

IN DEFENSE OF THE RESURRECTION:
A REPLY TO CRITICISMS
A REVIEW ARTICLE

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In *The Battle for the Resurrection*¹ I spoke of a significant drift to the left among evangelicals on the question of the bodily resurrection. A survey taken of members of the Evangelical Theological Society revealed that some eleven percent denied that "Christ rose from the dead in the same body of flesh and bones in which he died."² This seemed especially alarming for a Society committed to the belief that "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." This is particularly so in view of the fundamental role the bodily resurrection plays in the Christian faith.

The NT belief in the resurrection is a condition of salvation (Rom 10:9; 1 Thess 4:14) and places it at the heart of the gospel (1 Cor 15:1-5). Indeed, the apostle Paul goes so far as to say that if Christ is not risen, then (1) our faith is useless, (2) we are still in our sins, (3) our departed loved ones are lost, (4) the apostles are false witnesses, and (5) we are to be pitied more than all men (1 Cor 15:14-19).

We also argued that, in addition to its immortal nature, "there is overwhelming support in Scripture for the belief that Christ's resurrection body is a literal, material body of flesh and bones."³ This evidence includes (1) the fact that the empty tomb was miraculously vacated by the physical body that lay there (Matt 28:6), (2) the fact that the resurrected Jesus was touched and handled (28:9; John 20:27), (3) the fact that he had "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39),⁴ (4) the fact that he ate physical food on four occasions (24:30, 42-43; John 21:12-13; Acts 1:4), (5) the fact that his resurrection body still had the crucifixion wounds (John 21:27), (6) the fact that he was

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¹ N. L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989).

² Ibid. 190. This seemed alarmingly high, especially since all those who acknowledged that the resurrection body was material but qualified it by adding words like "glorified" or "immortal" were counted as affirming the statement. Only those who denied that the resurrection body was material were counted as denying it.

³ Geisler, *Battle* 42.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical citations are from the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983).

physically recognizable (Matt 28:7, 17; Mark 16:7),⁵ (7) the fact that he could be seen and heard with the natural senses (Matt 28:17; 1 Cor 9:1), (8) the fact that the NT speaks of continuity between the dead and resurrected body (Rom 6:3-5; 1 Cor 15:3), (9) the fact that resurrection is out from among (*ek*) dead bodies in a grave (Mark 9:9; Luke 24:46; cf. John 5:28), (10) the use of the seed analogy, which shows continuity between what is sown and what is raised (1 Cor 15:35-44), and (11) the fact that Paul implies that we will be able to recognize our loved ones in heaven (1 Thess 4:13-18).

Attempts to counter this clear Biblical teaching of a physical resurrection body are unconvincing. For example, Paul's reference to a "spiritual body" (1 Cor 15:44) is not to an immaterial body but to a physical body, which is what *sōma* ("body") always means in the NT when applied to a human being.⁶ The adjective "spiritual" (*pneumatikon*) means "spirit-dominated, spirit-controlled." It can be translated "supernatural," as the RSV does in 1 Cor 10:3-4. So the phrase "spiritual body" does not refer to an immaterial body but to an immortal body (cf. 15:53). Indeed, Paul used the same word to speak of physical rock and the physical food and water that God supernaturally provided for Israel in the wilderness (10:3-4).

Likewise the argument that Jesus' body dematerialized when it passed through physical objects, such as his so-called "undisturbed" grave clothes (John 20:6-7), or a closed door (cf. 20:19), is unconvincing for several reasons. First, this is an inference, not an assertion of the text, which merely says, "When the doors were shut . . . Jesus came and stood in the midst" (20:19). It simply does not say how he got into the room. As to the grave clothes, the text does not state that he passed through them, although he certainly possessed the power to do so. In fact, contrary to popular opinion, we know that at least part of them were disturbed, for "the handkerchief that had been around his head [was found], not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself" (20:7). Second, even if Jesus passed through a physical object it does not prove that he dematerialized to do so. According to modern science it is possible for one physical object to pass through another without leaving a hole, since most of matter is empty space anyway. Third, Jesus walked on water before his resurrection (as did Peter) in a purely physical body. So moving through a closed door is no more proof that Jesus' body was not material than walking on water is proof that it was made of balsa wood.

Furthermore the fact that Jesus could appear or disappear suddenly does not demonstrate that he had a nonmaterial resurrection body. The

⁵ The initial difficulty in recognizing Jesus after the resurrection was not due to the conditions of his physical body but to physical, psychological and spiritual conditions of the disciples, such as perplexity (Luke 24:17-21), sorrow (John 20:11-15), fear (Luke 24:36-37), disbelief (John 20:24-25), spiritual dullness (Luke 24:35-36), dimness of the light (John 20:14-15), and visual distance (21:4). But in each case these difficulties were only temporary. Before the appearance was over, the viewer was completely convinced of Jesus' identity.

⁶ R. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976) 182.

"Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more" (Acts 8:39). In other words, while in a physical body Philip was miraculously relocated from Gaza to the city of Azotus. There is no reason why Christ could not also do this in a physical resurrection body. For a miracle-working Christ, dematerialization is no more necessary to transcend space than it is to penetrate matter.

I. DOCTRINAL CONSEQUENCES OF DENYING THE PHYSICAL RESURRECTION

We also noted that denying the resurrection has far-reaching consequences for other Christian doctrines including creation, salvation, the incarnation, bodily immortality, the character of Christ, and Christian apologetics.⁷ Three of these are worth emphasizing here.

