

First Epistle to the Corinthians

29 – Essay Five: Resurrection (5.3) – Ethics

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

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. Rhetoric

- a. Five-section ring composition followed by an aside
- b. *Ad hominem* (personal attack) argumentation – exposing the absurdity of Corinthian position
- c. Real-world results if the Corinthian position is true
- d. The literal text can be rather confounding

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

Table 1: Bailey, location 5303

1 Corinthians 15:29-34 (ESV)		
1	29 Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?	If dead not raised Why be baptized for their sake?
2	30 Why are we in danger every hour?	Why endure?
3	31 I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!	By my boasting In Christ I die every day
4	32 What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus?	What reward?
5	If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."	If dead not raised Eat, drink, and die
6	33 Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." 34 Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.	[Aside]

3. Details

a. Section 1

- i. One of the most confusing and least understood text
- ii. "Baptized on behalf of the dead" or "baptized for the dead" – what does it mean?
 1. Some groups (e.g., LDS) literally get baptized for the benefit of those that have died
 2. There may be upwards of two-hundred possible interpretations of this text
 3. No one knows for certain exactly what was happening in the Corinthian church
 4. A few of the more viable interpretations
 - a. The "dead" is metaphor for the "body" that is buried in the waters of baptism.

So understood, a translation might read, "Otherwise [i.e., if there is not a future resurrection] what will those being baptized accomplish for the corpses? If corpses are not raised at all, why are they being baptized for them?" Here, in agreement with the Greek fathers, corpses refer to the bodies of the people being baptized. If in baptism one's body is immersed in water (dying and being buried with Christ) in hope of being united with Christ in a resurrection like his, if there is no future resurrection, then what is the point of the baptismal liturgy? The common Christian experience of baptism demands belief in a future resurrection.²

² Reading the New Testament: Corinthians, entry for 1 Cor. 15:20-32.

- b. Converts were being baptized in a desire to be reunited with their now-deceased Christian relatives.

Baptism for the sake of the dead refers to the decision of a person or persons to ask for, and to receive, baptism as a result of the desire to be united with their believing relatives who have died.³

- 5. Whatever it was, it was not a theological or practical problem for Paul
 - a. We shouldn't get too hung up over not understanding the details
 - iii. The point: baptism is a re-enactment of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection that looks forward to a future bodily resurrection of believers. If a person doesn't believe there is a bodily resurrection, what is the point of being baptized? In effect, why be a Christian?
- b. Section 5
- i. Follows section 1 – if there is no resurrection, there is no Christianity
 - ii. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" is a sentiment of despair – there is nothing worthwhile in this world to live for, so drown your despairs as best you can because you'll be dead anyway
 - 1. It is not a statement saying that "the world" is "more fun"
 - iii. This follows the earlier two parts of the essay, the theology that without the resurrection, sin and death have won
- c. Sections 2-4
- i. Paul shifts from general ethics to personal experiences

One must remember throughout that to deny the resurrection of the dead meant to deny the resurrection of Christ (vv. 12-19), which meant for Paul the denial of Christian life altogether. Thus everything Christians do as Christians—and especially the labors of an apostle—are an absurdity if there is no resurrection.⁴

- ii. Paul writes this letter from Ephesus (c.f., 16:8)
 - 1. It is probably shortly after this time that a riot erupts in Ephesus regarding the silversmiths of Artemis (Acts 19)
 - 2. Talking about another God, greater than Artemis, in a city where Artemis is greatly venerated, where the economy is based around her worship, is not a safe course of action
 - 3. The "beasts" are not literal. They are metaphorical language pointing to those who oppose Paul.
 - 4. "I die every day" should be understood in the sense "On a daily basis I face the reality of death"⁵ – it is not language of literal, daily self-sacrifice, but a symbolic one
 - 5. Paul uses the language of an oath to communicate the seriousness of his message

³ Bailey, quoting Thiselton; location 5319.

⁴ *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*, entry for 15:30.

⁵ *NICNT*, entry for 15:31.

- iii. Without the resurrection, Paul's efforts are merely human – it is simply a battle of one human philosophy over others – and what is the point of that?

Thus, without the resurrection his earthly struggle is without meaning; he has gained nothing, not only now but in the life to come, and not only for himself but for all those who have come to Christ as a result of that struggle.⁶

d. Section 6

- i. A section of exhortation and correction
- ii. Paul quotes from Menander's *Thais*.⁷ Paul once again weaves in both Hebrew and Greek traditions to develop his points.
- iii. Paul expressing his disapproval of becoming involved in discussions with those who dismiss the bodily resurrection
- iv. Paul comparing it to drunken stupor
- v. Paul commanding them to wake from the stupor and realize what is happening to them, to halt their present course
- vi. Not entirely clear precisely to what “do not go on sinning” refers – it can be the denial of the resurrection, and/or any of the problems mentioned in this letter.
- vii. Also not clear what is intended by “for some have no knowledge of God.” In relation to “I say this to your shame” it is probably some kind of put-down to shame those who claim “special spiritual knowledge” and leading the Corinthian church in its present disastrous course.⁸

Probably because most people have had such a difficult time knowing what to do with v. 29, there has been a strange silence in the church with regard to this paragraph. Yet it stands as one of the more significant texts pointing to a genuine relationship between what one believes about the future and how one behaves in the present (cf. 2 Pet. 2-3). This is not to say that the future is the only motivation for correct behavior, but it is to plead that it is a proper one because it ultimately has to do with the nature and character of God. We should be living in this world as those whose confidence in the final vindication of Christ through our own resurrection determines the present.⁹

- 4. How do we apply this ancient historical exhortation to present-day life?
 - a. We don't deny bodily resurrection... or do we?
 - b. We aren't in daily physical danger (at least here in the U.S.)...
 - c. We don't face daily the very real prospects of death... should we be?
 - d. We don't battle “beasts” on a regular basis...
 - e. Are we living lives of futility?
 - f. When do discussions about topics that don't conform to Christian “orthodoxy” deviate into “drunkenness”?
 - g. What are the inviolable, non-negotiable foundations of Christianity?

⁶ *NICNT*, entry for 15:32.

⁷ *NICNT*, entry for 15:33; and Bailey, location 5352.

⁸ *NICNT*, entry for 15:34.

⁹ *Ibid.*