

³⁹ And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as you will.

⁴⁰ And he comes to the disciples, and finds them asleep, and said to Peter, What, could you not watch with me one hour?

⁴¹ Watch and pray[...]

⁴² He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, your will be done.

Luke takes it even a step further—in Luke 22, verse 41:

Luke 22

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⁴¹ And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed,

⁴² Saying, Father, if you be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done.

⁴³ And there appeared an angel to him from heaven, strengthening him.

⁴⁴ And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Now you know, I have read these accounts countless times. I...I go through them again and again and I'm touched and moved by my savior's agony on this night; but I was strangely touched by Oscar Cullmann's description of this night and his *contrast* that he drew with the approach to death by Socrates. He said this:

[I]t is completely impossible to explain away the 'distress' in the face of death, and also in view of the fact that Jesus is abandoned by God on the cross (Mark 15³⁴), it is not possible to explain the Gethsemane scene except through this distress at the prospect of being abandoned by God, an abandonment which will be the work of Death, God's great enemy.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

And this next thing he points out I have long understood:

Jesus is afraid, though not as a coward would be of the men who will kill Him, still less of the pain and grief which precede death. He is afraid in the face of death itself.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

I would have to say: This is really sharply at variance with anything Socrates thought about the way man died; but *this* is what the early church *understood* about Jesus. It's what the First Christians believed because they *heard it from him*. If you've ever asked yourself, "Well, how did they know what Jesus prayed in the garden?", we'll come to that. Cullmann continues:

Death for Him is not something divine: it is something dreadful.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

Is there any way that we can argue with that? I don't see how.

Jesus does not want to be alone in this moment. He knows, of course, that the Father stands by to help Him. He looks to Him in this decisive moment as He has done throughout his life. He turns to Him with all His human fear of this great enemy, death. He is afraid of death.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

And, to tell you the truth, looking at this I think about how Jesus was tempted in all points like we are without sin [Hebrews 4:15]. It was necessary that he go through this hour. I mean, we live our whole lives in fear of death. Death stalks our tracks at every step of our life, and we all know day by day that we're just going to be here a while and then we're going to be gone. So Jesus *also* had to face death in the same fear that we feel. Cullmann goes on:

It is useless to try to explain away Jesus' fear as reported by the Evangelists. The opponents of Christianity who already in the first centuries made the contrast between the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus saw more clearly here than the exponents of Christianity. He was really afraid. Here is nothing of the composure of Socrates, who met death peacefully as a friend. To be sure, Jesus already knows the task which has been given Him: to suffer death; and He has already spoken the words: 'I have a baptism with which I must be baptized, and *how distressed* (or *afraid*) *I am* until it is accomplished' (Luke 19⁵⁰). Now, when God's enemy stands before Him, He cries to God, whose omnipotence He knows: 'All things are possible with thee; let this cup pass from me' (Mark 14³⁶). And when He concludes, 'Yet not as I will, but as thou wilt', this does not mean that at the last He, like Socrates, he regards death as the friend, the liberator. No, He means only this: If this greatest of all terrors, death, must befall Me according to Thy will, then I submit to this horror. Jesus knows that in itself, because death is the enemy of God, to die means to be utterly forsaken. Therefore He cries to God; in face of this enemy of God He does not want to be alone.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

And I'll tell you, that is *so* profound. He goes on:

He wants to remain as closely tied to God as He has been throughout His whole earthly life. For whoever is in the hands of death is no longer in the hands of God, but in the hands of God's enemy. At this moment, Jesus seeks the assistance, not only of God, but even of His disciples. Again and again He interrupts His prayer and goes to His most intimate disciples, who are trying to fight off sleep in order to be awake when the men come to arrest their Master. They try; but they do not succeed, and Jesus must wake them again and again. Why does He want them to keep awake? He does not want to be alone. When the terrible enemy, death, approaches, He does not want to be forsaken even by the disciples whose human weakness He knows. 'Could you not watch one hour?' (Mark 14³⁷).

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

I can't argue with Cullmann here, because I know categorically that Jesus was tempted in all points like we are, and we *are afraid of death*. There are emotions that we who live in the flesh cannot control, and fear is one of them.

