

The Foundation

Last week... *Jesus is really alive and it really matters.*

- In verses 1-11 the Apostle Paul was saying how the resurrection is essential to the Gospel.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say, “There is no resurrection of the dead”? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and **if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is without foundation, and so is your faith.** ¹⁵ In addition, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified about God that He raised up Christ—whom He did not raise up if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ **And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.** ¹⁸ Therefore, those who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished. ¹⁹ If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone.

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Corinth was at the heart of the Greek culture.

- The Greeks believed the bodies was evil & the spirit was good.
 - “According to Greek philosophers, the soul was the real person, imprisoned in a physical body, and at death the soul was released.” (Life Application)
 - No immortality for the body but soul does enter an “eternal state.”
- “Christianity, by contrast, affirms that the body and soul will be united after resurrection.” (Life Application)
 - But since the church was at the heart of the Greek culture, and they had been raised thinking a particular way, they had a hard time escaping their original views on this matter.

“Take away the Resurrection,” said Paul, “and you destroy both the foundation and the fabric of the Christian faith.” (Barclay)

if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is without foundation, and so is your faith. V. 14

The Resurrection is the foundation of our faith.

- As one commentary put it... “Christianity is fundamentally a resurrection faith.” (HCSB Study Bible)

I know some of you are saying but WAIT! Christ is the corner stone!

- You cannot separate Christ & His resurrection. Period.
 - Without His resurrection, Christ is a fraud.
- “Take out the resurrection of Jesus, and there is nothing left on which to rest faith—only the decomposing corpse of an itinerant Jewish carpenter-turned-rabbi. Here, as everywhere, Paul underlines the truth that faith is produced by looking to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Faith is not created, sustained or increased by looking at ourselves or at others, but only by absorbing the reality and the implications of the resurrection of Jesus.” (Prior)

Let’s look at the implications to our faith, according to Paul, if we remove Christ’s resurrection.

Problems according to Paul...

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say, “There is no resurrection of the dead”? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is without foundation, and so is your faith. ¹⁵ In addition, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified about God that He raised up Christ—whom He did not raise up if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Therefore, those who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished. ¹⁹ If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone.

If Christ is dead...

Our preaching or “proclamation” is for nothing (v.14)

Our Faith isn’t real (v. 14)

We are liars about God (v.15)

- We are saying that God raised Christ from the dead. If Christ is still dead, then we are lying about the Lord.

We are still in our sins & doomed (v.17)

- “If Jesus stayed dead, there are only two possible conclusions:
 1. either he was not the sinless person everyone thought him to be and his death marked his final separation from God; **OR**
 2. he might have been without personal sin, but his attempts to atone for the sin of the world by his death did not meet with divine approval.
 - Either way, we are still in our sins, cut off from God and facing his judgment, like everyone else.” (Prior)

No one will be resurrected, everyone will simply perish into dust (v.18)

- If Christ is still dead, then it has not been conquered & remains an **invincible terror!**

We are to be the most pitied people in the world! (v.19)

- “This is because of the sacrifices made in this life in light of the hope of life to come. If there is no life to come, we would be better “to eat, drink and be merry” before we die.” (MacArthur)

Personal Application:

Since Christ rose from the dead...what problem is it that you are going through that He can't handle?

Death is a pretty big thing to conquer!

- He can conquer your fear.
- He can conquer your troubled relationship
- Since he can grant life over death he can give you peace in a storm.

“An appropriate perspective on the life to come will further enable us to risk our lives for the sake of boldly testifying to Christ in dangerous situations at home and abroad.” (Blomberg)

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 2 Cor. 4:17

- Christ conquered death & that is a message worth proclaiming!

The centrality of the resurrection of Jesus (15:12–19)

If the gospel proclaimed to the Corinthians revolved around these crucial facts, culminating in the resurrection of Jesus, and if through this gospel their lives had been completely redirected and transformed, it was inconceivable that anyone should have asserted that *there is no resurrection of the dead* (12). If resurrection does not exist in any shape or form, then the consequences to Christian faith and discipleship are devastating. It is important, with Paul, to push people to see the logic of their beliefs, whether those beliefs are orthodox or heretical. Many Christians have never applied their faith either to their ordinary thinking or to their daily behavior. Likewise, those who deviate from biblical truth must face up to the implications of what they assert and deny. This is what Paul does in verses 13–19. To deny resurrection is to strip the Christian message of seven essentials.

i. 'Christ has not been raised' (13, 16)

If there is no such thing as resurrection, then Jesus himself did not triumph over death. If dead men don't rise, then Jesus is still dead. Presumably, the Corinthian heretics never intended to

suggest that Jesus was still dead; but Paul is pressing the logic of their position, in order to reveal its menace. 'The truth as it is in Jesus' is of a piece; it holds together with inner consistency; whatever the paradoxes inherent in the truth, it is not self-contradictory. To deny one lynchpin of this truth is to dislocate the whole structure. Of course, the truth itself is not imperilled, because it stands for ever into eternity, unshakeable and incontrovertible. But if men, like those at Corinth, decide to pick and choose which aspects of the truth they will accept, they will end up with no truth, i.e. in falsehood. This is nowhere more obvious than in the case of resurrection. This attitude reveals, in general, the danger of coming to the person and work of Jesus with even one preconceived idea about what can and cannot be true, what can and cannot happen. This is frequently being done: 'dead men don't rise', 'miracles don't happen', 'there is no life after death', 'you can't change human nature'.

ii. 'Our preaching is in vain' (14)

