

Notes on the Third Resurrection Doctrine in the Church of God

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Version 1.3

Introduction

While many denominations believe in two resurrections, the Radio Church of God (which changed its name to Worldwide Church of God in 1968) believes in a third resurrection which apparently is a unique belief within Christendom.

From the Church of God perspective, the three resurrections are referred to in Revelation 20:

First Resurrection:

“Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. **This is the first resurrection.**

Blessed and holy is the one who shares in **the first resurrection!** Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.” (Rev 20:4-6)

Second Resurrection:

“**The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.** This is the first resurrection...

and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” (Rev 20:4, 10-11)

It seems that after the second resurrection a third is introduced after the Great White Throne Judgment.

Third Resurrection:

“And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." (Rev 20:13-15. Cf 21:27; 22:11, 15)

So, there appears to be three separate resurrections and not two.

However, the other denominations do recognise that the Scriptures contain many references to a resurrection to judgment and condemnation but confuse the two or combine them which is easy to do and understandable.

The resurrections (as well as the rewards and punishments) seem to happen at the same time in some Scriptures such as Daniel 12:2; Acts 24:15; John 5:28-29; Mark 8:38. But it must be realised that these are 'telescopic' prophecies – the Hebrew mind would normally think that way and recognize it as such. A telescopic prophecy is one which makes future events look as if they are happening at the same time. The prophetic event looks to be as one – but are in fact separate events. (eg one may look at mountains in the distance and they look close together. Yet they can be 50 miles or more apart)

If it were not for the book of Revelation we would not have clarity of the sequence of end-time events including three diverse resurrections for three classes of people.

I believe that there are 3 resurrections representing 3 classes of people, viz:

1. resurrection to spirit life
2. resurrection to physical life with an opportunity for salvation
3. resurrection to sentencing to death.

With this in mind, it is important to note that Dan 12:2; Acts 24:15; Rev 20:4-6, 12-15 have a consistent approach to resurrection:

"Also Acts 24:15, where Paul speaks of the hope he shares with the Jewish people "that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous," and Revelation 20:4-6 and 11-15, where the two resurrections are separated by a thousand years" (J. Ramsey Michaels in *The Gospel of John in The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p322).

Now notice what some insightful commentators have to say about this in the context of John 4 and 5:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, **an hour is coming, and is now here**, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live ...

Do not marvel at this, for **an hour is coming** when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice

and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." (John 5:25, 28-29 ESV)

Compare with

"Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, **the hour is coming** when neither on this

mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

But **the hour is coming, and is now here**, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.” (John 4:21, 23 ESV)

“... “an hour is coming,” echoing verse 25, except the transforming postscript, “and now is,” is conspicuous by its absence... The same two expressions occurred in Jesus’ dialogue with the Samaritan woman, but with a quite different rhetorical effect. There, Jesus first said, “an hour is coming” (4:21), and then used the longer expression, “an hour is coming and now is,” to define what he meant (4:23). Here by contrast, the two expressions do not refer to the same “hour.” The longer one comes first, announcing a future about to begin, or one that has begun for the readers (v.25). **The shorter expression, “an hour is coming” (v.28), points to a more remote future (equivalent to “the last day”) and a literal, not just spiritual resurrection and judgment”** (ibid p321). [emphasis mine]

The following chart comparing John 5:24-25 with Revelation 20:4-6 by William Hendriksen throws further light on the subject (*New Testament Commentary Exposition of the Gospel According to John: Two Volumes Complete in One*, p200). NB: Hendriksen has taken the words “and (he) does not come into condemnation...” and placed them in alignment with Rev 20:6 to demonstrate the point of how these Scriptures speak of the same event:

Fourth Gospel	Revelation
A. First Resurrection	A. First Resurrection
I most solemnly assure you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has everlasting life ... has passed out of death unto life ... I most solemnly assure you, the hour is coming – yea, has already arrived! – when the dead will hear his voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.	“... and I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded ... and such as not as worshiped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years ... This is the first resurrection.
and (he) does not come into condemnation...	“Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection: over these the second death has no power.”
B. Second Resurrection	B. Second Resurrection
(unto judgment)	(unto judgment)
Stop being surprised about this, for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out: those who have done good, for the resurrection of life, and those who have practised evil, for the resurrection of condemnation.	“And I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it... Rev 20:12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works: And the sea gave up the dead that were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them: and they were judged according to their works... And if any one was not found in the book of life, he cast into the lake of fire.”

Note how at least two resurrections are clearly delineated in various Scriptures. A bit more thought and analysis shows that there are three.

A Resurrection to Condemnation

One only has to read the Scriptures on the subject to understand that a condemnation is prophesied for the unrepentant: Rev 20:13-15; 21:7-8, 27; 22:14-15; Jude 1, 7-8, 14-16; Ps 11:5-6; 21:8-10; 68:3; 140:9-11; Prov 21:16; Dan 12:2; Mal 4:1-3; Matt 5:21-22; 7:18-23; 12:32; 13:39-42, 49-50; 18:8-10; Mark 3:28-30; 8:38; Acts 24:15; 2Thess 1:5-10; Heb 2:3; 6:4-8; 10:26-29; 12:28-29; IPet 4:17-19; IIPet 2:4-9, 20-21; 3:5-7. Look up each Scripture yourself.

