

First Epistle to the Corinthians

27 – Essay Five: Resurrection (5.1) – Message and Validity of Faith

1 Corinthians 15:1-20

1. Outlines

a. *ESV Study Bible*

i. The Futility of Faith If the Dead Are Not Raised (15:1–58)

1. The truthfulness of the traditions about Christ's resurrection (15:1–11)
2. Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of believers (15:12–34)
3. The nature of the resurrection body (15:35–58)

b. *Reading the New Testament: Reading Corinthians*

i. The Human Transformation Yet to Come

1. A Reminder of Christ's Resurrection (vv.1-11)
2. Corinthian Assertions and Pauline Responses (vv.12-34)
3. Corinthian Questions and Pauline Answers (vv.35-58)

c. *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*

i. The Resurrection of Believers

1. The Basis—The Resurrection of Christ (vv.1-11)
2. The Certainty of Resurrection (vv.12-34)
 - a. If Christ is NOT raised (vv.12-19)
 - b. But Christ IS raised (vv.20-28)
 - c. Ad hominem arguments for resurrection (vv.29-34)
3. The Resurrection Body (vv.35-49)
 - a. Analogies of seeds and "bodies" (vv.35-44)
 - b. Analogy of Adam and Christ (vv.45-49)
4. The Assurance of Triumph (vv.50-58)

d. Bailey¹

- i. Resurrection: The Message and Validity of Faith (vv.1-20)
- ii. Resurrection: Adam and Christ (vv.21-28)
- iii. Resurrection and Ethics (vv.29-34)
- iv. Resurrection: Adam and Christ (vv.35-50)
- v. Resurrection: Victory (vv.51-58)

2. Rhetorical placement of Essay Five²

- a. The Cross and Christian Unity (1:10-4:16)
- b. Sex: Men and Women in the Human Family (4:17-7:40)
- c. Christian and Pagan: Freedom and Responsibility (8:1-11:1)
- d. Men and Women in Worship (11:2-14:40)
- e. *Resurrection: Faith, Christ, and Victory* (15:1-58)

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 4971.

² Bailey, location 4968.

Table 1: Bailey, location 4975

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (ESV) - The Message of Faith		
1		1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, I Preached You Received
2		in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain. Grace Received In vain?
3		3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: An apostle Delivers tradition
4a		that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, The cross
b		4 that he was buried,
5c		that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, Resurrection
d	Aa Bb	5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. First appearances
6	Cc	6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Later appearances
7	Aa' Bb' Cc'	7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Later appearances 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.
8		9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. An apostle Unfit persecutor
9		10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. Grace Received On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Not in vain
10		11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. We Preached You Believed

3. Rhetoric

- a. Ring composition with expanded center (4-7 as a unit)
- b. "The tradition" (gospel) forms the center
- c. Resurrection is the focus
- d. Parts 4-5 appear to be an early Christian creed
- e. Paul is correcting a problem and/or aberrant theology held by the Corinthians
- f. This is not proof of the resurrection. The resurrection is presupposed to be true.

4. Details

- a. Parts 1, 10 – (vv.1a, 11) – Tradition
 - i. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians how they came to know the gospel

- ii. Paul tells them that all the apostles preach the same gospel (c.f., essay one)
- iii. Paul reminds them that not only did they hear the preaching and receive it, they responded by believing
- b. Parts 2, 9 – (vv.1b-2, 10) – Grace
 - i. Paul first affirms that they have grace, and that it is what empowers them (e.g., manifestation of spiritual gifts)
 - ii. “By which you are being saved” (v.2) – may be a correction to overrealized eschatology – Corinthians believing they had already entered into the full realization of salvation
 - iii. Then we get to a tricky part – is Paul casting doubt on their faith?
 - 1. Commentaries vary widely in interpretation
 - a. That in fact there can be vain/empty belief and Paul is questioning the Corinthians about their belief³
 - b. That salvation is maintained through holding fast to the gospel (whatever that is)⁴
 - c. That Paul is simply making an absurd argument to make a point⁵
 - d. That Paul is foreshadowing arguments that he will flesh out in upcoming verses⁶
 - 2. It is important to interpret this with part 9 (v.10), the rhetorical pair
 - a. God’s grace , when received, is never in vain/empty/without effect
 - b. The gospel includes intellectual assent to teachings, but it is also grace: the power of God to compel its recipient to good works
 - iv. “By the grace of God I am what I am...” (v.10a)
 - 1. Frequently taken and used out of context
 - 2. Context is not “saving grace” but a reference to *charismata* – the gift of apostleship
 - v. “I worked harder than any of them...” (v.10b)
 - 1. Not comparing, but probably responding to Corinthian’s low view of Paul
 - 2. He quickly adds that he worked harder, but not because of his own strength

