

1 CORINTHIANS 15:44, 50

- 1 Supernatural physical body.
- 2 Mortality cannot inherit God's Kingdom.
- 3 Other New Testament verses.

44 It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.... 50 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society teaches that at the resurrection Christ was raised as a spirit creature in a non-physical, immaterial form.¹ Jehovah's Witnesses often point to 1 Corinthians 15 to support their spiritual resurrection doctrine. Yet the immediate context, as well as the whole of New Testament theology, teaches that Christ was raised in a glorified, immortal physical body.

EXPLANATION

1. Supernatural or Spirit-directed physical body. Jehovah's Witnesses understand the phrase "spiritual body" to refer to a non-physical, or immaterial form. Yet linguistic considerations, as well as the context of the passage, argue against such an interpretation.

The words translated "spiritual body" are the Greek words *soma pneumatikos*. Scholar Robert Gundry has argued forcefully that the word *soma* (translated "body" in this passage), when used of persons in the New Testament, always refers to the physical body.² So Paul must be speaking here of a physical body that is in some sense spiritual.

But this spiritual characteristic is not properly understood as immaterial. Earlier in this chapter Paul draws a contrast between the natural bodies we have now and that which will come forth in the resurrection (vss. 39-41). In verses 42 and 43 Paul draws a series of contrasts between the pre- and post-resurrection bodies: the body that dies is "sown" in the ground as perishable, dishonorable, weak and natural. The body that is raised is imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. The proper understanding of the word "spiritual" (Greek *pneumatikos*) is not immaterial, but rather supernatural or "Spirit-directed." This meaning is clear for two reasons. First, this passage teaches that there is a physical continuity between the body or "seed" that is sown in the ground in death (vs. 37) and the glorified physical body that is raised at the resurrection with its new characteristics (made clear by Paul's pre- and post-resurrection body contrasts). Second, Paul uses the word "spiritual" with the meaning of supernatural in 1 Cor. 10:1-4 when referring to the spiritual food and water that God provided for the Israelites during their wilderness wandering. The sustenance God provided for them was not immaterial, but rather, the source was supernatural because it came from God Himself.

2. Mortal humanity not prepared for God's Kingdom. The phrase "flesh and blood," which are said not to be fit for the Kingdom of God, is not to be understood as teaching that Christ's post-resurrection body was immaterial. The phrase is a Hebrew idiom for humanity in its present pre-resurrection state of weakness and mortality. This understanding is clear when we consider the latter part of the verse which states that corruption must inherit incorruption and immortality through the transformation of our physical bodies at the resurrection at the end of the ages (vss. 52-54). This transformation involves a change from a corruptible physical body to an incorruptible physical body fit for service in the Kingdom of God, not a change from a physical to a non-physical body.

3. New Testament testimony to Christ's bodily resurrection. In addition to 1 Cor. 15 being a strong testimony to Christ's physical, bodily resurrection, other New Testament passages support this doctrine as well. Christ told the religious leaders that if they destroyed the temple of his body he would raise it again in three days (John 2:18-22). And in Luke's gospel the disciples initially thought that the risen Christ was a spirit. He corrected their misunderstanding stating that his glorified body had flesh and bones. He then allowed the disciples to touch his body and ate in their presence to demonstrate the physical nature of his transformed body and the reality of his conquering of death (Luke 24:36-39).

When properly understood 1 Cor. 15 provides powerful testimony to the physical, bodily resurrection of Christ which is an essential element of the genuine gospel that Jehovah's Witnesses need to hear.

¹ Robert Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 168.

² *Let God Be True* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1952), 40-41.

KEY TO USING THIS PAGE

The biblical passage is highlighted in blue to indicate that this is a passage to which alternative religions use to support their unique teachings about Christ. The notes to the left of the passage can be written in the margins of a Bible to help explain the passage (however, do not write the numbers). The numbers correspond with the detailed explanations at the bottom of the page. These explanations help readers to fully understand the meaning of each marginal note.