Apparently, it was in the early 1950s that the Church adopted the view that there are three resurrections but prior to that held to the standard two resurrections doctrine. Probably the earliest article on the subject was by C Paul Meredith "If you die will you live again?" *Good News*, March 1952: 3-6:

"Now you are going to be in for a surprise! **Undoubtedly you are going to learn of one resurrection that you never heard of before and possibly two or three!** Yet they are in YOUR BIBLE. The things that are in the BIBLE are just *not being taught today!*" (page 5)

"Revelation 20: 13,14,15 describes the FINAL RESURRECTION in which the sea, death, and hell ("Hades"-the grave) give up *their dead* to be judged. These are they who, after being begotten by God, rebelled, and those who have lived contrary to Gods way of life and have refused to repent; be baptized, and thus receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. These are cast into the lake of fire which is described in verse 14 as the SECOND DEATH. It is the EVERLASTING DEATH!" (page 6) [emphasis mine]

Presumably the third resurrection teaching was brought in because a change was made from: all those not now called would get their first chance during the Millennium - to a new view of their receiving their first chance during the Last Great Day instead. In other words, it was logical that if the Last Great Day was the time referred to in Rev 20:12 (ie the second resurrection), then when are the wicked resurrected? It must be in a subsequent resurrection described in Rev 20:13-15 which would make it the third. (though some within the Church of God refer to a part A and part B for the second resurrection to accommodate those who will have a first chance and those who are condemned)

Apparently, in 1943 Herbert Armstrong brought in the truth that most of humanity are not currently called to salvation ("Predestination. Does the Bible teach it?" *Plain Truth*, Nov-Dec: 8-12). The article seems to indicate that he originally believed that the future calling of all of mankind will be during the Millennium (it is unknown whether he taught this prior to 1943). Over time he increased his understanding and later taught the calling of mankind during the Great White Throne Judgment period and also the additional new truth about a third resurrection.

Three Resurrections in History and Typology

Belief in three (instead of two) resurrections is virtually unheard of in Christian theology. However, history records that some Sabbatarians believed in three resurrections in the 2nd century:

"These Jewish Christian groups, referred to by Epiphanius (Williams, 1987) as Nazarenes or Elkasaites, professed the following beliefs: They proclaimed Jesus as

prophet-Messiah; insisted upon the validity of the Torah & laws of ritual purity; **spoke of three resurrections**; professed a millennial eschatology; looked forward to the restoration of the Temple; observed the feast of Sukkoth (Tabernacles), celebrated Easter at Passover, & observed the Sabbath; affirmed the primacy of James, brother of Jesus, over Peter in the leadership of the church; & preferred the designation "Nazarene" over "Christian." ("Early Judaism and Christianity in the Light of Archaeology," *Biblical Archaeologist*, June 1988: 69-79 by Eric Meyers) [emphasis mine].

If it is indeed true that the Nazarenes are our spiritual ancestors (Acts 24:5), it would appear from the above quote that they believed in 3 resurrections. One can assume that they believed in three resurrections in similitude to what the old WCG taught (viz 1st resurrection of the saints; 2nd resurrection of the majority of mankind who were not 'called' to salvation in this life; 3rd resurrection to eternal death of the wicked). Alternatively, they may have meant that Christ's resurrection was the 1st, the resurrection of the saints was the 2nd and the resurrection at the end of the millennium was the 3rd. More investigation is required in this regard to ascertain with certainty exactly what they believed pertaining to the 3rd resurrection.

It may be more than passing interest that there were:

- 3 resurrections performed in the Old Testament (IKings 17:17-25; IIKings 4:32-37; 13:20-21);
- 3 by Christ (Luke 7:11-18; Mark 5:35; John 11); and
- 3 after Christ's death (Matt 27:51-53; Acts 9; 20).

Bullinger in his superb *Number in Scripture* goes so far as to state that : "three is the number of resurrection" (page 111) because Christ rose the 3rd day; he was perfected on the 3rd day, he was crucified at the 3rd hour; for 3 hours darkness shrouded the region at the time of His crucifixion; he raised 3 persons from the dead; and it was on the 3rd day that the earth was caused to rise up out of the waters in Genesis.

From this we can be sure that there are three resurrections and not two.

Old Worldwide Church of God Articles on the Subject

Following is a list of many of the old Worldwide Church of God articles on the subject of the third resurrection which you can look up and read for your own research:

Ambassador College. (1965).	"The Last Great Day. The Last Judgment", Lesson 39, <i>Ambassador College Correspondence Course</i> . Pp. 13-14. Radio Church of God, Pasadena, CA.
Dankenbring, W. F. (1970).	"What is the place called Hell?" <i>Tomorrow's World</i> , July-Aug, pp. 14-17.
Luker, D. G. (1967).	"The First Resurrection Is a Better Resurrection!" <i>Good News</i> , July, pp. 9-10, 18-21.
McNair, R.F. (1974).	"The Third Resurrection: Part V," <i>Good News</i> , May, pp. 27-30.
McNair, R. F. (c1980).	<i>The Three Resurrections</i> . Article Reprint series. Worldwide Church of God, Pasadena, CA.
Meredith, C. P. (1952).	"If you die will you live again?" <i>Good News</i> , March, pp. 3-6.
Neff, L. (1961).	"Why Some Fall Away," <i>Good News</i> , Jan, pp. 3-4, 12.

Plain Truth staff. (1960).	"The Bible Answers Short Questions from our Readers: Wicked Will Be Ashes Under Our Feet?" <i>Plain Truth</i> , April, p. 30.
Plain Truth staff. (1977).	"Questions & Answers: Explain Luke 13:28 Re: Lake of Fire," <i>Plain Truth</i> , Aug, p. 34.
Tomorrow's World staff. (1970).	"Questions & Answers: What Is the Third Resurrection?" <i>Tomorrow's World</i> , July-Aug, p. 34.
Tomorrow's World staff. (1971).	"Answers to Your Questions: What Is the Third Resurrection?" <i>Tomorrow's World</i> , Aug, p. 44.

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