Paul regards himself supremely as a preacher of the gospel. He is, therefore, stating that his whole life has been a complete waste of time if there is no such thing as resurrection. All those persecutions, sufferings, tribulations have been pointless. The obvious implication is that, not only has his life's ministry been founded on a fraud and a hoax, but so has every other apostle's—indeed every other believer's. The word translated in vain (*kenos*) literally means 'empty': i.e., take out the resurrection of Jesus, and there is nothing left to the Christian's proclamation. As Paul shows in the rest of the chapter, the whole sweep of salvation in time and eternity is based, not merely on the resurrection-principle, but on the fact of Jesus' resurrection.

iii. 'Your faith is in vain' (14)

Because their faith was based entirely on his preaching (15:1–2), the collapse of the ground of his preaching necessarily meant the collapse of their faith. Take out the resurrection of Jesus, and there is nothing left on which to rest faith—only the decomposing corpse of an itinerant Jewish carpenter-turned-rabbi. Here, as everywhere, Paul underlines the truth that faith is produced by looking to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Faith is not created, sustained or increased by looking at ourselves or at others, but only by absorbing the reality and the implications of the resurrection of Jesus.

iv. 'We are misrepresenting God' (15)

The very reputation, and even the character, of God is destroyed if there is no such thing as resurrection. Paul's vocation and ministry are consistently portrayed as given him by God, not assumed by himself. The gospel he proclaimed was not his own invention, but given him by God through revelation. Specifically, Paul's claim (following the apostolic traditions handed on to him) was that God ... raised Christ: if he did nothing of the sort, if Jesus was another guru-figure and in fact an impostor, it is nothing short of blasphemy to link the name of God almighty with such a person. The only convincing reason for linking God to the person and work of Jesus is the fact of his resurrection. Only God has power over death: if Jesus rose from the dead, God raised him.

v. *'You are still in your sins' (17)*

In verse 14 Paul has referred to faith being empty, devoid of content. Here he writes of its being unable to secure any results, i.e. being weak and ineffective. Of course, if it has no content, it will not achieve anything at all. But Paul's main thrust in this verse is that the sin-problem remains unsolved, if Jesus did not rise from the dead. All talk of Christ dying for our sins in accordance with the scriptures becomes meaningless, if in fact he stayed dead. The unanimous testimony of the scriptures is that 'the wages of sin is death': death marks the end-result of that separation from God which sin inevitably produces. If Jesus stayed dead, there are only two possible conclusions: either he was not the sinless person everyone thought him to be and his death marked his final separation from God; or he might have been without personal sin, but his attempts to atone for the sin of the world by his death did not meet with divine approval. Either way, we are still in our sins, cut off from God and facing his judgment, like everyone else.

vi. *'Those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished' (18)*

Another awful consequence of there being no resurrection is that death remains, not just 'the last enemy' (26), but the one invincible terror. Death is not falling asleep in Christ and waking up to see his smile of welcome into the Father's house: it is hard confirmation of the lostness of all men, that we are all doomed to perish without hope and without God. It is no coincidence that Paul almost casually, if not unconsciously, introduces the pregnant phrase in Christ at this point. As we shall see, this is the core of his positive teaching about the implications of the resurrection of Jesus; but it becomes empty words if Christ turns out to be nothing more than a dead guru.

vii. *'We are of all men most to be pitied' (19)*

If Christ was not raised from the dead, any expectation of life beyond death with him evaporates. We are then left with a pseudo-gospel which purports at least to give some meaning to our life here on earth. This presumably takes the form of doing the best we can to follow the example of Jesus Christ, assuming that we select him as our mentor in preference to countless other teachers, wise men and leaders. Paul sees this attitude to Jesus as pitiable and pathetic: if there is no such thing as resurrection, much of Jesus' teaching falls to the ground and he is revealed to be a liar. Yet the Corinthian Christians had set their hope on Christ as Lord of life, death and eternity. If he was not raised from the dead, he is not Lord of anything. If life here on this earth is all there is, it makes no sense to base our hope on the groundless promises of one who made empty assertions about eternity. If the Christian faith is thus based on an empty gospel and a fraudulent saviour, 'anybody is better off than the Christian'.

It is right at this stage to ask certain questions of those today who deny that there is such a thing as resurrection from the dead, and particularly dismiss the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. With what premisses do they come to the evidence? What is the actual content of their preaching? Does their teaching lead people to a saving faith? What kind of God are they presenting? Do they believe in the assurance of sins forgiven? Do they preach such assurance? Is there any firm expectation of life beyond death? Can they say, with Tertullian, 'Our people die well'? When an elderly church-goer heard one such modern sceptic speaking on

the radio, she concluded that everything she had hitherto believed by way of orthodox Christianity was unreliable, if not untrue,—and committed suicide.¹

THIS IS THE FIRST major topic in the second half of Paul's letter, dealing with issues arising from the Corinthians' correspondence (7:1–16:4), that does not contain any hint of what the Corinthians wrote. Nor does it begin with "now about," as do 7:1; 8:1, and 12:1. First Corinthians 16:1 will use that phrase again, so perhaps Paul simply omits it here for variety's sake. Or maybe this section is meant to be more closely connected with chapters 12–14, reflecting some of what the Corinthian prophets and tongues-speakers were proclaiming. A third possibility is that chapter 15 may be addressing the otherwise unstated issue at the root of all the other problems the Corinthians faced.

At any rate, the position of some in the Corinthian church is specified in verse 12 ("How can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?"), and it is to this challenge that Paul responds. By denying the resurrection, the Corinthians were almost certainly not denying life after death; virtually everyone in the ancient world believed in that. Rather, they would have been disputing the Jewish and Christian doctrine of *bodily* resurrection and endorsing one of the more Greek forms of belief that limited the afterlife to disembodied immortality of the soul (cf. 2 Tim. 2:17–18). In keeping with their overly realized eschatology (see p. 25), and like some later Gnostics, they may have applied the language of resurrection to the state of spiritual transformation they believed they had already achieved in this life.

