

“Ministry Diversity and the Centrality of Christ in the Local Assembly”
Issues of Theology - Understanding the Resurrection

Author: Patrick J. Griffiths ©
Date: June 3, 2007
Title: “A World without a Resurrection”
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, 29-34
Theme: “What if there was no Resurrection from the Dead?”
Introduction:

The present danger:

What if there was no resurrection from the dead? What if this life is all there is? What would you change? How different would your life be? What purpose would suffering have? Why would I tolerate any kind of discomfort or inconvenience? If there was no life after death, I would completely live for self-gratification. Whatever made me happy would be my goal. If this life was not eternal, I would be an atheist and I would be a hedonist.

The eternal view:

In the absence of His resurrection from the dead all faith in Him for the redemption from sin is vain (v. 14) and worthless (v. 17) and you are still in your sin and you are to be most pitied (v. 19). In the absence of His resurrection from the dead there is no hope in this life or for the life to come (v. 19). Verses 29-34 pick up the thread and provide 5 additional negatives in the absence of the resurrection.

The Big Picture:

It is important to remember the apostle is addressing issues as they existed within the Corinthian fellowship. He now addresses the issue of the gospel and resurrection. In light of what we have already seen inside of the letter it is safe to assume that a problem existed within the church concerning the gospel and the resurrection.

The issue is not in response to a question, but rather a concern that has been brought to the apostle’s attention. The issue is significant enough to warrant a response.

It is important to remember that these two thoughts are not separate but one and the same. The gospel is Jesus Christ and His credibility as King of kings and Lord of lords is validated by His resurrection from the dead. Because Jesus Christ *is* the gospel, the gospel is a living, breathing, life-transforming power.

The direct issue is not the gospel, but the resurrection. The gospel becomes the issue because of its unbreakable link to the resurrection. In verses 1-11, the appearance of Jesus AFTER His resurrection is crucial in lending validity to the event itself. The idea of resurrection presupposes death. The early church preached the message of Christ crucified which included His resurrection.

Although we can rightly note how this chapter “is the heart or hub of the letter from which everything has radiated” we must not forget how the theology of the cross noted in chapters 1 and 2 and the theology of the resurrection as seen here cannot be put asunder. “For Paul [these two ideas] are not only joined together but [are] one and indivisible. The proclamation of the resurrection is at the same time and in the same breath the word of the cross; the

word of the cross is at the same time and in the same breath the proclamation of the resurrection.” (Roy A. Harrisville, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians [Augsburg Publishing House, 1987], 248)

It is important to remember that although our resurrection is looked upon as a future event, it is something that is already present. Because of our union with Christ, His people are viewed as living in newness of life right now, in the present. We have an unfortunate tendency not to see the implications of biblical truth in our every day lives. The Holy Spirit will not allow us to live such disconnected lives.

This text challenges the idea that the resurrection is of no consequence as to its impact on the Christian life.

I. The resurrection challenged as to its validity (v. 12)

“The reason for the introduction to the topic in the present letter is that some Corinthians were denying that there would ever be a resurrection from the dead. So much is clear, but their reasons for holding this view are not so plain.” (Margaret E. Thrall, The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians, [Cambridge: at the university press], 1965, 103)

The historical context for this letter is provided for us in the book of Acts. The theology of the resurrection is found throughout the record. The historicity of the event is established in the selection of the apostle to take the place of Judas; the betrayer (Acts 1:22). The resurrection of Jesus Christ by the power of the Father is a non-negotiable in the preaching of the apostles and early church (Acts 2:24, 30-32; 3:15, 26; 4:10, 33; 5:30; 10:40, 41; 13:30, 33, 34, 37; 17:3, 31; 24:15; 26:8, 23). This is what they preached. Friend, we cannot abandon this thought from our current ministry or message. We forsake it at our peril.

Preaching Christ crucified was met with open resistance and ridicule (Acts 17:18, 32). Many in Paul’s day saw such ideas as mere babble and the setting forth of strange gods. Others were intrigued by the idea. Even the religious establishment of Paul’s day had those within who resisted the doctrine of a resurrection (Acts 23:6, 8; 24:21). Many were grieved that the resurrection was taught openly (Acts 4:2). There were at least four views present at this time.