I've spoken of my own reaction to the death of my mother. I was there next to her, I thought I was ready for her to go; but when the line went flat, and I knew she was dead, I wept like a child. Why? Well, I

learned something that night. I learned that there is a *human reaction to death*; and I think it is why Jesus wept when he approached Lazarus' tomb [John 11:35]. He was *human*, and that's what humans do. We can't help ourselves.

Socrates was a thinker, a man of logic, and Cullmann applies logic to this question. He asked:

Can there be a greater contrast than that between Socrates and Jesus? Like Jesus, Socrates has his disciples about him on the day of his death; but he discourses serenely with them on immortality. Jesus, a few hours before His death, trembles and begs His disciples not to leave Him alone. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who, more than any other New Testament author, emphasizes the full deity (1¹⁰) but also the full humanity of Jesus, goes still farther than the reports of the three Synopsists in his description of Jesus' fear of death. In [Hebrews] 5⁷ he writes that Jesus 'with loud cries and tears offered up prayers and supplications to Him who was able to save Him'.

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You wonder how the disciples knew what his prayers were so they could write them down? They could hear him, even from a little distance.

Thus, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus wept and cried in the face of death. There is Socrates, calmly and composedly speaking of the immortality of the soul; here Jesus, weeping and crying.

Oscar Cullmann - Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?

It was interesting to me, because I was reading a later edition of Cullmann's book, and apparently he took a real *beating* for this comparison; probably because his argument could not be defeated on the *merits* from the text or from logic, and all that was left was to attack him personally; but I can't think of any better way to contrast Socrates' philosophy with the belief and the faith of the First Christians. Mind you, these are the people who knew Jesus, walked with Jesus, and who in the years following Jesus' ascension to the heavens had time to contemplate what they had seen and what they had heard, and their belief system was *shaped* by that; and, consequently, it's reflected in the way they tell his story.

Recently, the third-ranking bishop in the Church of England, N. T. Wright, published a book in which he argues that Christians do not go to heaven at death, but wait in an intermediate state which the First Christians universally referred to as "sleep".

Now, this is *not* a new idea. You've heard of William Tyndale, I'm sure—an English Bible translator of the 16th century? He said...and I think he's talking here to the people who argue that people go to immediately to heaven at death. He says:

And ye, in putting them [the departed souls] in heaven, hell, and purgatory, destroy the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection [...] And again, if the souls be in heaven, tell me why they be not in as good case as the angels be? And then what cause is there of the resurrection?

William Tyndale - An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue

I've had that same thought come to me. If we're already up in heaven, if we're already playing harps and eating fruit before God and just really enjoying eternity, why do we need to be rejoined with the body? Why does there need to be a resurrection from the dead at all? And this one really surprised me: Martin Luther—German reformer, Bible translator.

Solomon judges that the dead are asleep, and feel nothing at all. For the dead lie there accomplishing neither days nor years, but when they are awoken, they shall seem to have slept scarce one minute.

Martin Luther - An Exposition of Solomon's Book, called Ecclesiastes or the Preacher

So it's kind of hard to throw rocks at Bishop Wright and Oscar Cullmann for developing *the same theme* further. In these days, when we begin to understand *time dilation*, I find myself in the strange position of agreeing with Martin Luther.

Some time ago, a good friend of mine died. We used to have lunch together every Friday and talk about... whatever we felt like talking about; but cancer came and he left, and from time to time I contemplated it. For him, the day he died *time stopped* (which is sort of like what Martin Luther was saying). Time stopped. It will start again for him in the day of the resurrection; just as it will for all those other saints who died in Christ, and for those of us who live to the return of Christ and are changed in that same moment—we also will come at that time.

It's fascinating that, *universally* throughout the New Testament, all those people who wrote about this topic considered that the dead are asleep. John... actually, Jesus is using this expression. He was talking to the disciples; he said:

John 11

AKJV

¹¹ [...] Our friend Lazarus sleeps; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.

Now, Lazarus was *dead*, and he was going to go bring him back to life. But Jesus himself called it "sleep".

John 11

AKJV

¹² Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well.

¹³ However, Jesus spoke of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep.

Now, it wouldn't take you very long if you wanted to look it up in your own concordance. Just go to the New Testament section of it and look up all the references to sleep, and you'll find out entirely what the First Christians thought.

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