1. *The problem of creation.* God not only created the physical body but also pronounced it good (Gen 1:31). Sin marred God's creation and brought suffering and physical death (2:17; Rom 5:12; 8:18-19). Through Christ's death and resurrection, however, death and decay will be reversed (8:21-23). But nothing less than a resurrection in a physical body will restore God's original creation. As Gundry observed, "to dematerialize resurrection, by any means, is to emasculate the sovereignty of God in both creative purpose and redemptive grace."⁸

2. *The problem of redemption.* Redemption involves, among other things, redemption from death brought on by sin. Hebrews declares that Jesus "partook of the same nature [as humans], that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14 RSV). Because of Christ's death and resurrection "death is swallowed up in victory" and we can say with Paul, "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (1 Cor 15:54-55). Without a physical resurrection, however, this redemptive celebration is impossible, since the only way physical death can be reversed is by a physical resurrection.

3. *The character of Christ.* The postresurrection Jesus said emphatically, "Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Handle me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have" (Luke 24:39). If he was not raised in the same material body of flesh and bones in which he died, then Jesus deceived his disciples. Indeed, when they still did not believe, Jesus said, "'Have you any food here?' So they gave him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And he took it and ate in their presence" (24:41-42). If Christ has not risen in a physical body, then all of this was a charade that casts a dark moral cloud over the character of our Lord.

⁷ See *Battle*, chap. 2.

⁸ Gundry, *Sōma*.

II. HISTORICAL CONFESSIONS

In addition to the doctrinal importance of the physical resurrection, we demonstrated its creedal prominence in the Christian Church down through the centuries. The ecumenical *Apostles' Creed* stressed the physical nature of the resurrection by affirming: "I believe . . . in the resurrection of *the flesh*." One of the great early creeds, the *Second Creed of Epiphanius* (A.D. 374), an enlargement of the *Nicene Creed*, affirmed that "the Word became *flesh*. . . . The same suffered in the flesh; rose again; and went up to heaven in the *same body*, sat down gloriously at the right hand of the Father; is coming in the *same body* in glory to judge the quick and the dead."⁹ The celebrated *Westminster Confession* declares: "On the third day he arose from the dead, with the *same body in which he suffered*; with which he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of His Father." The historic *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* proclaims that "Christ did truly rise again from the dead and took again *his body with flesh and bones* . . . ; *wherewith he ascended into Heaven*, and there sitteth, until he return to judge all Men at the last day."¹⁰

In a classic volume J. A. Schep wrote:

We may say, therefore, that the entire early Church, in the West and in the East alike, publicly confessed belief in the resurrection of the flesh. . . . In the Western creeds . . . this confessional formula has retained its place with hardly any exception. Up to the Reformation there is no exception at all.¹¹

III. THREE KEY ELEMENTS IN THE ORTHODOX VIEW OF THE RESURRECTION

In *The Battle for the Resurrection* we identified four key elements in the orthodox view of the resurrection: immortality, numerical identity, materiality, historicity. Since the first one is not in dispute we argued that the denial of any one of the other three is unorthodox, though usually all three go hand in hand. Certainly if the resurrection body is numerically the same as the preresurrection body, then it will likewise be material. And if it is material, then when it is within human view it will be an observable part of space-time history.

IV. CURRENT EVANGELICAL DENIALS OF THE PHYSICAL RESURRECTION

After discussing some liberal, neo-orthodox and cultic denials of the physical resurrection,¹² we noted a drift among some evangelicals who had

⁹ *Two Creeds of Epiphanius: Second Formula* (A.D. 374) in P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2. 37 (italics mine).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 489, 620-621 (italics mine).

¹¹ J. A. Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrection Body* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 221. Schep adds: "The Churches of the East retained the expression 'the resurrection of the flesh' up to the Council of Constantinople in 381." When it was dropped, according to Schep, "without any intention to reject the Western formulations as unscriptural, [the Eastern Church simply] went her own way in formulating the truth" (*ibid.* 223).

¹² See *Battle*, chap. 5.

significant writings on the subject, including Murray Harris.¹³ We concluded that he denies all three essentials of the orthodox view: numerical identity, materiality, historicity. We will now focus on his view.

1. *The resurrection body is not essentially material.* Consider the following quotations by Harris: "In his resurrected body . . . his essential state was one of invisibility and therefore immateriality."¹⁴ Again: "What remains remarkable are his appearances rather than his disappearances. This suggests that after his resurrection *his essential state was one of invisibility and therefore immateriality.*"¹⁵ Harris adds: "Another characteristic of Jesus' resurrection body was the ability to materialize and therefore to be localized at will. This is a corollary of his *essential immateriality* and the tangible reality of his resurrection appearances."¹⁶ "The Resurrection marked his entrance upon a spiritual mode of existence, or, to borrow Pauline terminology, his acquisition of a '*spiritual body*', which was both *immaterial and invisible* yet capable of interaction with the world of time and space."¹⁷ "It will be spiritual also in that it is free of sinful propensities and without physical instincts: it will be *neither fleshly nor fleshy.*"¹⁸

2. *The resurrection body is not numerically identical.* Harris argued that "from this viewpoint the new body [of believers] is *qualitatively and numerically distinct* from the old body."¹⁹ "The identity between the physical and spiritual bodies *can scarcely be material or substantial* or physical unless we believe that Paul and the early Christians took over without modification a crassly materialistic view of resurrection." "If, then, the notion of a *material identity between the two forms of embodiment must be rejected*, we may propose that the identity is personal."²⁰ Thus: "One and the same person finds expression in two successive but different types of body. There are two dwellings but only one occupant."²¹

Furthermore, "since the physical body of Jesus that had been buried had gained, as the result of a resurrection transformation, the properties of a spiritual body, *we cannot say that the resurrected Jesus had precisely the same body as Jesus of Nazareth.*"²² The only identity is in the "person" or

¹³ M. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), printed earlier in England by Marshall, Morgan and Scott (1983).

¹⁴ M. Harris, *Easter in Durham: Bishop Jenkins and the Resurrection* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985) 17.

