



COMMENTARIES ON "1 CORINTHIANS"

Chapter 15

After all the time spent dealing with problems in the Corinthians' attitudes toward each other and their willingness to overlook - and sometimes to engage in - immorality, St. Paul turns in 1 Corinthians 15 to a problem that strikes at the heart of the gospel he preached to them (15:1): some Corinthian Christians denied that Christians will be resurrected. The problem is so serious because, as the apostle points out several times in this chapter (15:2, 16-17, 19), the Christian hope is in vain if either Christ or they will not be resurrected.

He starts with a brief summary of the gospel he preached to them: Christ died for our sins (15:3), was buried and rose again on the third day (15:4), and that he was seen by a large number of people beginning with Cephas (or St. Peter) and ending with himself (15:5-8). When listing the fact of Christ's death and resurrection in verses 3-4, St. Paul twice emphasizes that these things are "according to the Scriptures." The fact of Christ's sacrificial death is prophesied in Isaiah 53:10-12, and many early Christians preached about Psalm 16:10 referring to His resurrection (see Acts 2:25); Jesus Himself said that Jonah 1:17 refers to His burial and resurrection (Matthew 12:40), and the Church likewise understands Hosea 6:2 as referring to His resurrection on the third day. St. Hilary of Poitiers explains the importance of these events being in accordance with the Scriptures:

Paul reminded us that we are to confess the manner of the death and resurrection not so much by literally naming these things but strictly according to the testimony of the Scriptures, so that our understanding of his death might be in accord with the apostles...He did this in order that we might not become helpless or to be tossed about by the winds of useless disputes or hampered by the absurd subtleties of unsound opinions.

In 1 Corinthians 1:1 St. Paul states that he is "called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God," and now in 15:8-11 he goes into detail about his calling and his work as an apostle. He says that he was "one born out of due time" (15:8), referring to the way he was abruptly pulled by Christ from his previous life of persecuting the Church into his new life as a Christian. He therefore considers himself unworthy to be an apostle (15:9), but by the grace of God he has worked ceaselessly to proclaim the gospel (15:10). Therefore, whether the Corinthians were converted to Christianity after listening to him, or after listening to another apostle, they were converted by the same message to the same gospel (15:11).

The apostle now moves into the main point of the chapter: the resurrection. Some of the Corinthian Christians, influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy, believed that it is impossible for the physical body to be resurrected. Therefore, while they accepted that Jesus was resurrected, they denied that any other person would also be resurrected. St. Paul points out, however, that such a philosophical position undermines the gospel. Since you believe the gospel message that we apostles preached to you, he asks, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection (15:12)? If people cannot be resurrected, then

Jesus is not risen from the dead (15:13, 15-16). If this is the case, the over 500 people who say they saw the risen Christ are false witnesses (15:15).

St. Paul then carries this argument to its logical conclusion: if Jesus Christ is not risen from the dead, then the Christian faith is empty (15:14). This means that not only are Christians who have died without hope of ever living again, but that their sins have not been forgiven (since Christ's resurrection was necessary for God to forgive sins) (15:17-18)! Indeed, if all of this is correct, then Christians are the most pitiable people on the face of the earth (15:19). As St. Cyril of Jerusalem says, "If the cross is an illusion, the ascension is also an illusion, and everything, finally, becomes unsubstantial."

Fortunately for us, this line of reasoning is not correct: Christ is risen (15:20)! Christ is the first of many who will be resurrected by God: He is, to use St. Paul's words, the "firstfruits" of those who have fallen asleep in death, referring to the Jewish practice of bringing the first sheaf of a harvest as an offering to God (15:20; see Leviticus 23:10ff). Just as death entered the world through the fall of one man, Adam (15:21, 22), so salvation came into the world through the resurrection of one Man, Jesus Christ (15:21, 22). This establishes the order of the salvation of the world: first Christ is resurrected, then those who belong to Him are resurrected when He comes again (15:23), and then comes the end of the age when Christ abolishes all enemies of God (15:24-25), and finally destroys death itself (15:26).

All of this fulfills the messianic prophecy in Psalm 8:7, "He has put all things under His feet" (15:27). Christ will overcome all enemies of God and His order, and then will lead all creation, as Fr. Lawrence Farley puts it, "in bowing before the Father" (15:28). St. Gregory the Theologian explains that the final part of verse 28, "that God may be all in all," refers to the fullness of existence for which Christians strive:

'God will be all in all' at the time of restoration - 'God,' not 'the Father.' The Son will not revert to disappear complete within the Father, like a torch temporarily withdrawn from a great flame and then joined up again with it...No, God will be 'all in all' when we are no longer what we are now, a multiplicity of impulses and emotions, with little of nothing of God in us, but are fully like God, with room for God and God alone. This is the 'maturity' toward which we speed.