Chapter 15 falls into two main sections. Verses 1–34 present Paul's arguments for the certainty of the bodily resurrection, while verses 35–58 discuss the nature of resurrection bodies. The first section also divides into two parts. Verses 1–11 reiterate the fact of Christ's bodily resurrection. Verses 12–34 outline the consequences of disbelief and belief in this fact. The first of these parts in turn has three components. Verses 1–2 provide an introduction to Paul's treatment of resurrection. Verses 3–8 rehearse the early Christian creed or confession about Christ's death and resurrection. And verses 9–11 highlight Paul's unique role as an "untimely" witness to the risen Lord.

Verses 12–34 form an ABA pattern. Verses 12–19 and 29–34 both argue for the absurdity of Christian belief and practice if the bodily resurrection is not true. In between, verses 20–28 gloriously reaffirm that it *is* true and point to some of the consequences of this grand doctrine. The main point of verses 12–19 is that if there is no coming bodily resurrection of all Christians, then Jesus himself was not bodily raised, and that makes Christianity futile. Paul continuously repeats this thought from several different angles in these verses. The upshot is that all of the following result if there is no bodily resurrection: both the apostolic preaching and the Corinthians' faith are useless (v. 14); Paul and his companions are liars (v. 15); all humanity stands condemned because of their sins (v. 17); and those who have already died, including believers, are eternally lost (v. 18). As a result, Christians are most deserving of others' pity or

¹ Prior, D. (1985). [*The message of 1 Corinthians: life in the local church*](#) (pp. 262–266). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

compassion, since they have given up creaturely comforts and endured persecution (vv. 30–32) for the sake of an empty promise (v. 19).

But wonderfully none of this is true, Paul retorts. Christ *has* been raised bodily and has thus set into motion an inexorable chain of events that will culminate in the universal demonstration of the absolute sovereignty of God (vv. 20–28). Verses 20–22 describe how Christ’s bodily resurrection guarantees the future bodily resurrection of all believers, just as the “firstfruits” of a harvest (v. 20) heralded a much larger crop to follow (cf. Lev. 23:9–14). Paul points out the parallel between Adam’s sin leading to the sinfulness of all humanity (cf. Rom. 5:12–21) and Christ’s resurrection leading to the resurrection of all his followers (vv. 21–22). Because Adam represented the entire human race that would descend from him, sin spread throughout the whole world. Because Christ, as fully human, represented the entire human race in bearing its sins, he is able to apply the benefits of his death and resurrection to all who will accept them (cf. Heb. 2:5–9, appealing to Psalm 8, just as Paul will do in v. 26 here). “All” in the statement “all die” (v. 22a) means “all who are related to Adam.” “All” in the declaration “all will be made alive” (v. 22b) refers to “all who are related to Christ,” as verse 23 makes clear (“those who belong to him”).

But the general resurrection of believers at the time of Christ’s return is just the beginning (v. 23). Verses 24–28 go on to explain what will subsequently occur. After some unspecified interval of time, “the end” or goal of human history will arrive. By this time, Christ will have destroyed all opposition to his reign in the universe—both human and angelic (i.e., demonic—vv. 24–25). Finally, death itself will be destroyed, so that God’s people will never again have anything to fear for all eternity (v. 26). But the last word is not Christ’s but God’s (vv. 27–28).

The “he” in verse 27a refers to God; the “his” to Christ, as verse 27b clarifies. As a representative of humanity, and doing what humans were supposed to have done but failed to do (i.e., exercise dominion over the cosmos—Gen. 1:28), Jesus remains ultimately subordinate to God. Compare Psalm 8:5, in which humanity, including Jesus in his incarnation (Heb. 2:9), was made “a little lower than the angels.” Here Paul quotes Psalm 8:6 to stress Christ’s corresponding conquests as well. The result is that God is “all in all,” that is, “pervasively sovereign.” Although God the Son is *essentially* equal to the Father, he remains *functionally* subordinate, just as his glorified humanity keeps him distinct from what he was prior to the incarnation.

In verses 29–34 Paul goes back to arguing the absurdity of denying the bodily resurrection. Here he uses three *ad hominem* and *ad hoc* arguments based on what he and the Corinthians were experiencing (note the references to “they” [NIV “those” and “people”] in v. 29, “us,” “we,” and “I” in vv. 30–32, and “you” as the implied subject of the commands in vv. 33–34).

The most puzzling of these is the first. Despite all sorts of ingenious alternatives that have been suggested, the plain meaning of verse 29 remains that of some sort of proxy baptism. Early church fathers allude to such a practice among second-century Gnostic and Gnostic-like groups, in which living believers were baptized on behalf of those in their sect or group who had died without being baptized (cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.10; Chrysostom’s *Homily on 1 Cor.* 40.1; Epiphanius, *Heresies* 28; and Philaster, *Heresies* 49). Given the Corinthians’ tendencies toward early Gnostic belief and practice, it is not difficult to imagine something similar having begun among at least a few in Corinth already in the first century. Paul neither condemns nor condones such a practice but argues for its irrelevance if Christ is not raised. In

other words, those who are baptizing people on behalf of the dead contradict their own theology that denies the resurrection. The Corinthians might well have replied that they performed such baptisms for the sake of disembodied souls, but Paul is convinced that without a body there is no further life at all.

In verses 30–32 Paul turns to a parallel pair of arguments from his own experience. Why should he continue to tolerate hostility from others and risk his life for the sake of the gospel if there is no hope of resurrection? Second Corinthians 11:23b–29 sheds light on the kinds of trials he has had to endure. In verse 31, “I mean that” translates a Greek word used to introduce an oath or solemn declaration of the truth of a particular statement. “Just as surely as I glory over you” translates the three Greek words, “by your boast,” and more naturally refers to the Corinthians boasting in Paul. But since there was little evidence that they were doing that, the NIV may be correct.