¹⁵ *Raised* 53 (italics mine).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 54 (italics mine).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 56-57 (italics mine).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 124 (italics mine).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 127 (italics mine).

²⁰ *Ibid.* 126 (italics mine).

²¹ *Ibid.* When Harris says that "Jesus' resurrection body was not a fresh creation of God," a "creation out of nothing" (*Easter* 20), he does not mean that the same (or like) physical molecules of the former body are in the latter. Indeed he declares that the resurrection body is not even physical by nature (*From Grave to Glory* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990] 406).

²² *Easter* 20.

spiritual "substance,"²³ but there is no material identity in the pre- and postresurrection body.²⁴

3. *The resurrection body is not a part of observable history.* According to Harris, "resurrection may therefore be described as an event that occurred simultaneously within history and beyond history. It is 'historical' in that it is open to historical investigation that a person who died was restored to life and that he gained what might be called a 'spiritual body.'" But "*it is not 'historical' in the sense of being an incident that was observed by witnesses or even an incident that could have been observed by mortal gaze.*"²⁵ That is, Jesus "was not permanently and openly visible in his resurrected state (Acts 10.40-41)."²⁶ "It is 'trans-historical' . . . because it was a transaction between God and Jesus in which the Father raised the Son in a transformed state to his right hand forever. Such a transaction clearly lies outside the scope of historical research; it is an item of faith."²⁷

Harris acknowledges that the sudden disappearance of Jesus' physical body and his appearances happened in history, but he denies that the spiritual resurrection body was by nature an observable, historical phenomenon. He states: "We have already noted that there were no witnesses of the Resurrection itself and that *in his resurrected state Jesus was normally not visible to the human eye.*"²⁸ So by nature the resurrection body of Christ was not a visible part of objective history. In Harris' words, it is in this sense "trans-historical."²⁹ On the basis of this analysis, we concluded that Harris' view falls significantly short of the standards for orthodoxy.

V. THE RESPONSE OF MURRAY HARRIS

Although we gave Harris' view a mere nine-page analysis,³⁰ he responded in *From Grave to Glory*³¹ with an overwhelming 122 pages. Since much of his response is irrelevant to the central doctrinal issue we raised, we will discuss more substantive matters. Of these, three get to the heart of the issue. First, he attempts to show that his view was misrepresented. Second, he tries to support his position from Scripture. Finally, he offers some tests for orthodoxy of his own, concluding that his view is well within orthodoxy.

1. *Was Harris' view misrepresented or restated?* In *Raised Immortal* Harris contends that the resurrection body is essentially immaterial: "This suggests that after his resurrection *his essential state was one of invis-*

²³ *Grave* 356.

²⁴ *Raised* 53-54.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 58 (italics mine).

²⁶ *Ibid.* 57.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 58.

²⁸ *Ibid.* (italics mine).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Battle* 96-104.

³¹ *Grave* 337-458.

bility and therefore immateriality.”³² He adds: “Another characteristic of Jesus’ resurrection body was *the ability to materialize and therefore be localized at will*. This is a corollary of his *essential immateriality* and the tangible reality of his resurrection appearances.”³³ Interestingly Harris has allowed *Raised Immortal*, where these citations are found, to go out of print. He has reproduced most of this book verbatim, however, in his new work, *From Grave to Glory*, minus these clear quotations on the essential immateriality of the resurrected body.

Whether Harris has actually changed his view is moot. In any event he now affirms that the resurrection body is essentially “spiritual,” by which he means it is neither material nor immaterial as such but has the ability to take these modes on different occasions. He declares that “the resurrection of Jesus was not his transformation into an immaterial body . . . but into a ‘spiritual body’ which could be expressed in an immaterial or material mode, a nonphysical or a physical form.”³⁴ That is, “his [Jesus’] body was customarily ‘immaterial’ or ‘nonfleshly’ but was capable of temporary materialization.”³⁵ But it is important to notice that in order to make this crucial albeit unsuccessful move Harris has changed the customary meaning of the word “essential.” When “essential” no longer means “by nature,”³⁶ one is reminded of Humpty Dumpty’s contemptuous use of language in *Through the Looking-Glass* when he said, “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” Alice’s retort is good for both Humpty Dumpty and Harris: “The question is . . . whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”³⁷ Certainly it is not a customary use of language when the word “essential” is taken to mean “customary.” In fact it is an essential error to define “essential” as “customary.”

Harris’ complaint that his view was misrepresented is misdirected. In a recent review Frank Beckwith observes that “Harris overstates his own understandability.”³⁸ At any rate, the “new and improved” version of Harris’ view is actually worse than the old one. Harris’ current view is not only still unorthodox but also unintelligible. The problem is that Harris claims that the essential nature of the “spiritual” (resurrection) body is neither material nor immaterial. “Immaterial,” however, means “not material.” There is nothing in the cracks between material and not material. If the “spiritual body” is not material, then it is nonmaterial, which is exactly the same as saying it is immaterial. So Harris has moved from a view that involved theological unorthodoxy to one that also entails logical absurdity.

³² *Raised* 53.

³³ *Ibid.* 54 (italics mine).

³⁴ *Grave* 405.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 375.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 435.

³⁷ L. Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* (New York: Signet, 1960) 186 (italics his).

³⁸ F. Beckwith, “Identity and Resurrection: A Review Article,” *JETS* 33/3 (September 1990) 370.

2. *Is Harris' view Biblical?* Surprisingly, for a Biblical scholar Harris offers very little evidence for his view based on what the Scriptures actually say. Other than a few overworked Greek words (discussed below), his main arguments are largely a matter of inference. Take for example the clear difference between the material passages and the so-called nonmaterial passages that Harris cites. The material passages give direct statements about the physical nature of the resurrection, whereas the passages used to prove that Jesus was customarily immaterial after his resurrection are merely inferences.

