

Questions for Easter

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

—I Corinthians 15:14

At Easter, more than at any other time of the year, Christians are summoned to profess their faith in the "risen Lord" and to celebrate the Resurrection as proof of man's ultimate redemption. And so, from pulpits across the nation, word will go forth once again next Sunday that death has been swallowed up in victory because, according to the gospel of Saint John, Jesus taught that "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." It is a comforting promise, and one that most Christian laymen—and many theologians—have taken as a guarantee of life after death. But does the Resurrection of Jesus really have anything to do with immortality for ordinary human beings? Nowadays, many theologians are not so sure.

According to a 1968 Gallup poll, fully 73 per cent of all Americans believe in some kind of life after death. And another Gallup survey last year found that 98 per cent of Roman Catholic priests, 86 per cent of Protestant ministers and 68 per cent of rabbis believe that "souls live on after death." Some students of the Bible, however, argue that most Christians confuse immortality (the survival of the individual soul after death) with resurrection (physical rebirth at the day of judgment).

Notion: On the strength of their own reading of the Bible, these scholars deny that the soul automatically lives on forever. And Lutheran theologian Krister Stendahl, dean of Harvard's Divinity School, believes that it is time that the church caught up with its Biblical experts. "The point," he says, "is that the whole world which comes to us through the Bible—Old Testament and New—is not interested in the immortality of individual souls. And those who think it is are reading that interest into the texts." With this, Methodist theologian Albert Outler is in full agreement. "There is no doubt that the notion of an eternal soul contradicts the Biblical idea that the soul is created finite by God," says Outler. "In the Bible, you find the idea of God's having created the soul out of nothing, of death's being a constant reminder of the soul's lack of intrinsic immortality. And the body and soul that emerge in resurrection will be another *creatio ex nihilo*."

Many clergymen, indeed, doubt not only their own immortality but Christ's Resurrection as well. "The Resurrection needs to be radically reinterpreted," says Dr. Deane William Fenn, dean of the chapel at Mount Holyoke College. And in a Lenten issue of *The Christian*



Brown Brothers

Della Francesca's 'Resurrection': Still a disputed question

Century, Fenn, a Presbyterian minister, insists that Christians need not affirm that Christ rose from the dead at all. "The Resurrection does indeed have symbolic value in that it emphasizes newness and spiritual rebirth," he writes, "but, so far as concerns its having literal historical significance, it has become excess baggage for most of us."

Even in some of the more conservative churches, the whole subject of immortality seems to be losing favor. "Where will you spend eternity? This is the supreme question," writes Dr. L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham's father-in-law and executive editor of the evangelical review *Christianity Today*. But supreme or not, Dr. Bell complains that "we rarely hear this asked of us from the pulpit" today.