Verse 32 is almost certainly not to be taken literally. Roman citizens were exempt from being thrown to animals in the gladiator’s ring, and Paul would not have easily survived such an encounter. In fact, language about fighting wild beasts was regularly used metaphorically for human opposition (cf. esp. Ignatius, *Romans* 5:1). Some think he is referring to the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23–41), but that seems to have occurred just before he left town (Acts 20:1) and therefore after writing this letter (cf. 1 Cor. 16:8). Paul may be alluding to some otherwise unknown personal attack or persecution that threatened his life. Second Corinthians 1:8–11 seems to look back on such an event. One early tradition claims that Paul was temporarily imprisoned in Ephesus, and some modern scholars believe that he wrote Philippians and/or the other Prison Letters (Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon) during such an imprisonment. We simply do not have enough evidence to know for sure what danger he was recalling here.

Verse 32b reflects the flip side of the logic of verse 19. If this life is all there is, then people ought to “live it up,” as the Epicureans did. Paul cites their most famous slogan, as the prophet Isaiah and the author of Ecclesiastes had done centuries earlier (Isa. 22:13; Eccl. 2:24). But he immediately proceeds to reject such logic, since Christ has in fact been raised. Instead he quotes another popular Greek proverb, this one first attributed to the fourth-century B.C. comic playwright Menander (v. 33). Those who deny the resurrection make for “bad company,” and their dualistic presuppositions (“matter doesn’t matter”) foster immoral behavior (as in chaps. 5–6). Paul appeals to the Corinthians to reject this route (v. 34) by again chiding them for their lack of *gnosis* and by trying to shame them into repentance (cf. 6:5).²

Bridging Context

THE RESURRECTION BRINGS US to the very center of the Christian faith. When Paul was on trial for his life before the Jewish leaders, he summed up the charge against him as his “hope in the

² Blomberg, C. (1994). [*1 Corinthians*](#) (pp. 294–300). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6; cf. 24:21; 26:6–8). When he clothed the gospel for the Athenians in almost entirely different garb, he nevertheless still focused on “Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). His emphasis on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 in no way contradicts 2:2—Christ’s death and resurrection are inseparable. Without the latter, the former has no eternal significance. To counteract those who play down the weakness and servanthood of Jesus, Paul must stress the crucifixion, but to refute those who deny a future material hope for believers and the cosmos, he must stress Jesus’ bodily resurrection. Historically, the Eastern Orthodox have best highlighted the resurrection; the Roman Catholics, the crucifixion. Protestants have alternately magnified elements of each. Both remain crucial.

Although emphases may vary from culture to culture, particularly according to the objections to belief in the resurrection that emerge in each, this doctrine must remain at the core of Christian theology. Applying this chapter requires a comparison between first-century beliefs about life after death and similar beliefs in other cultures. Then the uniqueness of the Christian doctrine of resurrection and its significance can appear more clearly. In Paul’s day, almost everyone held to a supernatural worldview that encouraged belief at least in life after death. Most Greeks and Romans, however, did not see that this entailed bodily resurrection. In modern cultures influenced by the skepticism of the Enlightenment, this supernatural worldview is not shared, so we have to defend both the *possibility* and the *need* for bodily resurrection.

Verses 1–2 stress what this chapter will continually repeat, most notably in verses 12–19 and 29–32, that **Christian belief without the doctrine of bodily resurrection proves worthless.** Verses 3–7 offer a strong apologetic for the reality of Christ’s being raised. Given the early date of 1 Corinthians (ca. A.D. 55) and the likelihood of Paul relying on formalized oral tradition that substantially predates the letter, we are indeed in touch with very early testimony. Paul, of course, used this tradition to call wayward believers back to that which they once firmly maintained. But we may also use these verses to argue the case for the resurrection with unbelievers. So too we are reminded of what must remain central doctrine even for mature believers, tempted to move away to peripheral matters. The absolute fundamentals of the faith include the genuine humanity and deity of Christ (making real death and real resurrection possible, respectively), his vicarious atonement, his bodily resurrection, and the authority of the Scriptures, which are twice appealed to in verses 3–4 to corroborate the significance of the historical events described.

These appeals to the Old Testament, as elsewhere in the New Testament, raise questions for us and remind us that the first Christian writers saw all of Scripture pointing to Christ. Indeed, Jesus himself during his resurrection appearances solidified such a hermeneutic in his disciples’ minds (Luke 24:25–27). This involved use of such well-known Jewish techniques as typology, midrash, peshet and so on. As we grope today to find specific Scriptures that “predict” the resurrection, we recognize that we have entered a world in which prophecy did much more than provide straightforward predictions that were literally fulfilled at a later date in history. At the same time, we must not overlook the significance of Acts 2:30–31, in which Peter claims that at least David understood more directly the prediction of the Messiah’s resurrection. Because David was told that one of his descendants would always sit on his throne (2 Sam. 7:13–14), he may have received a clearer understanding than most of his contemporaries of the ministry of the coming Christ.

The contents of the early Christian “creed” embedded in verses 3–7 also refute all the classic suggestions that have been made down through the centuries to account for the origin of resurrection faith apart from a literal bodily resurrection. That “Christ died” disputes the claim that he merely swooned and recovered in the tomb. “That he was buried” renders implausible the views that the disciples stole his body or that the women went to the wrong tomb. Eventually a body could have been produced and the disciples’ story laid to rest. The verb *ophthe* (“appeared”) refers more naturally to an objective reality that the disciples saw rather than to some subjective vision (as might more plausibly be the case with the word *horama*—“vision”). The number of witnesses and numerous occasions on which Christ appeared seem to rule out mass hallucination. By mentioning Jesus’ appearance to two people who did not previously believe in him (Paul and James), Paul refutes the contention that the appearances were the projections of individuals who had so much personally invested in Christ that they simply couldn’t imagine him remaining dead.