- A. If you die before He comes, there will be no resurrection for you (1 Thess. 4:13-18).
- B. There is no physical, bodily resurrection only the existence of soul (i.e. Plato).
- C. Resurrection life is simply mirrors this present physical life all over again (2 Tim. 2:18).
- D. Resurrection life is no real life only a dreary and shadowy existence (i.e. Ancient Greek ideology).

Paul goes about showing how completely illogical and irrational such thinking is in light of our Lord’s bodily resurrection by showing ten negative ideas that would exist in the absence of resurrection truth.

II. The implications of no resurrection (vv. 13-14)

a. Christ is still dead (vv. 13, 14a, 16)

If there is no resurrection, then logically all they presently profess is of no consequence. “The first absurd and impossible conclusion is this. If the dead are completely incapable of being restored to life, if such a process is entirely alien to the nature of man, then Christ has not raised.” (Margaret E. Thrall, The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians, [Cambridge: at the university press], 1965, 107)

Such a conclusion is ridiculous. “Paul has just proved (vv. 4-8) that the resurrection of Jesus is an authentic historical fact.” (Margaret E. Thrall, The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians, [Cambridge: at the university press], 1965, 107)

If there is no resurrection from the dead and Christ is still dead, then the program of God is over and what He purposed will fail (vv. 20-28).

Notice the intrinsic necessity of Jesus Christ to everything Christian. It is a travesty of the highest kind to have Christianity without Christ. First Corinthians 15:12 begins with a simple statement, “Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead. . .” There is a marked simplicity in the statement; “Christ is preached.” Perhaps the strength of the statement can be addressed by asking it in the form of a question, “Is Christ preached?”

Earlier in the chapter, Paul defines the resurrection of Jesus as the bulwark on which the Christian “good news” rests (v. 4). In the absence of this resurrection all hope is lost.

Much earlier in the letter (1:18-25; 2:2), Paul establishes the theology of the cross. Here (in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11) he welds together the theology of the cross and the theology of the resurrection and in so doing shows them to be indivisible. **How many times is a theology of the cross and resurrection heard from the pulpits of today’s church?** It is undeniable that our culture is rife with a consumer mindset. **Consumerism or the need to purchase is either a necessary slave or a horrible master. When “I shop to live” becomes “I live to shop” we have crossed over into a dark abyss. The church has not been left unscathed by such thinking.** Everything from ministry to message has fallen prey to a market driven mindset. **The congregant, as a consumer, dictates what many churches become.**

Equally compelling is the prevailing ignorance of the general population. I find myself ensnared by such tantalizing tidbits offered by the Hollywood elite. We have become a world inhabited by the unthinking. Our attention span is deficient and our ability to think is significantly hampered by a consuming, non-desire to learn. We bend and conform to whatever pressures exist. We bow before whatever weight is most pressing. Does this have any significance in ministry and message?

I do not fault too harshly the need to meet the “needs” of growing families. When we had small children, we were compelled by employment to have our children go to the church where I was employed. Our choice was made for us. **Today, the church has become a superstore of options whereby the congregant can pick whatever ministry expression**

(i.e. entertainment) best appeals to their appetites. What is said by the church sits in a position of secondary importance to how it is said and in what context it is said.

We are not so much concerned by truth as we are by attraction. The same is true with reference to the message taught on Sunday mornings. We forget that worship is truth driven. It is driven by an unfolding and revealing of God and His work, not by us and our needs. Modern technology has caused us to “need” something more than the “mere” preaching of Christ crucified. We fail to see or we have failed to make Christ relevant to the modern consumer. We do not ask questions that strike at the heart of biblical worship but rather, “What can He do for me?”

The relevance of preaching Christ to my job, my home, my spouse, my friends, my surroundings, in short, my life cannot be overestimated. **In the absence of this message all ministry expression is vain. It becomes mere entertainment and the cuddling of the overfed and under-active. In the absence of this message, faith is empty.** There is nothing left to drive self-sacrificing service. There is nothing that drives the courageous to offer up their lives in death for Him who loved them and gave Himself for them. In the absence of this message, we are still in bondage to sin. There is no deliverance, no freedom, and no hope. We still exist under the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and the very presence of sin. In the absence of this message, we mourn the death of loved ones knowing that nothing awaits us but darkness and separation. There will never be an ultimate reunion, if Christ is not preached.