St. Paul asks what is, for modern readers, a cryptic question in verse 29: If there is no resurrection, then why are people baptized for the dead? Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - popularly called Mormons - understand this verse to mean that modern Christians must be baptized on behalf of people who have died and were not baptized as Mormons. This, however, is not what St. Paul is saying. The practice of being baptized on behalf of dead persons who had not been baptized apparently did occur in Corinth (and only in Corinth, with the exception of a few later heretical groups like the Marcionites (who rejected the God of the Old Testament)). St. Paul, while noting the practice, is not approving it; he simply uses it as evidence that the Corinthians must believe in the resurrection, or else the practice of physical baptism on behalf of those who had already left their bodies behind would be foolish.

The life of St. Paul itself would be foolish if there is not resurrection. Every person is in continual danger of death (15:30); accidents could befall us at any time. But St. Paul went beyond this, continually denying himself and enduring intense opposition (in fact the opposition in Ephesus was so intense that he said he

“fought with beasts” (15:32). If there were no resurrection, then the only intelligent response would be to pursue as much physical pleasure as possible in the time you have available (15:31). There is a resurrection, however, and therefore Christians should live according to their knowledge of God and avoid sin (as well as people who would inspire us to sin) (15:33-34).

Now that he’s established the fact that there is a resurrection, St. Paul moves on to discuss what the resurrection will be like. He first addresses the physical aspect of the resurrection: what will a person’s body be like after it is resurrected (15:25)? For example, if I die in a terrible accident where I am horribly mutilated, after the resurrection will I spend eternity with a disfigured and possibly all but useless body? Or, for that matter, how can a person’s body be resurrected after it has decomposed in the grave? This seem like important questions to us, but St. Paul simply begins his response by calling the person who asks such things “foolish one” (15:36). He then uses examples from nature to illustrate his point that the physical existence of a thing at one time does not represent its physical existence at another time. Therefore, the body that you have now gives only a limited idea of the body you will have after the resurrection, just as it is difficult to tell by looking at a single grain of wheat what it will look like after it has been planted and grown into a full, mature stalk of wheat (15:37). God will give each person a glorious body that is unique, just as planets and stars exist and are glorious in different ways (15:40-41).

The natural human body starts out as a corrupt, weak - even dishonorable - thing, but after the resurrection your spiritual body will be incorrupt, glorious and powerful (15:43-44). Blessed Augustine explains:

As the spirit, when it serves the flesh, is not improperly said to be carnal, so the flesh, when it serves the spirit, will rightly be called spiritual - not because it is changed into spirit, as some suppose who misinterpret the text, ‘What is sown a natural body rises a spiritual body,’ but because it will be so subject to the spirit that, with a marvelous pliancy of perfect obedience, it will accept the infallible law of its indissoluble immortality, putting aside every feeling of fatigue, every shadow of suffering, every sign of slowing down. This ‘spiritual body’ will not only be better than any body on earth in perfect health but will surpass even that of Adam and Eve before their sin.

St. Paul brings the discussion back to Adam and Christ. Just as Adam, the first man, became a living spirit (see Genesis 2:7), so Jesus - called “the last Adam” because he fulfills and perfects the human nature that was first given to Adam - became a life-giving spirit (15:45). In other words, Adam was given life, while Jesus Christ gives eternal life; the first man was of earth, but the second Man is the Lord from heaven (15:47). Therefore, as we bear the image of the first man because we are human beings, after the resurrection we shall bear the image of the heavenly Man because we shall be perfected (15:48-49).

This perfection is significant because the corrupt flesh and blood of our present bodies cannot inherit the kingdom of God (15:50). This means that we will need to be changed; we will need bodies that, as Fr. Lawrence Farley says, “can bear the glory of the age to come.” Cassiodorus explains what needs to happen in this way, “The radiance of the saints refers to when they will gleam at the resurrection like the angels of God. They will be so cleansed and radiant that they can gaze on the Majesty with the heart’s eyes. They cannot gaze on that Light unless they are changed for the better.” This will occur at Christ’s Second Coming, and notice two key facts about this event: first, it will be an instantaneous change, like the “twinkling of an eye” (15:52); and everyone who belongs to Christ - both the resurrected

dead and those who are alive at that moment - will be perfected (15:51). This will fulfill the messianic prophecies that death will lose its sting and its victory (15:54-55; see Isaiah 25:8; Hosea 13:14).

Notice what will give victory over sin and death. It is not the Law which, while good, ultimately is capable only of recognizing sin, but not of overcoming it (15:56; see Romans 7:7-25); the Law therefore cannot grant this victory. This victory is given only "through our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:57). Knowing all of this, Christians should therefore be unmovable from our avoidance of sin as well as our pursuit of a holy life through relationship with God (15:58).