Material passages include the following:³⁹ "They came to him, *clasped his feet* and worshiped him" (Matt 28:9); "As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself came up and *walked along with them*" (Luke 24:15); "*Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me* and see; a ghost does not have *flesh and bones*, as you see I have" (24:39); "They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and *he took it and ate it* in their presence" (24:42-43); "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he *lifted up his hands* and blessed them. While he was in the act of blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" (24:50-51); "After this *he showed them his hands and side*" (John 20:20); "Then he said to Thomas, '*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe*'" (20:27); "On one occasion, while *he was eating with them*, he gave them this command" (Acts 1:4); "He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us *who ate and drank with him* after he rose from the dead" (10:41).

In these passages Jesus literally exhausted the ways in which he could convince his disciples that he had risen in the same material body of flesh and bones in which he died. Why then does Harris deny this obvious conclusion?

A look at the so-called nonmaterial passages that Harris uses to justify his belief that the resurrection body was customarily nonmaterial will help answer this question. He lists the following verses: "He disappeared from their sight" (Luke 24:31); "While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them" (24:36); "This is what I told you while I was still with you" (24:44); "When the doors were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them" (John 20:19); "He appeared to them over a period of forty days" (Acts 1:3); "God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (10:40-41a).

Even a cursory examination of these passages reveals two important facts. First, not one of them speaks of the resurrection body as being "nonmaterial" or "nonfleshly," as Harris contends. He is reading his view into the passages, not reading it out of the passages. Second, unlike the material passages that speak of the resurrection body being "flesh and

³⁹ In fairness to him these passages are taken from the NIV, the translation preferred by Harris (*italics mine*).

bones" that can be "clasped" by bare hands and possesses the crucifixion scars of the physical body, these so-called nonmaterial passages are not speaking about the nature of the resurrection body but simply about its activity. They are referring to things Jesus did in his resurrection body, not what it was by nature.

The only positive evidence Harris offers for Jesus' intermittent physical appearances are a handful of overworked texts. Let us briefly consider them.

Harris examines the question, "Was the risen Jesus 'customarily invisible'?"⁴⁰ The first text he looks to for support of his thesis is Luke 24:31: "He vanished from their sight." He observes that "most English versions render the relevant part of this verse, 'And he vanished out of their sight' or 'And he disappeared from their sight.' Literally, it reads: 'And he became invisible . . . from them (= to their eyes).'"⁴¹

Four sources are quoted in support of his translation. But most of these sources do not leap, as Harris does, from the disappearance of Jesus to the conclusion that Jesus had a customarily invisible body. Plummer states:

We are to understand disappearance without physical locomotion: but we know too little about the properties of Christ's risen body to say whether this was supernatural or not. Nowhere else in bibl. Grk. does [*aphantos*] occur: in class. Grk. it is poetical. In 2 Mac. iii. 34, *aphanēis egenonto* [became invisible] is used of Angels ceasing to be visible. The *ap' auton* [from them] implies no more than withdrawal from their sight.⁴²

Unlike Harris, however, Plummer does not jump to the conclusion that Jesus' body must have been customarily invisible. In fact, earlier Plummer made this observation with respect to Luke 24:39: "Jesus first convinces them of His identity,—that He is the Master whom they supposed that they had lost; and secondly of the reality of His *body*,—that it is not merely the spirit of a dead Master that they see."⁴³

Plummer states that Jesus displayed the nailprints in his hands and feet in order to convince the disciples of "the reality of His *body*." This statement is in opposition to Harris, who states that Jesus showed his hands and feet in order to demonstrate "not that he was material but that he was real."⁴⁴ But if Harris is right, then a demonstration to convince the disciples of the "reality of His body" is deception. At least this statement demonstrates that Plummer does not view the Biblical record as leading to the conclusion that Jesus had a customarily invisible, immaterial body.

Harris says that the literal translation of the verse is as follows: "And he became invisible . . . from them (= to their eyes)."⁴⁵ But to become invisible "to their eyes" does not call for the conclusion that Jesus suddenly

⁴⁰ *Grave* 376.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 376-377.

⁴² A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975) 557.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 559 (italics mine).

⁴⁴ *Raised* 54.

⁴⁵ *Grave* 376-377.

altered his being so that he was invisible to everyone's eyes. In fact although Harris quotes Meyer in support of his translation, Meyer seems to be making the opposite point. He does not claim that Jesus' body became invisible in reality, but that he became invisible "from them"—that is, to their perception. Harris confuses reality and perception.⁴⁶

"These are the words I spoke to you while I was still with you" (Luke 24:44). According to Harris, these words indicate that Jesus was "customarily invisible" after his resurrection because he was not constantly with the disciples. He quotes F. Godet in support of his conclusion:⁴⁷ "It must be remembered that Jesus, strictly speaking, *was already no more with them* (ver. 44), and that the miracle consisted rather in His appearing than in His disappearing."⁴⁸ Contrary to Harris' position, however, Godet does not conclude from these verses that Jesus' body was customarily invisible or immaterial. Commenting on vv. 41-43 Godet states:

Jesus gives them a new proof of His corporeity by eating meats which they had to offer Him. . . . But the body of Jesus was in a transition state. . . . On the one hand, then, He still had His terrestrial body. On the other, this body was already raised to a higher condition.⁴⁹

From this citation it seems clear that, for Godet, Jesus was no longer with the disciples in a qualitative way, because, as he says, "in the mind of Jesus, His separation from them was now consummated. He was with them only exceptionally; His abode was elsewhere."⁵⁰ The difference was not that he was intermittently with them as opposed to being constantly with them. Rather, the difference was that Jesus was no longer with them in mortal flesh. Now he was in his immortal, material, resurrected body, and because his disciples were yet in their preresurrection bodies he could say "when I was with you"—that is, "when I was as you still are."