How do we make Christ relevant in a consumer driven age? How do we make Him appealing when everyone wants cookies, ice cream, and Kool-aid? Friend, it is not our responsibility to make Christ relevant. What we are to do is preach Christ crucified. Let us proclaim Him as God. Let us believe He is enough in this life and in the life to come. And let us never stop preaching Him to a world that is blinded by and in bondage to their appetites and pleasures.

If Christ is not alive, then our preaching is vain and we are testifying to something that is not true.

- b. Our preaching is vain

The message of His resurrection is the centerpiece of biblical preaching. Note 15:1, 2, and 11. What would a life, a world, a government look like in the absence of a resurrection? Perhaps we do not have to look far to see the devastating consequences of a society that is consumed by its own fleshly appetites.

The world, the flesh, and the devil all invite us to abandon our innate spirituality that thirsts for God and instead exchange Him for things created. Our flesh is not accidental or incidental to what and who we are. In many ways our flesh defines us as people. Non-fallen flesh hungered and thirsted; it tired and promoted a need for rest. Our non-fallen flesh enjoys sense stimulation; it appreciates well prepared food and enjoys the truly beautiful. There is nothing wrong with this. Yet **we are drowning in a sea of abundance where the simple no longer appeals. We have lost sight of the buoys of God in the sea of excess that keep us on course. Over-stimulation dulls our senses to the truly stunning. We have developed thick calluses over sensitive tissue and thus lost all feeling for the attraction of God. What can we do?**

First, we must fully recognize that we were designed for something more than what is seen. This world is not the end. It is only a beginning. It is a part of a much larger whole. Our lives are pieces of a much larger picture. This existence is only a shadow of something bigger. This is not saying that our existence has no real meaning, only that if this is all there is, then we are living as fools. We must see God in the details of what He has created.

Second, we must see the full nature of God in His tri-unity. Somehow our perception of God is so stunted that we find Him either obsolete or incredibly boring, neither of which are true. How can the God who has created all things with such powerful expression and intimacy be tiresome? How can the Creator abandon His creation to run in the absence of His involvement? Such thinking is ludicrous. We must once more take upon ourselves the serious study of God in His person and in His work.

Third, we must resist the urge to over indulge our senses. We must stop eating, stop watching, stop moving, we must slow down. We cannot think about God because it requires contemplation. It requires us to think, but we fail to think about Him because there is little room for Him in the midst of tremendous mind clutter. Our inability to think comes as a result of minds that are both blunted and polluted. The devil uses the world to make appeals to our flesh. All of this market driven consumerism is choking life and thus stifling growth. We cannot avoid it, but we should at least be aware of it and live open-eyed and guarded.

Believe me when I say this is as much about me as anyone else. I am the foremost offender and need a constant reminder to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. However, **if we do not live this life in light of the life to come, we will lose by adapting the mindset of our world and that is to eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Such a mindset is a result of having lost one's way. If we abandon the buoys of God, we will drift and then drown in a sea of frivolous distractions. We will have amused ourselves to death.**

As depressing as this might appear when you begin to assess your surroundings, all however, is not lost. Let us begin to take baby steps in regaining lost ground and see Him as enough for this life and the life to come. Let us live with a singular appetite and that is for Him. Be encouraged and enjoy the journey in your pursuit of Him. The reward of Him is what resonates within each of us to continue the quest.

- c. We are false witnesses (v. 15)
- d. Your faith is vain (vv. 14c, 17b)

“That our faith is ineffectual is defined to mean that it does not secure us freedom from our sins, that is to say justification, if Christ has not risen.” (Hans Conzelmann, *Hermeneia, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, [Fortress Press, 1975], 266)

- i. You are still in your sins (v. 17c)

If Christ be not raised, then His people are still under the rule of sin and death. They are still in bondage and not living as freed people. Their experience, however, says otherwise.