We do not have enough data to demonstrate how the various resurrection appearances cited here fit in with all of the accounts of the four Gospels, but it is important to stress that none of these data necessarily contradicts any other. Plausible harmonizations have been offered. Charges that the New Testament writers cannot agree on the details remain highly misleading.

Paul’s primary purpose in his list of witnesses, however, is to prepare the way for a reference to his own encounter with the risen Christ. He omits mention of the women to whom Jesus appeared (Matt. 28:8–10; John 20:10–18), probably because they were not considered authoritative or valid legal witnesses in much of the ancient world. By singling out the private appearances to Peter and James in verses 5 and 7a, he anticipates his own personal experience in verse 7b. Whatever authority their witness to the resurrection confers on them (or on any of the other apostles), he can lay a legitimate claim to equal authority. That his experience of Jesus on the Damascus road may have been somewhat more subjective (cf. the different experience of his companions in Acts 9:7) does not render the pre-ascension appearances more subjective too. Rather Paul is claiming that, notwithstanding these distinctive elements, his experience was as objective as the earlier apostles’ encounters.

Verse 10 reminds us that Paul does not dislike good works! As in Ephesians 2:10, he agrees with James that faith without works is dead (cf. James 2:14–26). Or to use Paul’s language, faith necessarily works itself out through love (Gal. 5:6). Here is no cheap grace; rather God’s mercy produces more diligent effort on Paul’s part than had he merely merited God’s favor.

Verses 12–19 return to the theme of the absolute necessity of bodily resurrection, both for Christ and for believers, in order for Christian faith to be genuine or valid. Paul does not permit a perspective on Jesus that views him merely as a good, moral teacher or on Christianity that considers it simply an admirable collection of proverbial truths about how to live. If the resurrection is false, Christianity is worthless. If Christ was not raised, death, the penalty for sin, is not conquered. And his death in particular could not provide forgiveness of our sins, since it would not have eradicated death (cf. Rom. 3:23–25; 4:25). Above all, Paul did not experience enough natural enjoyment or “self-realization” in his life of constant turmoil and persecution to see any point in continuing the struggle if it were based on a myth.

But the reality of the resurrection gives him great hope (vv. 20–28). This life is not all that there is, nor is life after death mere immortality of the soul, though it does include that (cf.

verse 53). Though the word “sleep” (vv. 18, 20) was used widely in the ancient world, it is an especially appropriate euphemism for death in Christian circles, since we look forward to “awakening” one day to our new bodies. But the metaphor does not necessarily imply the doctrine of “soul-sleep”—that is, a lack of conscious awareness of the presence of God in between death and resurrection. And 2 Corinthians 5:8 and Philippians 1:23 are more naturally interpreted as referring to an intermediate state between these two events that involves conscious, disembodied existence.

Neither may verse 22 be taken to support any doctrine of universalism (that eventually all people will be saved). Our previous discussion has already noted that “all will be made alive” must refer to “all who are in Christ,” that is, believers. Paul simply does not address the question of the fate of unbelievers in this passage. Other Scriptures, however, point to a bodily resurrection for them as well, not for glorification but for eternal punishment (e.g., Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:46; John 5:29; 2 Thess 1:9; Rev. 20:11–15). Verse 23 does not necessarily support a doctrine of the millennium, but it at least allows for it. The adverbs in verses 23b–24a, “then ... then” (Gk. *epeita ... eita*), often but not always refer to a sequence of events with a period of time in between. Given the substantial gap between Christ’s resurrection and his return (v. 23b), it is natural to assume a similar gap prior to the final destruction of all his enemies (v. 24a), as Revelation 20 seems to teach. But we cannot be sure, and one’s views on numerous other parts of Scripture must be considered before arriving at a position on the millennium.

Verses 24–28 remind us of our discussion of women’s issues under 11:2–16. Clearly, Paul teaches here an ultimate subordination of the Son to the Father (in function, not essence). Therefore, to the extent that he bases relationships between men and women or husbands and wives on the analogy of the Godhead (11:3), functional subordination remains appropriate in the spheres of home and ministry too. Perhaps Paul is not drawing the analogy that tightly, but if he is, it will not do to dismiss Christ’s subordination to the Father as limited just to his time on earth. On the other hand, we dare not jettison his equality of essence or we revert to Arianism and leave the door open for Christ to be viewed as a created being. Neither may verse 28 be interpreted in a pantheistic light, as if God’s being “all in all” meant that he was indistinguishable from the created order. Rather, as we have already observed (p. 298), this text makes an absolute claim for God’s ultimate sovereignty and lordship.

Given the plethora of suggestions for interpreting verse 29, we dare not be dogmatic in upholding any one of them. But given Paul’s parallel reasoning in verses 30–32, an *ad hoc* understanding seems best. Paul points out the logical implications of the Corinthians’ behavior without passing judgment on it one way or the other. We need not shrink from admitting that some of the Corinthians, along with all their other problems, were baptizing people on behalf of unbaptized, deceased believers or inquirers into the faith. *We must simply insist that Paul is in no way condoning the practice*, any more than he approves of the fact that he daily suffers hardships (vv. 30–31) or that he “fought wild beasts in Ephesus” (v. 32). These are simply unfortunate realities that Paul uses as a springboard for furthering his contention for the truth of resurrection. Why continue with them if there is no hope beyond the grave? So there remains no justification for making any of these practices prescriptive rather than descriptive, and certainly no evidence that Christians ever considered proxy baptism valid for total unbelievers. Both of these observations, therefore, contradict historic Mormon belief and practice, despite their appeal to verse 29 for support. What is more, no Scripture ever suggests

that salvation is transferable from one individual to another apart from their personal belief in this life, and Matthew 25:9 most likely rules out such transfer.