Further, it is evident from Godet's commentary that he held that while Jesus was still on earth, before his ascension, he was still in a physical, material body. He calls it a "terrestrial (earthly) body."⁵¹

Harris multiplies quotations and observations designed to support his conclusion that Jesus was customarily invisible.⁵² But in each of these cases he makes the same mistake: He assumes that because something is out of sight it must be invisible by nature. By that same logic, the Queen becomes invisible when she is out of public view. Even worse, Harris assumes that what is invisible is also immaterial. By this logic, when the Queen retires from public view she dematerializes.

⁴⁶ See discussion below at nn. 82-83.

⁴⁷ *Grave* 378.

⁴⁸ From F. Godet, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (5th ed.; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1870), 2. 355, cited by Harris, *Grave* 450.

⁴⁹ F. L. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n. d. [1887]) 357.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 359.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 357.

⁵² Compare *Grave* 379-381.

“Him God raised up on the third day, and showed him openly” (Acts 10:40). This passage is heavily overworked by Harris. He translates “showed him openly” [*emphanē genesthai*] “to become visible.”⁵³ Here Harris makes his usual leap from the perceptual to the actual, insisting that this proves that Jesus was customarily in an invisible state of being after his resurrection. But this conclusion is not warranted from the text. Harris’ belief that the common use of the term *emphanē* (“visible”) refers to the Greek gods “appearing among humans in bodily form” misrepresents the concept of the nature of the Greek gods. Rather, the Greeks believed that the gods were beings who had real bodies, “like mortal bodies, but superior in stature, strength and beauty.”⁵⁴ Their bodies were “vulnerable to weapons used by men,” and they had the “power of metamorphosis, to change themselves if they wished into animals or even to take on the aspect of inanimate objects.” Of course these gods lived in seclusion (e.g. Zeus on Mount Olympus) and only occasionally came into human view.

Furthermore, in most of the passages where *emphanē* is used there is no indication from the text that this word assumes the meaning “invisible by nature.” Rather, it implies that the person simply does not see something or someone and then does see that thing or person. A good example of this use is by Sophocles in *Ajax*. Ajax inquires of Tecmessa that she bring his son to him so that “*auton emphanē t’ idein*”—that is, in order that he may “see him face to face.”⁵⁵ Here the one who should become “visible” to Ajax is the mortal, material son of Ajax who is not visible to Ajax at the moment because he is not present. This cannot possibly mean that Ajax’s son was “customarily invisible.”⁵⁶

Even granting Harris’ translation “to become visible,” jumping to a metaphysical conclusion based on perceptual language is not warranted by the text. Although Jesus was “invisible to them [the disciples] immediately prior to his arrival [in the upper room],”⁵⁷ as Harris states, this does not mean that his body was invisible in itself—that is, by nature. Furthermore, even if it could be argued that Jesus’ body became actually invisible at times it does not follow that it was immaterial. Air and clear glass are invisible but still material. More probably, being visible simply indicates that before his arrival he was simply not within their visual range. Harris’ abnormal theological conclusions are not supported by a normal exegesis of the texts.

⁵³ Ibid. 379.

⁵⁴ *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (ed. F. Guirand; London: Paul Hamlyn, 1959) 103.

⁵⁵ This translation is taken from the LCL edition.

⁵⁶ Another example is found in the *Trachiniae* by Sophocles. The messenger Lichas is detained by a large crowd and is unable to come before Deianira. The messenger, however, tells Deianira: “*Opsei d’ auton autik emphanē*” (“But thou shalt see him face to face anon”). Thus the reference here is not to a customarily invisible being who would suddenly appear before Deianira. So the word *emphanē* (“visible”) used here means the herald Lichas would become “visible” to Deianira by eventually arriving there and coming into view (*Larousse*).

⁵⁷ *Grave* 380 (italics mine).

“He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve” (1 Cor 15:5 NIV). One of the most crucial words in Harris’ argument is the Greek word *ōphthē*, “he appeared.” He contends that it should be translated “he became visible,”⁵⁸ from which he concludes that Jesus was invisible before he appeared. In response we noted that several usages of the term clearly indicate that it means to become perceptually visible, not to pass from an actual state of invisibility to a visible one.⁵⁹ This is true in the Greek OT (cf. 2 Kgs 14:11) and in the intertestamental period (1 Macc 4:6) as well as in the NT (Acts 7:26). The latter passage refers to Moses who “appeared to two of them [Egyptians] fighting.” This clearly demonstrates how the same word (*ōphthē*) refers to a continuously material body that nevertheless can come from a place where people cannot see it to a place where they can (cf. Exod 2:11-15).

In response Harris contends that “the difficulty with finding a parallel in Acts 7:26 . . . is that *ōphthē* [he appeared] is never used in any of the four gospels to describe an action of Jesus prior to his death.”⁶⁰ He goes on to conclude that because he cannot comprehend any reason for this omission there must not be a reason. But, this is a classic argument from ignorance. The fact that *ōphthē* (“he appeared”) is used, even in the NT, of a normal material body coming into view of others is proof enough that it can be used in this way. It would seem, then, that Harris’ rejection of Acts 7:26 as a parallel is based more on his own inability to comprehend rather than on the text of Scripture.

In this same connection Harris insists that both Christ’s appearances and God’s appearances in the OT were from an invisible state to a visible one. But there is a crucial distinction that he fails to note. In Deut 4:15-18, when God demonstrated his reality to the children of Israel, Moses said, “But you saw no form.” God did this to prevent anyone from forming any image of him (cf. Exod 20:4). When Jesus appeared, however, he did appear in a particular form—namely, in a human body. If Jesus had desired merely to demonstrate his reality he could have done so effectively without appearing in a human body, just as God did many times in the Bible. So just as God intended to demonstrate that he had no form like anything under heaven, likewise Jesus appeared in order to demonstrate that he in fact did have a form—that is, in a physical human body.