Thus, in Pauline theology, even though his labor is a response to grace, it is more properly seen as the effect of grace. All is grace; nothing is deserved. Neither therefore can he lay claim to his own ministry nor can they reject it; it is God’s activity in him in their behalf.⁷

- c. Parts 3-8 – (vv.3-9) – The Tradition, The Gospel
 - i. Apostles do not create tradition – they are transmitters of tradition
 - ii. The tradition that Paul transmits is exactly the same as with the other apostles
 - iii. What is the tradition/gospel?
 - 1. Vv. 3b-5 appear to be part of an early creed – “the gospel”
 - a. Christ died, was buried, was raised, and he appeared to witnesses

³ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, entry for 15:1-2.

⁴ *Reading the New Testament: Reading Corinthians*, entry for 15:1-11.

⁵ *UBC*, entry for 15:1-2.

⁶ *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*, entry for 15:1-2.

⁷ *NICNT*, entry for 15:10.

2. Vv. 6-7 is probably also tradition that Paul adds to the creed
 3. Vv. 8 is Paul's autobiography
- iv. What is Paul's point?
1. The bodily resurrection of Christ is attested to by hundreds, with whom the Corinthians could go verify
 2. Corinthians were not disputing the idea of a resurrection, but rather its bodily nature
 - a. In the Greek body-spirit dualism, the body was thought to be evil and temporary, something to be cast off
 - b. The Corinthians may have accepted the above and/or believed that they had entered into the resurrected (spiritual) life already
 3. Paul asserts that Jesus was resurrected into a physical body

... Paul will next turn to a direct confrontation with the Corinthians over their denial of the resurrection of the dead. The nature of that argument makes it plain that the purpose of this opening paragraph is not to *prove* Christ's resurrection but to reestablish that fundamental premise as the common denominator from which to argue with them... The reason for the catalogue of witnesses is therefore not to prove that Jesus rose but to emphasize that the resurrection of Christ, which they believed, had objective reality...

On the other hand, there are those who use this passage to try to prove the Resurrection to unbelievers. What they fail to recognize is that such "proofs" are valid only to those who believe.⁸

- v. "Untimely born..." (v8a)
1. Literally can mean "the abortion" and also "one who is freakish"
 2. Paul's self-disparagement
 3. But also a reference to a physical body that is transformed by grace
- d. Digression on "Christ died for our sins" (v.3b)
- i. "For": as some kind of payment or punishment, or "because of" or "as a result of"?
 - ii. Did sin demand Christ's death, or did humankind cause Christ's death?
 - iii. Excerpted sections from Bailey:⁹

"Christ died because of our sins" is the preferred (legitimate) Arabic translation of this text...

Theologian Miroslav Volf has written,

"Let us beware that some accounts of what it means for Christ to have died on behalf of the ungodly—what theologians sometimes call his "substitutionary" death—are deeply problematic. If we view Christ on the cross as a third party being punished for the sins of transgressors, we have widely missed the mark..."

⁸ *NICNT*, entry for 15:11.

⁹ Bailey, locations 5118-5169.

William Temple points out that the New Testament always starts with the love of God, not his wrath. He writes,

“... So the forgiveness that Christ wins for us is not chiefly a remission of penalty; it is the restoration to the affectionate intimacy of sons with their Father...”

God is angry at sin, but, as Temple argues,

“[God’s anger] is not anger, if by anger we mean the emotional reaction of an offended self-concern; it is anger, if by anger we mean the resolute and relentless opposition of a will set on righteousness against a will directed elsewhere... He seeks to abolish sinners by winning them out of their sin into the loyalty and love of children in their Father’s home... It is only through preoccupation with thoughts of punishment that people have come to invent doctrines of transferred penalty...”

Suffering is the divine choice in which we participate. Temple writes,

“There are two ways of expressing antagonism to sin; one is to inflict suffering on the sinner, the other is to endure suffering...”

The issue is the reform of the sinner. Temple concludes,

“Fear of punishment might deter me from sinful action, but it could not change my sinful desires... But to realize what my selfishness means to the Father who loves me with a love such as Christ reveals, fills me with horror of the selfishness and calls out an answering love... We plead His Passion, not as a transferred penalty, but as an act of self-sacrifice which re-makes us in its own likeness.”