Some readers are surprised that Paul uses an oath in verse 31, after Christ's apparent prohibition of all oaths in Matthew 5:33–37. But that prohibition is not so sweeping as at first glance it appears. Paul uses oaths elsewhere too (2 Cor. 1:18 and Gal. 1:20), while Jesus is concerned to abolish the elaborate casuistry that encumbered typical first-century Jewish practice. His followers should be people whose words are so characterized by integrity that others need no formal assurance of their truthfulness in order to trust them. But in writing the Corinthians (as with the Galatians), Paul has to resort to extreme measures to counter their growing mistrust of him.

Verse 32b points out how self-indulgence is the consistent outgrowth of a material philosophy that denies the resurrection life. The Epicureans of old did not usually interpret their slogan as a call to sheer gluttony and drunkenness. Rather they sought the "good life," cultivating the arts of fine dining, music and theater, and treasured friendships. Yet ultimately all of this was self-centered, since they did not look to continuing any pleasures beyond the grave. Self-interest may even lead to humanitarian and altruistic concerns, but ultimately it produces nothing permanently satisfying if this life is all that exists.

Christians must have a radically different mind-set. Recognizing that a far better life awaits them, they can risk their lives or well-being for the gospel in ways other people would not be willing to emulate. In Christian ethics, physical death cannot be the greatest tragedy that determines correct human behavior. Rather one must ask what is likely to lead to the spiritual salvation of the most number of people and to avoid the physical (and therefore spiritual) deaths of the greatest number of unbelievers. Snyder puts it well:

The resurrection addresses those who insist on protection and security of the individual, institutions, and country. Such persons set up mechanisms of defense along economic, racial, and national lines....

In sharp contrast, the life of the Spirit, with its hope in the resurrection, does not, indeed, cannot, dwell on preservation of the flesh (personhood, institutions, nations). Rather the corporate life of the Christian becomes one of risk. A Christian hospital can accept more welfare patients than economically advisable because it knows God's love for the poor does not depend on its continued existence.... Christians can call for total disarmament in the midst of a cold war because they know the future of the world does not depend on the survival of their nation. A Christian can risk his or her life because a Christian knows this life is not the end.

Verse 33 proves widely applicable and reminds us that Christians do not become the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16) automatically. Our persistent sinful nature continues to try to corrupt us when we are surrounded by people engaged in sinful practices, unless we take deliberate, conscious action to the contrary. Verse 34a highlights how immorality often flows from false theology. We recall the sexual sin that stemmed from the Corinthians' divorce of body and spirit (chaps. 5–6). Verse 34b reminds us again that shame or guilt can be an appropriate motivation to corrective action when we are objectively guilty and engaged in shameful behavior. But it can be overdone and misapplied as well.

Finally, an important objection to Paul's line of thought throughout this half-chapter must be considered. Many Greeks and Romans in Corinth, like many people today, might well have asked, "Why isn't immortality of the soul enough?" Why not merely affirm that Christ's spirit lives on and that our spirits can also live forever with his? First Corinthians does not directly answer this question. Paul apparently relied on his audience to understand his Jewish background or recall his previous teaching on the topic.

But Scripture's teaching elsewhere points us in the direction of an answer. Against the Greco-Roman dualism that treated matter as inherently evil, the Bible declares that God created the material world, including human bodies, as good (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Humans were intended to live in bodily form in a material world. Revelation 21–22 describes God's ultimate re-creation of new heavens *and a new earth* in equally material terms. In other words, God intends to see that his original creative purposes are not thwarted. Anything less than full bodily resurrection and full re-creation of the cosmos might still give believers an enjoyable experience but would not vindicate God against all his enemies or provide the absolute perfection that he intends for his people.³

Contemporary Significance

DENYING THE REALITY of the resurrection remains a central problem in contemporary culture. Atheism usually rejects the possibility of the existence of all supernatural powers, often claiming support in the "findings" of modern science. But with revolutions in modern physics associated with Einstein and Heisenberg, scientists who understand their discipline are often more reluctant to rule out God and the supernatural on scientific grounds than are students of the humanities and even of world religions! Historians usually recognize the absurdity of most of the proposed alternatives to the resurrection—the swoon theory, the stolen body or wrong tomb, mass hallucination, and so on, though that does not stop more popular writers from continuing to perpetuate such nonsense.²⁷

Far more common in scholarly circles, however, is the view that resurrection language expresses theological truths in mythological garb, and that some kind of subjective experience of the disciples' faith was transformed over time into the biblical narratives that claim to describe more objective realities. There are numerous problems with this approach, but the most important are these: (1) The disciples were nowhere close to being in a psychological mood favorable to belief in a resurrection (John 20:19). (2) Without a genuinely empty tomb, it is incredible that Christians never came to venerate a holy site in which their founder was supposedly buried, as did most other world religions. (3) Early on, Jesus' disciples stopped worshiping on the Sabbath (Saturday) in favor of Sunday, the first day of the week (e.g., Acts 20:7). But why should they abandon one of the very Ten Commandments so central to Judaism

³ Blomberg, C. (1994). [*1 Corinthians*](#) (pp. 300–307). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

unless some genuinely historical event like the resurrection had occurred on that other day as a powerful stimulus for change? (4) The development from spiritual to bodily resurrection makes sense had Christianity moved from Greek to Jewish circles, but not when it in fact progressed in the opposite direction.

