Why I Am Skeptical about the Corporate Body View of the Resurrection

By Charles S. Meek

For details and background of the debate among preterists about the nature of resurrection, please see my articles—“The Personhood View of the Resurrection,” “Salvation after AD 70,” “The Two Resurrections of Revelation 20,” and “What is Hyper-Preterism.” These articles and others may be found here:

http://prophecyquestions.wordpress.com/2013/02/02/articles-by-charles-meek

The “Corporate Body View” of the Resurrection (CBV) holds that resurrection refers primarily, if not exclusively, to recovery of relational death between man and God. This view teaches that resurrection is purely collective and spiritual, and not in any sense individual and bodily. This stands against the “Individual Body View” (IBV), which is often stated as the “Individual Body at Death” view (IBD).

The IBV view teaches that while there is certainly an element of collective fulfillment in the sense of what Paul refers to as the “hope of Israel,” there is also a sense of resurrection of individual bodies to heaven in an immortal glorified state. CBV advocates may or may not acknowledge an individual aspect to resurrection. (All preterists reject the idea that fleshly bodies will emerge from their physical graves to ascend into heaven.)

I could be wrong, as I often am. But I see the CBV, if taken as a stand-alone doctrine, as incomplete and potentially misleading. Here are some thoughts:

• The corporate sense of resurrection is certainly part of the meaning of resurrection. But is it the only sense of it? To believe this, one has to essentially hold that every time the word “body” (Greek “soma”) is used in the New Testament (some 142 times), that it refers to a collective body, ie. the church. This is highly improbable and, for me, impossible to swallow. Only a relatively few times can soma be interpreted, indisputably, as the collective. Just as in English, the word “body” can mean a group of people, or it can mean a living person or a dead person. I fear that CBV-only advocates have forced a single meaning into this word to reach a desired conclusion.
This CBV-only doctrine stems, really, from one guy—Max King (born 1930), who developed it, apparently, from the very liberal theologian John A. T. Robinson, who even doubted the bodily resurrection of Christ. It is not unreasonable to be suspicious of the origin of all this. I think there is a whole lot of group-think among preterists, and it all emanates from King. Are preterists guilty of the very thing that they accuse futurists of—rallying around ideas from prominent theologians?

CBV advocates, I think, make a logical fallacy. They say that the Bible uses physical/bodily language to explain spiritual realities. How do you know that it is not the other way around—that spiritual/corporate language is used to explain bodily realities?

Is the “hope of Israel” limited to some sort of metaphorical positioning? I think you have to ignore dozens of passages in the New Testament to accept that conclusion. There are too many passages about the afterlife and heaven as a place of rest, hope, etc. for individual persons. And further, despite objections from CBVers, I think that the individual nature of the afterlife is how it would have been understood by the original hearers (examples: Martha in John 11, cf. Luke 7:22; 9:7; the disciples in John 14:2-3; the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17).

The CBV-only view, IMHO, misses the fact that the Bible discusses both spiritual AND bodily death, therefore implying both types of resurrection. Thus, the CBV-only view misses what I think are two different TYPES of resurrection per John 5 and Revelation 20. I am persuaded that the first resurrection was a “resurrection” of the living in a soteriological sense. The second resurrection was a resurrection of the physically dead in an eschatological/bodily sense (“immortal glorified body”). These were fundamentally different events, and not merely the same event separated in time. To think that the resurrection of the living and the resurrection of the dead are the same thing defies logic.

The CBV-only view has led to unfortunate inferences such as (a) universalism, (b) the notion that we are in heaven now (on earth), (c) that the afterlife holds nothing better for believers, or (d) even that sin no longer exists. These conclusions are abominable errors. The CBV-only view has been the archway for many poor souls right out of Christianity.

CBV-only advocates have failed to grasp that the idiom “heaven and earth” is not the same thing as heaven itself. Even in English, we use the terms “heaven,” “heavens,” and “heaven and earth” in several different ways. In every language, some words have many different meanings. This is just basic hermeneutics.
The CBV folks emphasize that you cannot understand the NT on resurrection unless you understand the OT. Well, I do not see how anybody could miss that such Old Testament passages as Isaiah 26:19; Job 19:26, and Daniel 12:2 are about individual persons to life after physical death.

I don’t see how you can miss that 1 Corinthians 15 is, at least in part, Paul’s attempt to explain the nature of the afterlife for believers. His discussions about the seed and image analogies seem as obvious to me as it certainly has been to believers throughout Christian history. In 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Paul sets this earthly life over and against the resurrection life in heaven, confirming his teaching of our personal life after bodily death. The concepts of both individual and corporate resurrection converge in 1 Corinthians 15.

It is evident enough from Scripture that Jesus has a body in heaven (1 Corinthians 15:49; Colossians 2:9; Philippians 3:21). There is no indication in these passages, or Acts 1:9-11, that Jesus’ body disintegrated as CBVers propose. It was changed, but not annihilated. Jesus’ eternal body sets the pattern for us. We will have a body in heaven. But it will be an immortal body—a new body suitable for our eternal habitation. Paul used the terms “glorified,” “immortal,” “spiritual,” and “emperishable” to explain the nature of our heavenly bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35-55; Philippians 3:20-21; cf. Matthew 17:2; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:3; 4:14; 10:12). These terms adds to our understanding that our eternal bodies will have physicality—corporeal and personal in some sense.

I fear that CBVers have lost sight of the gospel. Yes, Paul said in Acts that he taught nothing but the “hope of Israel.” But he does not limit this hope to a collective. Elsewhere he stated he preached nothing but Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2). He emphasized the gospel repeatedly in the New Testament (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 1:13-14; Colossians 1:22-23; etc.) and vehemently warned against any other gospel (Galatians 1:7-8; 2 Corinthians 11:4). This is the heart of the New Testament. I just don’t see what the motivation might be for minimizing the gospel. (See http://www.faithfacts.org/bible-101/what-is-the-gospel.) Notice that the emphasis placed by Paul on the gospel was after the initiation of the New Covenant at Christ’s first advent. He expected the gospel to endure forever (Ephesians 1:21; 3:21), so the hyper-cessationist idea that emanates from the CBV view seems clearly short-sighted.

What I think CBVers also miss is that Jesus personalizes all of theology. Numerous passages in the New Testament explain that one’s personal salvation is by grace through a living faith in Jesus Christ alone. It should be evident that the passages on salvation are
immensely personal in nature—not about corporate salvation. After all, corporate entities don’t sin; individuals do.

- I have noticed that explanations of their views by CBVers seem to delve into esoteric Bible ping-pong that is very difficult to follow. This might explain why local preterist congregations have not been successful. It is not relevant to people.

Summary: Some preterists tend to see resurrection and related passages in literal terms. Others seem to find symbols under every rock. Both approaches create more problems than they solve. Preterism will never gain traction among mainstream Christians unless we can find middle ground on resurrection and make it relevant to the lives of people.

For more details, analysis, and proof texts, see my articles mentioned above.