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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS

#37

**OF FIRST IMPORTANCE
 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11**

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 15 appears to take an unexpected turn from the previous subject matter of chapters 12-14, but Paul continues to address the erroneous thinking of the Corinthian church. It appears that some within the congregation had begun to deny the future bodily resurrection of Christians. The Corinthian error was probably rooted in the idea that they had already reached a level of super "spirituality" because they possessed the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues, even calling tongues the language of the angels (1 Corinthians 13:1). They came to see themselves as existing in a sort of angelic state where marriage was no longer required because such sexual pleasures were beneath them (1 Corinthians 7). They believed themselves to be impervious to the temptations of pagan feasts because of this newfound spirituality (1 Corinthians 10). This attitude accounts for most of Paul's warnings and admonitions throughout this letter. He must warn them of overconfidence (1 Corinthians 10:1-12) in spite of their great spiritual blessings. He must correct their haughty attitudes toward others (1 Corinthians 12-13) and he must put restraints on their use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14). Now, in chapter 15, Paul must refute the idea that a bodily resurrection is unnecessary. He must uphold the importance of an eternally glorified body as part of God's redemptive plan. To accomplish this purpose, Paul reminds them of Jesus' own resurrection and its centrality to the Gospel. Then, reminding them that they believe Jesus arose from the dead, Paul draws the conclusion that all who are in Christ will arise from the dead. In short, Paul connects Jesus' past resurrection to their own future resurrection. What emerges from verses 1-11 is the centrality of the Gospel with a particular emphasis on Jesus' resurrection as an essential aspect of that Gospel.

1. THE RESURRECTION, AN ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF THE GOSPEL (15:1-4)

The Apostle wants to draw a vital connection between Jesus' resurrection and the Corinthians future resurrection. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the very Gospel that he preached (v1), they received (v1) and they believed (v11) contained a clear teaching on the resurrection of Jesus. There is no saving Gospel without the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We cannot speak of the cross apart from the resurrection. We must recognize that the cross and the empty tomb comprise one great saving act of God (vv3-4) [See 1 Thessalonians 4:14].

Paul is pointing to Jesus and declaring that the center of all Christianity is the confession that Jesus is the risen Lord. Christianity is not trying to follow the teachings of Jesus as one would try to follow the teachings of Mohammad or Buddha. Christianity is believing and confessing that Jesus is Lord over all. It is believing that God took on flesh, lived a perfect life, died on the cross to absorb His own wrath and arose again to prove that His reigns over all, even death.

It is relying upon this sinless, crucified and risen Savior that saves us (v2). In other words, we must have faith, a believing reliance, upon this Savior if we are to be finally saved. It's not faith

that saves us; it is Jesus who saves us. Faith only connects us to Jesus and it is when we look away from ourselves and look to Him that we are justified. Paul points out that such faith is not a temporary faith, but one that holds fast to the preached message (v2). To temporarily believe is to believe in vain. The Corinthians had once believed the Gospel and Paul reminds them not to forget or neglect central features of that Gospel. According to Paul, the Gospel is *of first importance* (v3) and any Gospel which omits the bodily resurrection of Jesus is no good news at all.

The Corinthians should have known these things because the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was predicted by the Scriptures, meaning the Old Testament Scriptures (vv3-4) [See Luke 24:25-27; Matthew 12:39-40]. The Old Testament gave us types and shadows which taught us about atonement, but the Gospel is that *Christ died for our sins*. So the Gospel centers on the idea that our sins are atoned for by the death of another, Jesus [See Isaiah 53]. Death is the price for sin and therefore, Paul explicitly tells us that Jesus died and was buried. Finally, Jesus was raised on the third day just as the Scriptures predicted.

So the essential themes which Paul includes in his presentation of the good news are: our sin, Christ's sinlessness, Jesus' substitutionary death, Jesus' burial as objective proof of death and Jesus' resurrection.

2. THE RESURRECTION, VALIDATED BY EYEWITNESSES (15:5-7)

As Paul continues to recount the traditional understanding of the Gospel, he reminds the Corinthians that this resurrection was accompanied by numerous appearances to numerous persons. Jesus appeared to Peter, the 12 Disciples, over 500 believers at once (many who were still alive at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians), James and all the apostles.

Paul's emphasis here seems to be on the physical aspect of Jesus' resurrection. It was not some spiritual event only or sentimental reality in the hearts of the disciples. It was a literal, physical coming forth from the dead. Many of the eyewitnesses were still available to be questioned if anyone doubted Paul's testimony. To emphasize the physical nature of Jesus' resurrection is essential in a unbelieving world. Our own historical confession, The 2nd London Baptist Confession, says *on the third day he arose from the dead with the same body in which he suffered, with which he also ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of his Father making intercession, and shall return to judge men and angels at the end of the world.*

3. THE RESURRECTION, THE ONLY EXPLANATION FOR PAUL'S CONVERSION & APOSTLESHIP (15:8-11)

In the concluding verses of today's text, Paul recounts Jesus' appearance to him (v8). Paul readily admits that his experience with the risen Christ was out of the ordinary for an Apostle. To be an Apostle, 3 criteria were necessary: (1) to have been a disciple, a learner (2) to have been an eyewitness to the resurrection (3) to receive a direct and immediate call to represent Jesus as an authoritative spokesman. Paul did not meet the first 2 criteria. His call to Apostleship was somewhat of a freakish event. Perhaps this accounts for some of the Corinthians' animosity towards Paul's authority.

In verse 9, Paul affirms his Apostleship and places himself as *the least of the apostles* due to his previous hatred and persecution of the Church. Like his conversion, Paul's Apostleship was completely a gift of God's grace (v10). And that grace *did not prove vain* because his preaching had brought such churches as Corinth into existence and now, he had the authority to correct them in

matters of doctrine and practice. It was God's grace that motivated Paul to work harder than all the other Apostles, and even this work was the grace of God active in Paul's life. Therefore, no matter whether it was Paul or any other Apostle proclaiming the Gospel, the resurrection was a necessary feature. If the Corinthians reject the concept of a future resurrection for believers, then they must know they are out of step with both the Apostles' preaching and the common belief of all the churches (v11).

CONCLUSION

How should this passage lead us to function as a local church? First of all, we must take notice of Paul's words that the Gospel is *of first importance*. It must be central in the life of this church. That means that some other doctrines, important as they are, will never become central expressions of who we are as believers. We must effectively distinguish between essential doctrines [the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith alone, and the authority of Scripture], secondary doctrines which are doctrines with which believing Christians may disagree, though this disagreement will create significant boundaries between believers [baptism, election, perseverance of the saints, church government] and thirdly, disputable matters. These are beliefs over which Christians may disagree and remain in close fellowship, even within local congregations [the doctrine of last things, how we educate our children, our beliefs about social issues such as attending movies, preferences for dress and drinking alcohol]. Doctrines are important, but we must honestly admit that some are more foundational than others.

Secondly, we must see the connection between Jesus' resurrection and our conversion. Paul alludes to this connection here, but it is much more explicitly explained in other New Testament passages. The Apostle Peter writes, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3)*. In Ephesians, Paul writes, *4But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6)*. And to the Colossian believers, Paul writes, *Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1)*. Finally, Paul's deepest desire was to *know Him and the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10)*. When we take these passages together and examine the breadth of how the resurrection is applied to our lives, we conclude that Jesus' resurrection provides new life for those who believe. This life is both spiritual and eternal. In other words, we are changed by the resurrection power as we are brought into fellowship with Jesus. The most obvious result of this resurrection [regeneration] is that we are granted persevering faith in Jesus.