Christ's death and resurrection in space and time, as bona fide historical events, actually set Christianity apart from all its major rivals. Later Western religions that developed in part in reaction to Christianity do not claim deity or resurrections for their originators, merely prophetic status (e.g., Mohammed in Islam or Joseph Smith in Mormonism). Older Eastern religions do not even require the actual historical existence of their founders for their beliefs and practices to make sense. In some ways they are more akin to philosophies than to historical truth-claims (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism). But Christianity lives or dies with the claim of Christ's resurrection. To be sure, it is possible to believe in Jesus' resurrection and not become a Christian,³⁰ but without the bodily resurrection Christianity crumbles. Finding the bones of Jesus would assuredly disprove our religion!

So it is appropriate to insist on the resurrection not only as the center of contemporary faith but also of contemporary apologetics. But recent evangelical apologetics has at times been one-sidedly rationalistic. Paul's appeal to his own personal experience of the risen Christ (v. 8) to balance the historical facts he had learned (vv. 3–7) means that we too may consider our personal encounters with Jesus as an equally legitimate part of the defense of our faith. On the other hand, without the appeal to historical facts, we have no way of mediating between the competing claims of largely parallel personal experiences. Mormons, Buddhists, and Christians alike often testify today to some strong feeling or spiritual encounter that "confirmed" the truth of their faith. But since these three religions contradict each other at important points, all cannot be simultaneously true. Christians must appeal to more than a personal testimony; they must recognize the historical evidence that is on their side.

Saddest of all are the examples of professing Christians, particularly within liberalism, who think they are bolstering the faith in a scientific age by relegating the resurrection to outmoded mythology. In so doing, they turn out to be most misguided of all, because they undermine the very core of what they seek to support. But evangelicalism has its counterparts, as with those who so stress the earthly benefits of belief that Christianity would seem to be a desirable lifestyle irrespective of what happens after death.³³ People who promote such perspectives have never walked in Paul's shoes or, for that matter, in the footsteps of a sizable number of Christians and martyrs throughout church history, who would have quickly abandoned their faith if it were not for hope of eternal reward for the misery experienced in the here and now (cf. vv 19, 30–32).

The non-Christian West today is increasingly implementing the Epicureanism of verse 32b. In more Christian societies, unbelievers at least outwardly have often imitated Christian lifestyles or have felt social pressure to curb their most excessively immoral behavior. But increasingly, we are seeing a culture that refuses to put on the brakes at all. The "Baby Boomers," including many professing Christians, are in debt up to their eyeballs. Advertisements bombard us daily with what we *have* to have immediately. Sexual morals continue to deteriorate, so that what was unthinkable for most non-Christians in another era—addiction to pornography, repeated acts of adultery, or incestuous behavior—is now widely practiced, even at times among those who profess to be born again. Worldwide, consistent

indulgence in self-interest has given rise to tribalism and ethnic wars that atheistic Communism once held in check and that humanistic evolution cannot explain.

But even where industrialism and technological advance give rise to the concept of “developed” nations, materialist philosophy fails to satisfy. So we are seeing the rise of the New Age movement, in many respects a reversion to pantheism or ancient Gnostic and earth-mother religions. Reincarnation is in vogue. Interest in the cults and the occult is booming. As authentic Christian spirituality is rejected, counterfeits will take their place to fill the “God-shaped vacuum” in each human heart, to use Pascal’s famous expression. Popular culture and media have an intense fascination with life after death, initiated particularly by Kübler-Ross’s studies of near-death experiences. Blockbuster movies invent fictitious accounts of those who die and yet live on, or come back to interact in various ways with those still living on earth.

Yet almost without exception, this fascination for the afterlife resembles more the Corinthians’ false teaching than orthodox Christianity. Seldom are persons depicted as having fully human bodies in their next life. Rarely does that next life seem incomparably more desirable than the present one. And virtually never are the destinies of Christians and non-Christians appropriately distinguished. Either all people are seen as going to “heaven,” or else they are distinguished on the basis of how good or bad they were during their time on earth.

A faulty theology of the resurrection plagues competing world religions in other respects too. Millions of young Muslims have tragically allowed themselves to be killed in war and terrorism, believing that martyrdom speeds their way to heaven. Mormons try to work their way up the ladder of extra-terrestrial privilege and power. Jehovah’s Witnesses hope that sufficient obedience will enable them to be one of the 144,000 who get to enjoy the new heavens as well as the new earth. Eastern religionists hope for *nirvana*—to be absorbed into the cosmic consciousness, which is all that there really is. Against all of these perspectives Paul’s absolute dogmatism challenges the prevailing tolerance of a pluralistic age. If Christianity is right, Paul would virtually shout, then these perspectives are damning, and people should be warned against them in the most forthright language. But if the Christian hope of resurrection is wrong, then all these other perspectives *are still wrong*, for the only other consistent alternative is total annihilation at death. Then we should eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. The proliferation of alternate worldviews shows how the human instinct recoils at such nihilism. But that in itself is backhanded testimony to the Christian truths that humans are created in God’s image, yet have sinned and so distorted that image that they consistently look for inadequate substitutes.

Evangelical Christians must shoulder some of the blame, however, for the unpopularity of biblical teaching about the life to come. Too many pew sitters in contemporary conservative churches think of and represent heaven as an “airy-fairy,” ethereal kind of existence to which they do not really look forward. Even referring to the life to come simply as “heaven” points out a serious misconception. The biblical hope is for believers to experience all of the wonders and glories of a fully re-created heavens *and earth* (Rev. 21–22). We will enjoy one another’s fellowship as well as God’s presence in perfect happiness. We will not sit on our private clouds with wings and harps periodically to dispel our eternal boredom! The new earth is centered in the new Jerusalem, a *city* of bustling activity.

Not only have Christians tended to make the life to come unattractive, but our generation in the West is one of few in human history that has so consistently tried to create Paradise on

earth in this life. Previous generations often lampooned certain kinds of Christians for being so heavenly-minded that they were no earthly good. It is doubtful if many such people under the age of fifty currently exist in our country. Instead, ours is a generation in which many Christians are so earthly minded that they are no heavenly good. Our society, and Christians often as much as anyone else in that society, has become preoccupied with physical health, dieting, recreation, and fitness, all at the expense of anything close to a comparable concern for spiritual health and salvation.