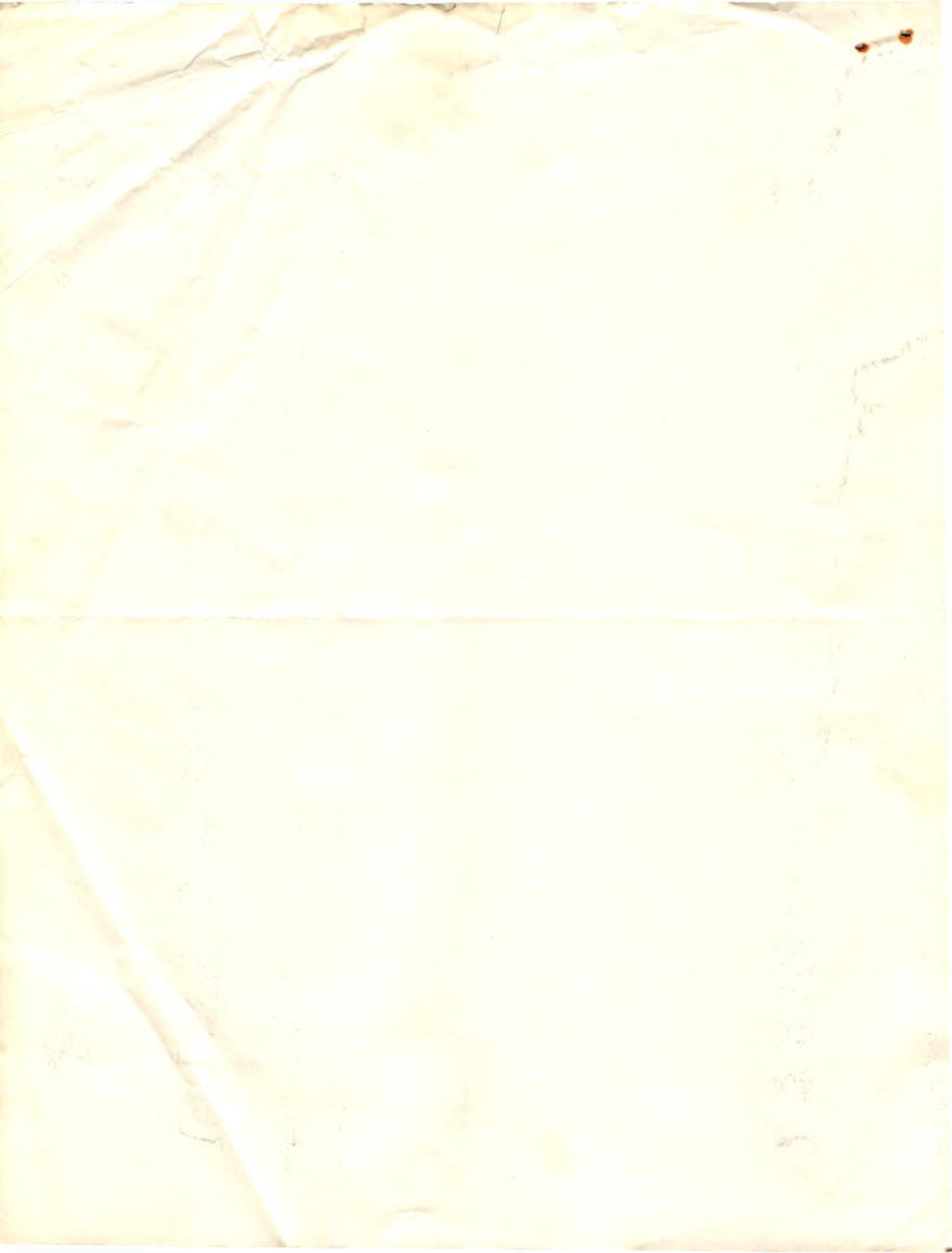
Among Biblical scholars, the anti-immortality argument is based on a view of the Scriptures that is widely shared by both Protestant and Catholic. According to this view, the Greek idea of man as a combination of body and soul does not appear in the Bible, except for a few brief passages written under the influence of Platonic thought. To the Hebrews, man was created finite by God and the only immortality he could expect was to live on through his children. God's blessings and punishment were administered in this world alone.

But the people of Israel also believed that God had promised them fulfillment in a communal kingdom on earth. At first this vision of God's kingdom was

purely mundane—a land flowing with milk and honey. But as wave after wave of foreign oppressors swept over Palestine, Jewish apocalyptic literature developed a new vision of a hereafter in which God would vindicate the sufferings of his people. If God were good and just, it was felt, then He must rectify the injustice of this world in some kind of afterlife. Or else there was no God.

Conflict: Since Hebrews typically did not separate man into body and soul, apocalyptic Jews used the image of resurrection—or total regeneration—to describe their vision of God's kingdom. Not all the Jewish leaders, however, accepted the idea of resurrection. It was, in fact, a source of great conflict during the life of Jesus between the Sadducees, who interpreted the Torah strictly, and the Pharisees, who were more elastic. On this point at least, Jesus agreed with the Pharisees—and so did his disciples, especially Saint Paul. To those who first preached or heard of Jesus's Resurrection, the event was taken as a sign from God that the world was in its last days and that the new age promised by Him was about to dawn. By his Resurrection, Jesus had been vindicated by God as the Messiah and as the "first born" of those who would enter the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom, however, did not arrive as the apocalyptic first-century Christians had expected. "It did not take long," Stendahl observes, "before the Easter message came to be applied as a spec-



acular answer to those concerns which expressed themselves in a hunger for eternal life and to which the belief in immortality was the answer." Even so, theologians wrestled for centuries with the various and often conflicting attitudes toward death, resurrection and immortality. Many of the church fathers railed against immortality as a pagan doctrine of human self-sufficiency that blunted man's ultimate dependence on God's grace. Others saw immortality as God's gift to the soul and proof that man is indeed made in the Lord's image. And in the classic Christian effort to reconcile the two divergent views, Saint Thomas Aquinas taught that the separated soul is immortal, but woefully incomplete without its resurrected body. Since then, the immortality of the soul has remained a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

