

"THE RESURRECTION: 1 CORINTHIANS 15"

(David Garland)

In chapter 15, Paul moves on from the problem of "their disorderly worship, which required correction (14.40), to their disordered belief which was equally in need of being set right" (McDonald 1989: 38). Unlike the other issues he has addressed in the letter, this is not a case of inadmissible behavior, but the ethical admonitions in this discourse betray his conviction that errant belief inevitably leads to inadmissible behavior. Also, unlike his handling of every other issue raised in the letter he does not explain at the outset what precipitates this lengthy deliberation on the resurrection. Not until 15:12 does he note that some are claiming that there is no resurrection of the dead. He mentions no oral report or written query that informs how he knows this. But this discussion falls structurally in the section of oral reports. How he came to know about this problem is unknown. His only concern is to correct this misinformed opinion about the possibility and nature of the resurrection of the dead.

The Corinthians do not deny the futurity of the resurrection by assuming that it has already occurred and is past (cf. 2 Tim. 2:18) but have come to believe that there is "life after death without a resurrection of the dead" (Soards 1999: 315). Paul is not trying to prove the resurrection of Jesus but to argue from it that Christians will be resurrected (Sellin 1986: 235-36; Fee 1987: 718). As Christ was resurrected from the dead so those who are in Christ and pattern their lives after him can hope to be resurrected by God.

The Corinthians' error is not rooted in some deliberate doctrinal rebellion but in honest confusion, given their Greek worldview. They fail to comprehend how an earthly body that is physical and perishable can be made suitable for a heavenly realm that is spiritual and imperishable.

The question "With what kind of body are the dead raised?" (1 Cor. 15:35) is not sarcastic, as Sider (1977: 131) suggests, but states the heart of the enigma for them. Earthly bodies and heavenly existence are altogether incompatible, as different as chalk from cheese. The Corinthians fail to understand, then, how the resurrection of the dead makes sense given this inherent polarity between the earthly and the heavenly spheres. J. Wilson (1968: 94) is correct that Paul is "not dealing with a rebellion of the Corinthians against previous, clearly spelled out teachings of his. He is making explicit, probably for the first time, a new line of thought on the basis of his Jewish presuppositions but contrary to their Hellenistic presuppositions." Paul's argument in this chapter combines history, the church's preaching, and logical argument to make the case for the resurrection of the dead.

The argument divides into two distinct sections. The first section, 15:1-34, makes the case for the reality of the resurrection. The second section, 15:35-58, explains how the resurrection is possible. The first section has a tripartite structure. In 15:1-11, Paul gives a prolonged recitation of the facts that provide the essential background for the discussion of the issue. This opening unit is set off by an emphasis on what was and is preached by Paul and others [15:1], and [15:11]) and by what the Corinthians believed [15:2, 11]). In this introductory segment he establishes the resurrection's connection to the essence of the gospel that has been preached from the very beginning and does not attempt to prove that the resurrection of Christ actually happened (Barrett 1968: 341; Conzelmann 1975: 250; cf. Fee 1987: 737). By reiterating the tradition, he establishes the uniform apostolic witness to its truth and the continuity of that witness. The resurrection is and always has been the foundation of all preaching about Christ. Without it, the



gospel dwindles into an inspiring story of a wise teacher who suffered heroically as a victim of human perfidy. Paul hints that if they deviate from this belief, it brings their salvation into question.

In 15: 12, Paul states the issue that prompts his discussion, and in 15:13-28, he lays out his arguments for the resurrection of the dead. He contends that because Christ was raised, the dead also must be raised. Christ as the first fruits implies that there will be a harvest of others at the end. In 15:29-34, he draws out the implications of no resurrection of the dead and the ethical consequences of belief in the resurrection.

The second section of the chapter (15:35-58) begins by presenting the issue in question form (15:35): How are the dead raised? What kind of body will they have? It is followed by arguments for the possibility of resurrection (15:36-57) and a concluding brief exhortation (15:58). Paul begins with the diatribe form, answering the imagined objections of a slow-witted student, by which he can explain how so counterintuitive a thing as the resurrection could possibly occur and even must occur. The resurrection of the dead does not mean the resuscitation of mortal human bodies. The argument proceeds, using illustrations from agriculture (15:36-38), with the example of the seed that dies and is transformed and comes to life. One could not imagine from merely looking at the seed of a watermelon what a watermelon will look like.

In 15:39-41, Paul appeals to biology and cosmology—the example of the many different kinds of bodies in animal life and the different kinds of heavenly bodies—to prove that the resurrection body can be a different kind of body from anything experienced on earth. Since God has provided earthly creatures and celestial bodies with flesh or glory suitable for their environment and purpose, God can provide a glorious body for the dead in the resurrection.

In 15:42-44, Paul appeals to anthropology. The natural (physical), perishable body is sown as a body suitable for its earthly habitation. The dead are raised and given a spiritual, imperishable body suitable for its heavenly habitation.

Christology comes to the fore in 15:45-49. Paul contrasts the first man, Adam, with the last Adam, Christ. The first Adam became a living soul; the last Adam is a life-giving spirit. The first Adam was a man of the dust of the earth, who began the sequence of life for those who also are of the dust of the earth; the last Adam is the man of heaven, and his resurrection marks the inauguration of life for those who will be raised in him. Just as they bore the earthly image of the first Adam, so those who are raised from the dead will bear the heavenly image of the last Adam.

In 15:50-57, Paul concludes with a description of how what is mortal will put on immortality and how God will conquer all the opposing powers and, finally, death itself. The essence of his argument is based on the polarity between the resurrection body and the earthly body. Those who are resurrected will be transformed and clothed with immortality and incorruptibility. Scripture will be fulfilled (Isa. 25:7; Hos. 13:14), and thanks will redound to God's glory (1 Cor. 15:57). Paul concludes with an ethical exhortation to be steadfast and excel in the work of the Lord (15:58). Jesus' resurrection means that we are saved from our sins (15:14, 17), and the Corinthians must come to their right minds and sin no more (15:34). The chapter can be outlined as follows:

- A. Prologue: preaching and belief about the resurrection of Christ (15:1-11)
- B. The consequences if the resurrection of the dead is not true (15:12-19)
- C. The consequences since the resurrection of the dead is true (15:20-28)
- D. The consequences if the resurrection of the dead were not true (15:29-34)
- E. The bodily character of the resurrection (15:35-49)
- F. All will be changed (15:50-58)