

2. Paul began his discussion by reminding the Corinthians that the gospel they'd embraced and hoped in is the good news of resurrection from the dead (cf. 15:1-11, 12). Implicit in that reminder is the fact that denying or otherwise compromising the truth of resurrection has serious implications for the gospel itself, and therefore for those who've believed it. And if the gospel – which is the good news of what God has accomplished in Jesus – is implicated in a denial of resurrection, then so is the truth of Jesus Himself. And that means that the entirety of the truth of Christianity evaporates. Lest the Corinthians fail to see these critical implications, Paul proceeded to draw them out for them.

Again, scholars disagree regarding the particular concern(s) expressed by the Corinthians. Some believe the issue wasn't the fact of resurrection as such, but whether those who died before the Parousia would have a share in the renewal accompanying it (ref. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Similarly, others maintain that the Corinthians were concerned with whether or not the resurrection had already occurred and they had missed it (ref. 2 Thessalonians 2:1ff; 2 Timothy 2:16-18). Others argue that the issue was the question of physical resurrection as opposed to the ascension and glorification of the soul at death.

Because Paul taught a form of *present* resurrection – namely the “raising up” of the inner man as the enlivening work of the Spirit (ref. again Romans 6:1-11; Ephesians 2:1-7; Colossians 2:9-12, 3:1-4; etc.) it's not implausible that at least some members of the early Christian community misinterpreted this instruction as indicating that there is no future resurrection at all. This, in turn, implies one of two further scenarios:

- 1) There is no bodily resurrection; the “raising up” of the spirit is the totality of the truth of resurrection for believers (whatever may have been the case with Jesus' own resurrection from the dead).
- 2) The resurrection of the body occurs simultaneously with the enlivening of the soul. As strange as this view might appear, at least some among the very first Christians believed that Jesus' conquest of death meant that they would never die, a conviction reinforced by Jesus' own words (cf. John 5:24, 11:20-26).

Jesus' resurrection was a singularity point in the history of the world (indeed, in the history of the created order). It introduced a new reality of existence which touched and redefined every human experience and arena of thought and understanding. Jesus' resurrection changed everything, and so it was no wonder that the early Church wrestled with it and its pertinence and effect on Christians, unbelievers, and the creation itself. Paul's letters give some indication of the breadth of questions and concerns which confronted the fledgling Christian community and the Corinthian church certainly wasn't removed from them. But Paul's instruction in this passage narrows the focus, highlighting a couple of things about the Corinthians' struggle with the issue of resurrection:

- 1) The first is that the Corinthians were clearly wrestling with the whole notion of bodily resurrection (15:12) and not merely questions of timing or pertinence. How much this was driven by the Greek dualistic worldview (spirit vs. matter) versus misunderstanding of Paul's teaching – or a blend of both – is unclear.

- 2) The second is that the Corinthians apparently didn't rightly connect their objection to bodily resurrection with the fact of Jesus' resurrection. Here again there are two possibilities: Either they were denying resurrection in a *limited* sense or *altogether*. If the former, their concern was likely with the resurrection of *believers*, with Jesus' resurrection being regarded as unique. The second option is that these Corinthians were denying resurrection *as such*. While Jesus did emerge from the grave, this "raising" didn't involve the resurrection of His body in the true sense (a view held by Gnostic Christians and other quasi-Christian groups.)

It's not entirely clear how the Corinthians were reconciling their objections to bodily resurrection with their faith in the resurrected, living Christ, but Paul's approach indicates that they were indeed holding to Jesus' resurrection in some sense while questioning the reality of resurrection for Christians (cf. 15:12 with vv. 22-23 and 35-58). Perhaps they acknowledged His bodily resurrection, but as a unique "spiritual" phenomenon, even as Jesus possessed His physical body uniquely as the incarnate Son of God. Perhaps – and more consistent with their pre-Christian dualistic worldview – they regarded Jesus' resurrection as something other than involving the literal resurrection of His body.

Whatever the case, Paul understood that the truth of Jesus' bodily resurrection was the proper and effective way to address the Corinthians' questions and objections.