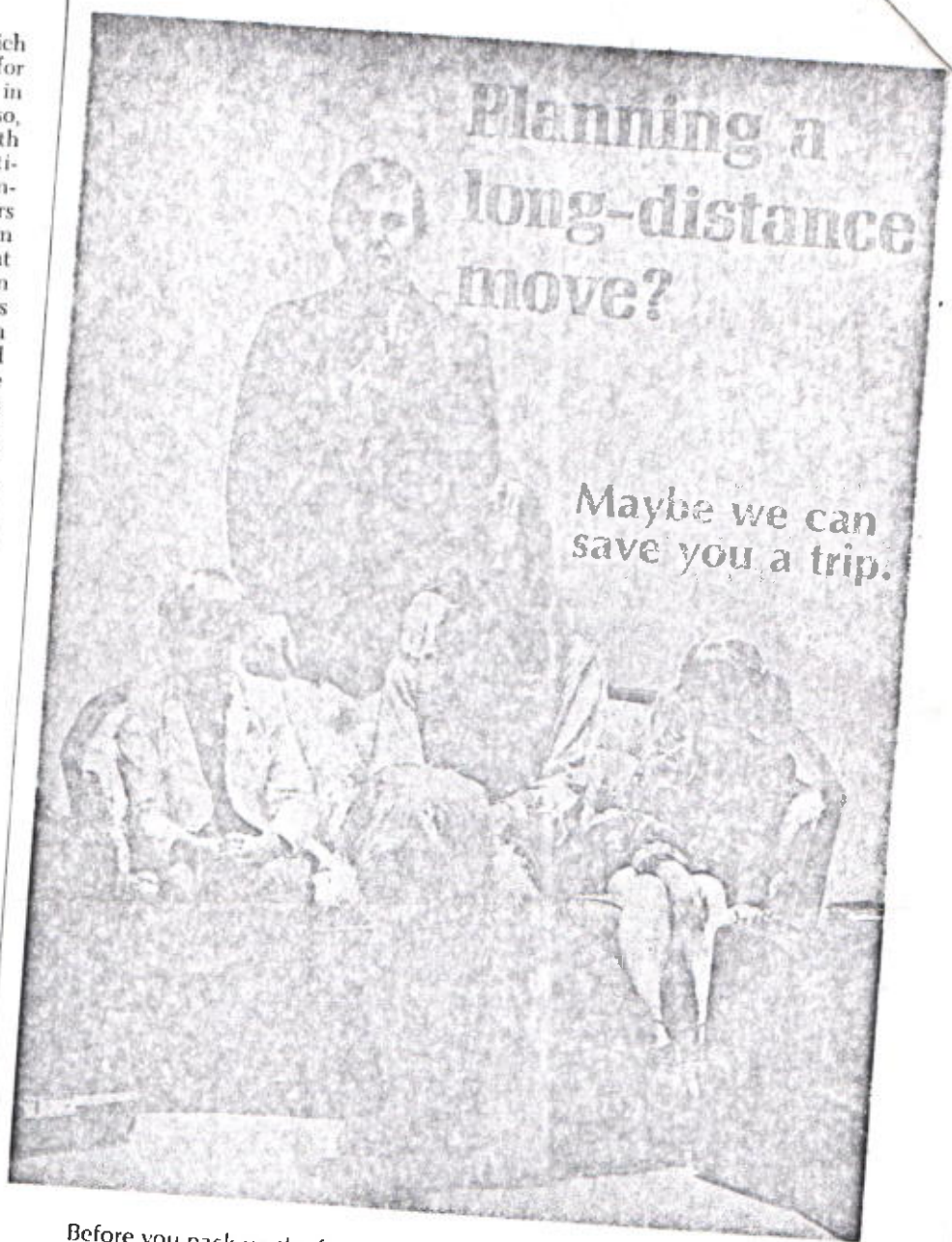
Theologians today, however, no longer seem to be very interested in proving immortality or resurrection—some, no doubt, because they do not want to appear "irrelevant." Others feel the issue is insoluble. "I don't know whether we can ever put this all together," admits Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles, the son of the late John Foster Dulles. "Somehow, though, the two—resurrection and immortality—must be kept in tension and balance. They are myths for approaching a reality which we cannot talk about more directly this side of death."

Fear: As myths, however, resurrection and immortality can have ethical consequences and, for those who put their hope in the risen Christ, those consequences are important. French Protestant theologian Oscar Cullmann likes to contrast the deaths of Socrates and Jesus to make his point. The philosopher died calmly after drinking hemlock because he felt that he would soon enter his rightful state of immortality as a seeker after truth. Jesus, on the other hand, as a pious Jew, feared death and was secure only at the last moment in his obedience to the Father. For that obedience, Cullmann concludes, Jesus was resurrected.

Krister Stendahl feels that those who look to Jesus as proof of their own immortality are egocentric and overlook the act of witnessing that Jesus had intended. "The crucial question," adds Methodist Outler, "is whether or not we do in fact believe that the existence of the self depends upon the mercy and grace of God—now and after death."

Outler does not venture to guess what happens to those who decline to put themselves at God's mercy and grace. But he does admit that, even in the Bible Belt, ministers no longer seem interested in preaching that a refusal to do so will lead inevitably to hell-fire and damnation. Yet the message of Easter is one of hope. And if those who have no faith show little hope in these troubled times, perhaps it is also true that too many of those who do believe in trusting God's grace have yet to demonstrate that their faith makes any real difference.

—KENNETH L. WOODWARD



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