Harris draws the conclusion that “a variety of texts and considerations leads us to conclude that during the forty days between his resurrection and ascension Jesus was normally not visible to mortal eyes.”⁶¹ But closer examination reveals that the conclusion that Jesus’ resurrection body was actually invisible is not supported by the texts of Scripture. At best this view is only grammatically possible, but it is not theologically plausible. In fact the most natural conclusion to draw from these texts, taken in their

⁵⁸ Ibid. 382.

⁵⁹ *Battle* 112.

⁶⁰ *Grave* 382.

⁶¹ Ibid. 384.

total contexts, is that Jesus simply at times passed out of the visual perception of his disciples, not that he passed out of his essentially physical resurrection body.

"[Christ] . . . will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body" (Phil 3:21). Harris makes a distinction between what Paul calls the "body of glory" in Phil 3:21 and "his fleshly body" in Col 1:22.⁶² But he fails to recognize that the passages do not indicate that the distinction is between physical and nonphysical. In fact the context makes it clear that in the Colossians passage Paul is speaking about the mortal flesh that died, and in the Philippians passage Paul is talking about transforming the mortal body into an immortal one. There is no indication in either of these passages that the glorified body is no longer flesh. The distinction is between a body of glorified flesh and a body of mortal flesh. Indeed the normal grammatical, historical understanding of Phil 3:21 is that the numerically same body that is called "lowly" is fashioned into a "glorious" body.

The truth of the matter is that the entire chapter that Harris labels "Exegetical"⁶³ is in fact not so much an exegesis as, largely, a series of philosophical inferences based on word studies. This brings into serious question the statement in the foreword by Walter Kaiser that Harris uses "biblical, rather than philosophical or apologetical categories."⁶⁴

In *The Battle for the Resurrection* we proposed a threefold test for orthodoxy: Is it Biblical? Is it crucial? Is it creedal? That is, a doctrine is orthodox if it is clearly taught in Scripture, is crucial to the Christian faith, and has been consistently confessed by the Church. It is unorthodox if it does not meet these tests. The belief that Jesus was resurrected in the same physical body in which he died meets all three criteria and the denial of that belief does not.

3. *Some inadequate tests for orthodoxy suggested by Harris.* Harris believes that Jesus rose in a spiritual body that was not the same essentially material body of flesh and bones in which he died. In order to arrive at the conclusion that this view is orthodox, however, he creates his own standards for orthodoxy that call for scrutiny.

Harris believes that whatever view takes seriously all the Biblical data should be considered orthodox.⁶⁵ He sees five such possibilities, of which his own view is the second: (1) Jesus' resurrection body was basically "material" or "fleshly" but was either capable of temporary dematerialization or had nonmaterial properties. (2) His body was customarily "immaterial" or "nonfleshly" but was capable of temporary materialization. (3) His body was "spiritualized"—that is, matter "wholly and finally subjugated to spirit." (4) "His body was composed of 'glory,' . . . regarded as its

⁶² Ibid. 386.

⁶³ Ibid., chap. 20.

⁶⁴ Ibid. xxiii.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 375.

'material' or 'substance'." (5) His body was in the process of transition from the material to the spiritual during the forty days of appearances.⁶⁶

Surprisingly Harris believes that "the differences between these views stem largely from their emphasis." This again leads one to wonder what status he affords the law of noncontradiction, since the first view seems logically incoherent⁶⁷ and the third seems logically impossible. In addition, the fourth seems to be nonsensical. One thing is certain: The categories are not logically exhaustive. When speaking of the essence or substance of the resurrection body there are really only two major categories: (1) It is essentially material, or (2) it is essentially immaterial. There is nothing in the cracks between essentially material and essentially immaterial any more than there is between being and nonbeing. This is exactly what the law of noncontradiction demands: Something cannot both be and not be at the same time in the same sense.

Further, Harris' definition of the word "Biblical" is ambiguous, since it can be understood in two basic ways. Let us call these two usages the "broader" and "narrower" understandings of the term. In the broader sense in which Harris uses it, it seems to mean roughly any view that comes up with some grammatically possible explanation of all the relevant texts. By this unacceptably broad definition, however, even cultic views of the resurrection are also "orthodox." For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses' view of the nature of the resurrection body and Jesus' appearances explains all the texts in grammatically possible ways. Indeed they explain them in the same basic way that Harris does, both affirming an empty tomb, a supernatural disappearance of the body, and physical appearances of Christ.⁶⁸ What they do not say is that Jesus was raised and appeared in the same physical body in which he died. In other words, by making the "Biblical" criterion broad enough to include his own view as orthodox, Harris has unwittingly included other views that are unorthodox.

In the narrower (i.e. normal) sense of the word "Biblical" Harris' view does not measure up. It is simply not enough to take seriously the Biblical data. They must also be put together consistently in the most plausible way. But, as we have seen, at best Harris' views are only grammatically possible, not consistently and comprehensively justifiable. It is insufficient to show that the mere grammar of this or that text permits the conclusion one wants. Rather, one must show that this conclusion is consistent with the teaching of all other texts and comprehensively includes the teaching of every text in a plausible way. And, as we have already seen, when this test is applied, Harris' view falls short of the standard for being Biblical.

As stated earlier, our survey of Harris' peers in the Evangelical Theological Society reveals that nearly nine out of ten believe his view is not orthodox.⁶⁹ Although Harris produced a nearly-five-hundred-page book

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ What does "basically immaterial" mean? Either it is immaterial by nature or it is not.

⁶⁸ See *Battle* 82-83.