Yet incurable diseases, unexpected accidents, and periodic exposure to the horrors of the less affluent parts of our world continue to point out the sheer inadequacy of such preoccupations. Sooner or later we will die, and some of us will suffer quite a bit before we do. We need to recapture the longing for the life to come, which enabled Paul to declare confidently even in his most difficult moments: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Or again, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor. 4:17). Most of us consider our truly minor physical afflictions far more serious than Paul's catalogues of horrible sufferings, and yet he could call *them* "light and momentary"!

An appropriate perspective on the life to come will further enable us to risk our lives for the sake of boldly testifying to Christ in dangerous situations at home and abroad. It will also give us a balanced perspective on the gospel we boldly preach. With much contemporary liberation theology, it is crucial to see our task as including social activism that works to eradicate poverty and liberate the physically oppressed throughout our world today. But many are dying daily before we can get to them, and some will continue to do so until Christ returns. So, against much liberation theology, we dare never truncate our gospel so that we do not simultaneously offer the spiritual deliverance that only Jesus can give and that alone can spare humans from an eternity far more unpleasant than anything they have experienced in this life.

In more modest ways, understanding Paul's theology of resurrection should affect our personal and corporate prayer life. How often do our lists of requests involve almost exclusively physical or material needs? How many of us could commend one another as John did Gaius in praying that his circumstances in this life might find him as healthy physically and materially as he already was spiritually (3 John 2)?

The resurrection hope gives purpose and meaning to all of human history. Christians need not fear that the world will end in a nuclear holocaust, because Scripture teaches that the end of this age comes with Christ's return. And although the world's armies are depicted as amassing for a final battle, Christ intervenes before his people suffer a single casualty (Rev. 19:17–19). This does not mean, however, that we should not take every precaution to guard against a limited nuclear accident that could still inflict more damage and suffering on the earth than it has ever experienced. Nor may we ever consider abortion or euthanasia as a way out of human suffering. God always has a purpose for humans whom he keeps alive.

On the other hand, God's ultimate purposes will be realized only after Jesus comes again. So we must not delude ourselves with the naive optimism that counts on us gradually Christianizing the earth this side of Christ's return. Rather we look forward to the world ending with neither a whimper nor a bang, but with Christ's universal, public, visible return to inaugurate the series of events that will culminate with God's absolute sovereignty being acknowledged throughout the cosmos (vv. 24–28).

In this vein, however, we must beware of a growing evangelical fascination with universalism and other unlikely alternatives concerning the fate of unbelievers (e.g., a second chance after death, annihilationism, or conditional immortality). People will not be saved irrespective of their attitude toward Jesus. Still, evangelicals have perhaps been too narrow or myopic in the last few generations when it comes to the question of the fate of the unevangelized. Orthodox Christianity has historically held a greater diversity of perspectives on the destiny of those who have never heard the gospel than has recent conservative theology. The real dividing point may not be whether a person has ever heard of the name of Jesus or not but whether he or she is relying solely on God's grace, to whatever extent it is understood, or trusting in his or her own self-righteousness.³⁹ Such a principle might conceivably let a few who have never heard into the kingdom (and the assumption must be that if they had heard they would have responded positively). It almost certainly means that many who *think* they are in are not—including some professing Christians!⁴

15:12 some among you say. The Corinthian Christians believed in Christ's resurrection, or else they could not have been Christians (cf. Jn 6:44; 11:25; Ac 4:12; 2Co 4:14; 1Th 4:16). But some had particular difficulty accepting and understanding the resurrection of believers. Some of this confusion was a result of their experiences with pagan philosophies and religions. A basic tenet of much of ancient Gr. philosophy was dualism, which taught that everything physical was intrinsically evil; so the idea of a resurrected body was repulsive and disgusting (Ac 17:32). In addition, perhaps some Jews in the Corinthian church formerly may have been influenced by the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection even though it is taught in the OT (Job 19:26; Pss 16:8–11; 17:15; Da 12:2). On the other hand, NT teaching in the words of our Lord Himself was extensive on the resurrection (Jn 5:28, 29; 6:44; 11:25; 14:19) and it was the theme of the apostolic preaching (Ac 4:1, 2). In spite of that clarity, the church at Corinth was in doubt about the resurrection.

APPEARANCES OF THE RISEN CHRIST

15:13–19 In these verses, Paul gives 6 disastrous consequences if there were no resurrection: 1) preaching Christ would be senseless (v. 14); 2) faith in Christ would be useless (v. 14); 3) all the witnesses and preachers of the resurrection would be liars (v. 15); 4) no one would be redeemed from sin (v. 17); 5) all former believers would have perished (v. 18); and 6) Christians would be the most pitiable people on earth (v. 19).

15:13, 16 The two resurrections, Christ's and believers', stand or fall together; if there is no resurrection, then Christ is dead. Cf. Rev 1:17, 18.

15:17 still in your sins. See notes on Ac 5:30, 31; Ro 4:25.

⁴ Blomberg, C. (1994). [1 Corinthians](#) (pp. 307–313). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

15:18 fallen asleep. A common euphemism for death (cf. vv. 6, 20; 11:30; Mt 27:52; Ac 7:60; 2Pe 3:4). This is not soul sleep, in which the body dies and the soul, or spirit, supposedly rests in unconsciousness.

15:19 most to be pitied. This is because of the sacrifices made in this life in light of the hope of life to come. If there is no life to come, we would be better “to eat, drink and be merry” before we die.⁵

⁵ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2006). [*The MacArthur study Bible: New American Standard Bible*](#). (1 Co 15:12–19). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.