Table 2: Bailey, location 5176

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 (ESV) - Validity of Faith			
1	12	Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead,	Christ is Raised From the dead
2		how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?	Your view: No resurrection
3a	13	But if there is no resurrection of the dead,	No Resurrection:
b		then not even Christ has been raised.	Christ not raised
c	14	And if Christ has not been raised,	Preaching-empty
d		then our preaching is in vain	Faith-empty
e		and your faith is in vain.	
4	15	We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.	We - Lying Our witness: Christ is raised Not raised No resurrection

5a		16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.	No Resurrection: Christ not raised
b		17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile	Faith-futile
c		and you are still in your sins.	Salvation-none
d			
e			
6		18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.	Result of Your view: We are most pitied
7		20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.	Christ is Raised First Fruits

5. Rhetoric

- a. Ring composition
- b. Climax is in center (4)
- c. The problem Paul is addressing is finally introduced
- d. Main body is Paul arguing the logical results if the Corinthian claim (“no resurrection”) is true
- e. Contrasts Corinthian claim with the apostles’ claim (“Christ is raised”)
- f. Paul is correcting a problem and/or aberrant theology held by the Corinthians

6. Details

- a. The outer envelopes (1, 7) and center (4) affirm that the apostles preach that Christ was resurrected in a body, as the firstfruit (pattern) for all who will follow
- b. The rest of this passage details the absurdity that results if one refuses to accept a resurrection into a physical body
 - i. Resurrection or afterlife of some kind is assumed
 - ii. This passage does not deal with the question of non-belief in any afterlife
- c. Parts 1, 2, 6, 7 flow together¹⁰
 - i. Logic of argument
 1. Christian faith is based upon the resurrection of Christ (bodily)
 2. So how can any of you claim that there is no (bodily) resurrection?
 3. If there is no bodily resurrection, then all who have died in Christ have perished (permanently, because there is no separate spirit that survives apart from the body)
 4. If, supposing what you claim is true, then existence is in this life only
 5. We are to be most pitied because
 - a. Even pagan religions offer some kind of afterlife
 - b. Or, even no hope is better than false hope
 - c. Or, to deny the future reality is to also deny the past and present realities – nothing you’ve done or are doing matters either
 6. But the reality is that Christ was raised bodily from the dead (as you once believed), as the template for all to someday follow, who have died in Christ
- d. Parts 3-5 form the center
 - i. Logic of argument
 1. If, supposing you are right that there is no bodily resurrection, then not even Christ has actually been resurrected (what it is that the witnesses saw?)
 2. If Christ has not been raised then there is no gospel

¹⁰ Bailey, location 5189.

- a. Our preaching is empty
- b. Your faith is empty
 - i. What Paul means by “unless you believed in vain” (v.2)
- 3. Even worse by our preaching we misrepresent God
 - a. Because our central teaching (“the gospel”) is that **God raised Christ**
 - i. I.e., Love overcame Death, therefore there is no basis for fear
- 4. But if what you say is true, God could not have raised Christ
- 5. Because if the dead is not resurrected bodily, Christ could not have been raised and appeared to all the witnesses
- 6. And if Christ hasn’t been raised, your faith is futile (empty)
- 7. And the power of Death still reigns (“you are still in your sins”)
- e. Bailey writes again on the problem of reading into this passage a substitutionary theory of the atonement:

This is another case where the third-party substitutionary theory of the atonement, with its focus on *penalty*, can lead astray. Imagine a scenario in which God takes Jesus to heaven seconds after the great cry, “It is finished.” Had that happened, would there be any salvation for believers? If the focus is on *penalty*, then of course there is salvation because “Jesus paid it all...” Does that not mean that the great work of salvation is completed? Not for Paul. For him, *without the resurrection* all faith is futile and believers are still in their sins. As noted, the *central focus is rescue, not penalty. Without the resurrection* the death of Jesus is like the death of John the Baptist. If there is no resurrection, Jesus is one more rabbi who tried to renew Israel and failed...

The resurrection affirms that sin and death do not have the last word. At the cross the finest religion of the ancient world (Judaism), and the finest system of justice of the ancient world (Rome), joined to torture this good man to death. These were not evil forces. They were the best institutions the ancient world had to offer, *and yet* together they produced the cross. But that was not the end. After the cross came the victory of resurrection...¹¹

7. Summary

- a. The gospel: Death, burial, resurrection, and bodily appearances of Christ to witnesses
- b. The resurrection is the assurance that the gospel has power
- c. The gospel is the victory of Love over Death
- d. This victory ensures there is nothing in this world nor unseen powers that Christians need fear
- e. Without the resurrection, there is no Christianity; a “Christianity” that rejects the bodily resurrection of the dead is a false Christianity

¹¹ Bailey, location 5203-5212.