⁶⁹ See *ibid.* 190.

detailing his own view, never once did he even mention this pronouncement by his evangelical peers. Instead, amazingly he refers to our critique of his view as "a one-man theological commission."⁷⁰

Harris offers a test for his orthodoxy with which he feels comfortable: the fact that his view has never been condemned by a general Church council. But neither has the denial of the inerrancy of Scripture ever been so condemned as unorthodox. Indeed, Harris himself once denied inerrancy by claiming that Paul made a mistake in 1 Thess 4:16.⁷¹ Is Harris also willing to say that a denial of inerrancy is not unorthodox? Perhaps this is why he calls George Ladd, who also denied the inerrancy of Scripture, "one of the acknowledged defenders of orthodoxy."⁷² Yet the broader evangelical community⁷³ has declared inerrancy to be a crucial part of orthodoxy. In like manner, an affirmation of the continuous, material, physical nature of the resurrection body is equally crucial to evangelical Christianity.

There may be other doctrinal deviations that the Church at large has never condemned, but this does not mean they are orthodox. It may only mean (1) that their unorthodoxy is already implied in what has been pronounced on, or (2) that they are so obviously in error that the Church saw no reason to treat them, or (3) that they were already addressed by an ecumenical Church confession (like the *Apostles' Creed*) so that the Church at large saw no explicit need to make any other pronouncements on them, or (4) that the whole Church never had occasion to treat them. Now it seems to me that both inerrancy and the essential physical nature of the resurrection body would qualify on at least (1), (2) and (3), if not (4). Certainly when it comes to the resurrection the universal confession that it was in the "flesh" rendered it unnecessary in the minds of most to call a general Church council to consider the matter.

VI. SOME KEY PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS IN HARRIS' VIEW

The apostle Paul warned us to "beware of philosophy" (Col 2:8). Unfortunately we cannot beware of philosophy unless we be aware of it. The person most likely to catch the disease of false philosophy is the one who is not aware of it or of how to guard against it. Often false philosophical premises are simply breathed in from the intellectual atmosphere of the day. Harris himself has apparently adopted several such ideas.

1. *Adopting a monistic anthropology.* At the heart of Harris' problem with the orthodox view of the physical, fleshy nature of the resurrection

⁷⁰ *Grave* 445.

⁷¹ Harris held that when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 5 he changed his mind about his earlier statement (in 1 Thessalonians 4) that believers will receive their resurrection bodies at the second coming, Paul now (in Corinthians) contending that the resurrection body is received immediately at death (cf. *Raised* 98-101); see "2 Corinthians 5:1-10: Watershed in Paul's Eschatology," *TynBul* (1971) 33, 45. Harris later saw that the error was his, not Paul's (cf. *Raised* 256).

⁷² *Grave* 385.

⁷³ See the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) "Chicago Statement" in N. Geisler, *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 493-497.

body is his self-confessed "monistic anthropology." In traditional theological language he rejects dichotomy (and trichotomy), both considered to be forms of Platonic dualism, for a more rigid monism: "With its basically *monistic anthropology*, the NT is unconcerned to identify one 'part' of the person that survives death to the exclusion of the other 'parts.'" ⁷⁴

More recently Harris repeats the same statement word for word with the exception of the introductory phrase. ⁷⁵ Although he is more careful in his wording, he is just as strong against the view that there is a never-dying "soul" that survives death and lives consciously in a disembodied state until its later reunion with the body at the resurrection. ⁷⁶ But his unwillingness to accept what he recognizes as the "traditional" view (that a disembodied soul survives death) gets him into great difficulty, both Biblically and theologically. The Biblical data strongly favor the position that there are both material and immaterial dimensions to human nature and that the immaterial can and does consciously survive death (see Matt 17:3; Luke 16:22-24; 23:43; Acts 7:59; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 5:1-3; Phil 1:23-24; Heb 12:22-23; Rev 6:9-10; 19:20; 20:4). ⁷⁷

Harris rejects the strong Biblical support for the "soul" surviving the death of the body and is left, therefore, with an unbiblical anthropological monism. This position is deeply imbedded in a philosophical commitment that creates havoc with his interpretation of key Biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 5, which he takes to mean that believers receive their resurrection bodies at the moment of death—even though their physical bodies are still in the grave. ⁷⁸

The problem that a rigid monistic anthropology creates is this: If the soul cannot survive without a body, then death offers an undesirably limited number of options. (1) At death both the soul and body are destroyed (annihilationism); (2) a temporary "spiritual" body is provided between death and resurrection; (3) the whole person (body-soul) is annihilated and recreated in another world (John Hick's position); (4) the believer's resurrection body is received at the moment of death, even though his physical body is obviously still in the grave (Harris' view). In other words, if one accepts Harris' philosophical commitment to anthropological monism (and rejects an interim body), then either annihilationism or immediate resurrection at death are the only remaining alternatives. In brief, his philosophical monism has backed him into a very uncomfortable theological corner, one already occupied by unorthodox groups.

2. *Manifesting Platonic tendencies.* Despite his professed distaste for Platonic philosophy, Harris has apparently unwittingly swallowed a sizeable portion of it himself. One place that it is apparent is in his tendency to

⁷⁴ *Raised* 140 (italics mine).

⁷⁵ *Grave* 211.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 205-212.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the intermediate state in Paul see L. Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul* (London: Chapman, 1967) 191-234.

⁷⁸ *Raised* 98-101.

“spiritualize” material reality. This is true not only of the resurrection body but also of the new heaven and new earth. According to Harris, “the ‘new heavens and new earth’ correspond to man’s new resurrection body,”⁷⁹ which, as we have seen, is not physical but spiritual. He adds: “The precise character of redeemed humanity’s future state is presently hidden (1 John 3:2); so too is the exact nature of the new or renewed universe.”⁸⁰

A careful study of Romans 8 and 2 Peter 3, however, reveals to the contrary that the new heaven and earth will be just as physical and material (though everlasting) as the first ones were. For example, Paul refers to “the creation” that was subjected to bondage as “the [same] creation itself [that] also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption” (Rom 8:20-21). Indeed he ties it to the physical resurrection of believers, saying that it is “eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (v. 23).