- a. Paul argued as he did because he recognized that the fundamental problem with questioning or denying the resurrection is that it calls into question Jesus' own resurrection (15:12-13). However the Corinthians were reconciling their objection to bodily resurrection with their understanding of Jesus' victory over death, the mere fact of their objection proved that they didn't have it right. *For there is but one resurrection from the dead, shared by the Lord and His people alike.*

Jesus wasn't merely raised from the dead; He was raised as the first fruits of the dead (15:20). This means that whatever was true of Jesus' resurrection is necessarily true of all believers; to deny the resurrection of the saints is to deny the Lord's resurrection. Furthermore – and critically important to the truth of the gospel, upholding Jesus' resurrection means also upholding the *exact same phenomenon* with respect to those who belong to Him. Being the "first fruits from the dead," Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of resurrection, not the unique (let alone final) manifestation of it. He was raised as the *Last Adam* – the fountainhead of a new humanity, so that what belongs to Him in regard to resurrection life belongs to all those who share in Him.

*"Our resurrection has already taken place and is already fully tied up with the resurrection of Christ, and therefore proceeds from it **more by way of manifestation** of what has already taken place [in Jesus], **than as new effect resulting from it.**" (Atonement)*

Thus Paul: Any denial of the *saints'* resurrection – or any attempt to distinguish it from Jesus' – means the denial of Jesus' resurrection (15:13, 16, 20-23, 42-49).

- b. There is no doubt that the Corinthians had embraced some notion of Jesus' resurrection, for that event was foundational to the gospel Paul preached at Corinth (and everywhere) and the Corinthians had embraced his gospel as the truth. It's possible that some hadn't really understood Paul's teaching on resurrection, or perhaps some had since come to question what they'd formerly believed. But whatever the disconnect or misunderstanding, it remained that Paul *had* proclaimed the gospel of resurrection to them. The clearest proof is Paul's insistence that any denial of resurrection by the Corinthians amounted to charging him (and the other apostolic witnesses) with *false testimony* (15:12-15).
- c. And if the gospel of resurrection amounts to false testimony, so also the *faith it engenders* is false (15:14-19). Paul substantiated this claim in several particulars:
- First and most obvious, such faith is false because it's grounded in and fixed upon a lie. Faith isn't directed toward the gospel message itself, but the person of Jesus Christ proclaimed in that message. But the heart of the gospel's proclamation of Christ is the truth of His resurrection and its consequences and implications for human beings and the whole creation. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Jesus' wasn't raised. And if Jesus wasn't raised then the gospel proclamation of His resurrection is a lie and faith in the resurrected Jesus is a misguided and tragic delusion.
 - But the gospel doesn't merely proclaim Jesus' resurrection; it proclaims the truth of resurrection as proving God's restoration of His dead and cursed creation. The gospel proclaims the resurrected Jesus as the *first fruits* from the dead, which means that the gospel holds out to men the promise of their own resurrection to be obtained in Him. The gospel is thus a message of *hope*, but a hope grounded in and directed toward the truth of resurrection (cf. cf. 15:46-58 with Acts 23:6; Romans 8:9-25; 2 Corinthians 4:1-14; Philippians 3:8-4:1). If there is no resurrection of the dead, then the hope held out in the gospel is empty and utterly worthless.
 - Resurrection is the ground and essence of the Christian's hope; if there's no resurrection of the dead, there's no real hope. Granted, a gospel devoid of resurrection can still hold out some form of "hope," but such hope is necessarily only earthly and natural; *it cannot extend beyond the confines of this present life* (15:19). For resurrection is the truth of *new creation*: the truth of the creation's recovery and renewal attested and having its first expression in the resurrected Christ who is the Last Adam. If resurrection doesn't exist, neither does new creation.

Thus the only "hope" that can exist is the expectation of a better "old creation" – a better manifestation of and existence under the present order of things. In Paul's estimation such a "hope" leaves men who embrace it *"most to be pitied."* All deluded men are to be pitied, but those most of all who've set their hope upon a world existing under the bonds of the curse.