“In other words, Christianity is completely destroyed: you might as well never have believed at all. It follows, since justification is by faith, that you are still related to God in terms of sin – not merely that you still commit sin, but that the sin you commit determines God’s judgment of you.” (C.K. Barrett, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, [Harper & Row, 1968], 349)

In such a world sin and death retain their victory over earth’s inhabitants.

ii. The dead have perished (v. 18)

The manner in which believers are identified is that we are hopers in God. We are believers. We have faith, but in what? Our hope is in Christ. Hope, belief, faith are all actions that find their validation in the object believed.

“Sin and death are imagined as twin powers which control man’s existence. The resurrection of Jesus meant the defeat of Death, and consequently the defeat of Sin also.” (Margaret E. Thrall, The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians, [Cambridge: at the university press], 1965, 107) Consider this idea as it unfolds in verses 53-58.

If there is no resurrection from the dead, your faith is vain and there is no reason to live with any kind of restraint or future hope (vv. 29-34).

e. We are most to be pitied (v. 19)

If there is no resurrection from the dead, you are to be most pitied because you will simply die and perish (vv. 35-53). If there is no resurrection and Christ is dead, then we believe a shadow. Our existence is one of a vapor. There is no weight or substance to the space we occupy. If there is no resurrection, then it would be most logical to embrace a philosophy that say, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” In the absence of the resurrection from the dead, what has defined the Christian life would be of no consequence.

“All of this, however, is unreal speculation, no value only in that it reminds the reader of what life without Christ would be.” (C.K. Barrett, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, [Harper & Row, 1968], 350)

f. No reason to be baptized for the dead (v. 29)

There are at least 40 different solutions to this one idea. As such verse 29 is an impossible verse so we will not spend any energy on it.

g. No reason to place ourselves in harm’s way (vv. 30-32)

Why should we be inconvenienced in any way if there is no resurrection?

h. No reason to avoid bad company (v. 33)

i. No reason to stop sinning (v. 34a)

Paul believes that what he describes is sufficient motivation to keep us morally pure. What Paul has not described is future reward or any kind of positioning in this heavenly kingdom. It sounds as if the presence of God is sufficient motivation to live the Christian

life. It sounds as if apathy toward Christ and His church is sufficient evidence to prove one does not believe.

I cannot find the author of the statement but it reads as follows, “What you win them by is what you win them to.” I do not believe the church is to compete with the world as to programming and ministry expression. Let the world do that, what the church is to be about is preaching Christ alive in and through His people. **The world cannot offer what is uniquely Christian.**

Think about everything we do to motivate people to do right and to live the Christian life. **Because we do not understand who He is and what He has done, we hold out lesser lights as motives for obedience.** Friend, He is enough in this life and when we see Him for that nothing else will prove worthy of Him.

- j. No reason to witness to the unbelieving (v. 34b)

If this is all there is, then there is no content behind what we say.

The resurrection from the dead gives hope in the moment. Since there is a resurrection we can endure and persevere in the midst of hardships and tribulations. It is also the resurrection that motivates us toward moral purity. The resurrection is a strong deterrent to sinning. If the purpose of God fails, then nothing in this life matters (v. 29). If there is no resurrection, then it would be most logical to embrace a philosophy that says, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” In the absence of the resurrection from the dead what has defined the Christian life would be of no consequence.

APPLICATION: (What is the NEXT STEP?)

1. The entire Christian life is built on a singular idea and that is, “Jesus Christ is alive.” In the absence of this singular thought, we are of all people to be pitied.
2. Because there is a resurrection from the dead your service for Christ to the world is necessary.
3. Because there is a resurrection from the dead your faith in Christ is not in empty.
4. Because there is a resurrection from the dead your sins have been forgiven.
5. Because there is a resurrection from the dead those who have preceded us in death have died in hope.
6. Because there is a resurrection from the dead we should seek to live morally pure lives.
7. Because there is a resurrection from the dead we are compelled to tell those without Christ the truth of the cross in order that they might be delivered from the sting of sin.

The believer is living the resurrected life right now. There is a future installment of this resurrected life, but because we are raised with Him, the implications of this for us in our daily lives and in all relationships are explosive.

You need to examine your own life and ask yourself where Christ is in all of your activity. Friend, He is worthy to have first place in your energy and in your thinking.

Our next paragraph will show us that there is a resurrection from the dead and that the Christian life is one that is filled with hope because Jesus Christ has led the way (vv. 20-28).