Further, Harris’ use of 1 John 3 scarcely proves his point, since in that very passage John declares that “we will be like him [Christ], for we shall see him as he is” (cf. Phil 3:20-21). And we know that Jesus’ resurrection body was a literal, physical body of “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39) that could be seen and touched, could eat food, and had the crucifixion scars that will still be visible at his second coming (Rev 1:7). Likewise, believers’ new bodies and the new heaven and earth will be just as physical.

Sometimes the Platonic tendency to spiritualize seems relatively innocent, as for example the tendency to allegorize some OT stories like Jonah. When it comes to the nature of the resurrection body of Christ and believers, however, it is much more seriously unorthodox and must be resisted.

3. *Accepting an existentialist view of super-history.* Existentialism has impacted Biblical studies since the early part of this century. One of its deadly results is its “spiritualization” of events (like the resurrection), claiming that they do not take place in real history (*Historie*) but in super-history (*Geschichte*). It is insisted that redemptive events do not occur in time but above time. They are not observable by the natural eye but are known only by the eye of faith.

According to such a view, observable history ends at the moment of the resurrection (when the body mysteriously disappears). From this point on, Christ has only a super-*sōma*, which is part of super-history. This view strongly impacts Harris at several points.

First, he contends that the resurrection body is by nature a spiritual body, not an essentially physical one.⁸¹ Second, Harris contends that Jesus’ resurrection appearances were not in his real resurrection body (which was spiritual) but in a temporary form in which he “materialized” for apologetic purposes. He believes that Jesus appeared temporarily in physical form

⁷⁹ Ibid. 170.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 171.

⁸¹ *Grave* 406.

only for “evidential reasons,” attempting to convince the disciples “not that he was *material* but that he was *real*.”⁸² Third, according to Harris, the exaltation of Christ (i.e. his real ascension to the right hand of the Father) did not take place some fifty days after Pentecost but at the moment of his resurrection.⁸³ Thus the ascension recorded in Acts 1 was only “a parable acted out for the benefit of the disciples as a visual and historical confirmation of a spiritual reality.”⁸⁴ But both the resurrection and the resurrection body were “trans-historical,” not historical. They were existential events of super-history, not an actual part of space-time history.

4. *Confusing reality and perception.* At the heart of Harris’ exegetical problems is a serious confusion between reality and perception (between what Beckwith calls ontology and epistemology).⁸⁵ This kind of confusion is manifest when he says, “If he [Jesus] did not appear [perception] continuously, but only intermittently, we may say he was not customarily visible [reality] to the human eye.”⁸⁶ Just because a body is not seen does not mean it is unseeable. The body does not change its mode of being (reality) when someone is not observing it (perception).

Common sense dictates that something does not cease to be simply because no one is looking at it. A candle continues to burn down even when we are in another room, and the grass continues to grow even when we are not looking at it. Furthermore, just because Jesus was not seen at times after his resurrection does not mean that he was invisible. And even if his physical body became invisible at times, it certainly does not follow that it was immaterial. Denying the continued incarnation of Christ in a physical body after the resurrection is a form of postresurrectional docetism.

5. *Failure to distinguish primary and secondary qualities.* Much of the force Harris generates for his view is derived from the obvious but irrelevant fact that a resurrection body need not have the identical particles of the preresurrection body. After all, scientists inform us that we do not have the same particles in our body that we had seven years ago. Nevertheless it is the numerically same body.⁸⁷ The bodily changes are in secondary qualities, not in primary ones—a fact Harris fails to recognize.

Something else Harris overworks is the truth, acknowledged by both sides,⁸⁸ that there will be changes in the resurrection body. As Paul said, “We shall all be changed” (1 Cor 15:51). But, unlike Harris, Paul goes on to inform us that this is not a change of body but a change in our body. This is clear from at least four things in this very passage: (1) The use of the figure

⁸² *Raised* 54 (italics mine).

⁸³ See *Raised* 83–85; *Grave* 175–178.

⁸⁴ *Raised* 92.

⁸⁵ See Beckwith, “Identity” 373.

⁸⁶ *Grave* 379.

⁸⁷ *Battle* 174–175.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 41–42.

“put on” denotes something over the old body, not something in place of it (v. 53). (2) The changes are in quality, not substance, as indicated by the contrasts from a “mortal” to an “immortal” body, from a “corruptible” to an “incorruptible” body (vv. 53–54). (3) The word “body” (*sōma*), as has already been noted, always means a physical body when referring to a human being. (4) The pre- and postresurrection bodies are directly connected as one and the same body. “The body is sown in corruption, it [the same body] is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory,” and so on (vv. 42–44). Finally the seed analogy (vv. 36–38) favors a continuity in physical body, since the plant that emerges is related both physically and in kind to the seed from which it comes.

In view of these facts it is obvious that there is no change in substance between the pre- and postresurrection body but only in its accidental characteristics. As William G. T. Shedd noted, “the difference will be in the secondary, rather than in the primary properties of the natural body.” He cited the *Westminster Confession* (33.3) for support: “The dead shall be raised up with the *self-same bodies*, and none other, although with *different qualities*.”⁸⁹ By failing to distinguish a change in primary qualities (such as number and extension) from a change in secondary ones (such as particles and duration), Harris has denied the orthodox teaching that Christ rose in the numerically same material body in which he died.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 2. 654 (italics mine).

⁹⁰ (Editor’s note: In order to honor a prior commitment, we are including this article as a departure from our standard editorial policy not to publish material substantially the same as that appearing in other already-published material on the same subject by the same author. The article has been edited to conform to the academic criteria of *JETS*.)