

## The spirit gives life and letter kills

Alan Bradley, I composed my thought for today in response to a question you put out there as moderator of your discussion group concerning eschatology, and Preterism in particular.

I don't believe that the writers of the New Testament were infallible. Jesus was sent to a Jewish audience, so the images and illustrations He used in His teaching were drawn from the Hebrew Bible and the surrounding culture. We even see some Greek and Persian influences, which had also been integrated into the "popular" theology of the Jews of Jesus' day. Jesus started out as a small child, knowing no more than anyone else about theology, science and history. All His worldly and spiritual knowledge was initially derived from the culture in which He was raised. The "emptying" that occurred as part of His incarnation resulted in the loss of His prior omniscience. This was necessary in order for Him to fully participate in the human experience and also in order for Him to fully identify with us in our sin, death and resurrection.

For this reason, the truths about God that Jesus taught have come to us through the "filter" of His human background and culture. He was God incarnate, but at the same He was an authentic product of His culture. His spiritual, moral and ethical teachings were expressed with terminology of the Hebrew Bible. As the early followers of Christ sought to understand the meaning of Christ's life, death and resurrection, they looked for it in the Hebrew Scriptures. During His earthly ministry, Jesus didn't talk very much at all about who He was, and said little about the significance of His impending death and resurrection. When He did communicate about these things, He often used symbolic or cryptic language and parables. For example, in one instance, instead of saying that He would be killed and then rise from the dead, He said, "*destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.*" He would take passages from the Bible and give prophetic meanings to them that were never intended by the original writer. He purposely did things in order to fulfill Bible prophecy. While on the cross, He uttered the words of King David, "*my God, my God, why has thou forsaken me.*" He talked about death and rebirth, but never spoke about these theological concepts in the detailed fashion that we find in modern theological circles. Instead, He would use the illustrations of plants and seeds. He talked about the coming Kingdom of God mostly in the form of parables, metaphors and similes, which today have become literalized, and many new layers of meaning have been attached to them.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, His followers tried to make sense of it all, so they also drew from the Hebrew Bible for prophetic clues. Jesus often referred to Himself as the "Son of Man," so they looked to the prophecies of Daniel about a humanlike figure (a son of man) coming from heaven to judge people who would be raised from the dead. They looked to the suffering servant in Isaiah to make sense of and understand the significance of Jesus crucifixion. A lot of this was incorporated into the Gospels and the writings of Paul, and in some cases, I believe, words were put into Jesus' mouth that He never actually uttered. After the destruction of the Temple and the massacre of the Jewish people in Jerusalem, the early Christians looked for clues in the Bible to help them understand it. They also looked for clues in Jewish apocalyptic literature, and in the sayings of Jesus. At this time the Gospels had not yet been written, so as Jesus' sayings were gathered together, and mixed in with Jewish apocalypticism, many of these ideas found their way into the mouth of Jesus.

So how does one make sense of it all? How does one separate out from all this the true message of Christ and the true meaning of His death and resurrection? One thing is for certain. Jesus did not communicate in clear and unambiguous language (nor did the writers of the New Testament). In some cases, He was even deliberately deceptive for various reasons, not the least of which was to avoid antagonizing the religious rulers. When looking for spiritual truth in the Scriptures, I look for various layers of meaning, beginning with the surface layers, and then I try to uncover the underlying truths. I look for threads of truth that harmonize with both the literal and figurative interpretations of the various Bible passages. When we get hung up on the literal and/or surface meanings, the underlying truths are sometimes distorted or obscured. If we focus only on the underlying truths, we can be led astray in a different way. We miss the underlying meaning and intent because we ignore or fail to understand the historical and situational context of the message.

Alan, with regard to your question to us regarding the meaning of “resurrection” and the eschatology of the New Testament, I personally would place greater emphasis on the underlying truths rather than cling to a surface literalism. I would focus more on the spiritual aspects, rather than the physical aspects. Charles Fillmore, the founder of the Unity Church, called it the “metaphysical” interpretation of Scripture, which does not depend on the literal, historical accuracy of story. The surface truths are neither affirmed nor denied. At the same time, they are not irrelevant. They provide valuable historical and contextual clues which help us better understand the underlying truths.

Preterism, I believe, takes two forms. Some hold to a more or less literalistic interpretation of Bible prophecy and see a literal fulfillment of the end time prophecies in the first century, as opposed some time still in our future. Others would hold to a more or less spiritual interpretation of these prophecies and believe that equally apply to believers of all historical time periods. I personally am the most comfortable with the latter view. I believe that on the surface, the prophecies primarily applied to first century believers, but beneath the surface they apply to believers of all ages.