And, though Paul didn't specifically mention it, it is also true that a hope confined to the present world is a hope which *itself* denies the gospel. The reason is that the gospel insists upon not only the fact of new creation, but the truth that the present creation has been judged and condemned and is passing away (cf. Romans 8:18-22; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 1 John 2:15-17). Already all things in the heavens and earth have been reconciled to God in Christ (Colossians 1:19-21; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20); already the new creation has been inaugurated, evidenced in Jesus' resurrection. His resurrection is the pledge of the renewal to come and the whole creation groans in view of it, longing for the day when it will experience in its own renewal the redemption and reconciliation which it already possesses. Thus, for men to hope in the present order of things is for them to turn away from the hope which the creation has for itself; *what could be more pitiable than that?*

Elaborating on this pitiable condition Richard Hays adds:

"If Christ has not been raised, we Christians mock ourselves with falsehood. We preach a message that turns out to be an illusion. We offer for the world's ills a pious lie that veils from ourselves the terrifying truth that we are powerless and alone. Second, as Barrett observes, Christians – in Paul's view – are called to a life of "embracing death," suffering through selfless service of others (cf. 10:33-11:1), not seeking their own advantage or pleasure. If there is no resurrection, this self-denying style of life makes no sense; those who follow the example of Jesus and Paul are chumps missing out on their fair share of life's rewards."

- d. Faith in a resurrection-less "gospel" is empty and worthless because of what the gospel promises, but it's also worthless because of what the gospel *affirms* – namely Jesus' satisfaction of all the demands obligated of God and man. Jesus' resurrection signaled His conquest of death, but since death is sin's outcome and penalty, death's conquest means the vanquishing of sin and its dominion and the enmity and guilt which attend it (ref. Romans 5:1-6:10).
 - Again and importantly, Jesus' resurrection attested His righteousness with respect to *God* as well as *man*. From the divine side, God's righteousness respecting man had two primary and related dimensions: God's obligation to fulfill His word concerning man (cf. Genesis 1:26-27 with 3:15), which, in turn, obligated Him to both condemn and conquer sin and the curse arising from it. In both respects Jesus satisfied the divine righteousness.
 - From the human side, the obligation of righteousness was also two-fold: Jesus was obligated to both condemn man in his falseness and live authentically as a new Adam. Thus human righteousness necessitated the confrontation, condemnation and destruction of pseudo-man, but in order that man should become man *indeed* – man as image-son in truth. In a word, Jesus' human righteousness involved agreeing with God against human falseness and affirming with God the truth of man as truly man.

All of these dimensions of divine and human righteousness were fully satisfied by Jesus Christ, and it was His resurrection that affirmed it to be so. For Jesus' resurrection was the proof of God's righteous vindication in His full condemnation and destruction of pseudo-man, but also in the full realization of His creative will that man should be image-son participating in the divine life and love (Genesis 1:26-31). And for that very reason, man was himself vindicated in Jesus' resurrection, having been liberated from his Adamic falseness to at last attain to the nature, role and relationship the triune God purposed for him. In Jesus' resurrection from the dead, God and man were fully attested as *true*.

Once again Torrance's observations are illuminating and helpful:

*"In the resurrection we see that the saving act of God in the expiation of sin and guilt, in the vanquishing of death and all that destroys the creation, is joined to God's act of creation. Redemption and creation come together in the resurrection. Indeed, God's **No** to all evil and its privation of being falls together with his **Yes** in the final affirming of the creation as that which God has made and declared to be good – for that declaration of God about what he had made is now made good through Jesus Christ. Atonement is unveiled to be the positive reaffirmation and re-creation of man."*

*"Apart from the resurrection, the **No** of God against our sins and the whole world of evil in which we had become entangled, even his rejection of our guilt, would be in vain – that is why St. Paul argues so insistently that if Christ is not risen we are still in our sins. But it is also true that apart from that **No**, the resurrection is no real **Yes**. Apart from God's **No**, in judgment and crucifixion, the resurrection would be only an empty show of wonderful power – it would not have any saving content to it, it would contain no forgiveness. By itself the expiatory death of Christ would mean only judgment, not life, only rejection of guilt – and yet even that could not be carried through apart from the resurrection – but now in the resurrection that act of atonement is seen to be God's great positive work of new creation. Thus the **No** and the **Yes** imply one another, and each is empty without the other." (Atonement)*

Thus Paul's sober assessment: In the absence of Jesus' resurrection, all men remain in their sin, *including Christians*. This means that those believers who are yet alive have an empty and futile faith devoid of authentic hope, and those who have died in Christ have perished. Living or dead, hope in Christ has no substance beyond this life (15:17-19) and so Christians have no real hope to offer the world.

"If the telos (goal) of our life together in Christ is merely a mirage on an ever-receding horizon of time, then we are living an unhealthy self-deception – as Christianity's critics, ancient and modern, have charged. There is no authentic Christian faith without fervent eschatological hope, and there is no authentic eschatological hope without the resurrection of the dead." (Hays)