

1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Of First Importance

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Introduction

The Gospel of Mark is widely believed to be the first gospel written, but even that was not until thirty or forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. First Corinthians is older still, from around twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. In chapter 15:1-11 we learn three things: First, the belief that Jesus rose from the dead was essential to Christian faith at its origin. This is no invention of later centuries. Second, First Corinthians was written when most of the apostles, John and Peter and others, were still alive, and were teaching as of first importance that Jesus had risen. Third, there is no gospel apart from that which declares that Jesus is alive.

Other gospels have been invented; a social gospel that Jesus was a pacifist, progressive intellectual; a moral gospel that Jesus was a family-values conservative; a gospel of works righteousness that leaves it up to us to earn grace as we follow the example that Jesus set; a universalist gospel that says I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay because we're born that way, and since Jesus loves everybody no one has to worry about anything. These other gospels are not the Gospel. God raised Jesus from the dead. This is of first importance, and all other facets of the Christian life grow out of it. Without it, belief in Jesus is in vain. With it, there is new life.

Let us pray: Lord God, you made him who was without sin to take on sin's curse for us, and then you made him live again. Send his Spirit into our lives, we pray, to live within us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

1. Believing in Vain

The first thing we learn from Paul is that belief that Jesus is alive is essential to being a

Christian. If this is not your belief, you are not a Christian, no matter your baptism and no matter how many times you have received communion. This theme is in other of Paul's writings as well, such as in Romans chapter 10 verse 9 in which he describes the basic, essential creed of the Christian: **If you confess with your lips "Jesus is Lord" and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**

To believe in Jesus but not in his resurrection is to believe in vain. First Corinthians is a long letter which describes a lot of what vain believing looks like. Paul has to tackle one ethical problem after another that the Corinthian Christians had been confused about. Paul deals with partisanship, sexuality, divorce, the Lord's Supper, gluttony, involvement with idols and demons, and what the presence of the Holy Spirit looks like, sounds like, and means for the ministry of the Church. All of these problems have their origin in a Greek philosophy of life which was different from the Biblical beliefs of the Jews. The Greek philosophy was that the body was evil by nature and will perish, while the spirit is immortal and will enter the afterlife as a ghost. Believing that the flesh was inherently evil, many in Corinth continued to indulge their flesh, thinking that belief in Jesus meant their ghosts would be at peace in the after-life. So they continued to be libertines and gluttons, and this embarrassed Paul.

The Biblical perspective is that the person is a single entity of body and spirit, and that the after-life is a resurrection into a body that will never again perish. The after-life is MORE real and substantial than this life. Heaven will not be filled with ghosts, but with people at a higher order and dimension of embodied life. It is of first importance to believe that Jesus Christ rose, embodied, from the dead. It was not his ghost going back to God; he was given a new body that would never die again. Therefore those who have his Spirit are called to testify to the life of God with our bodies. As we live in God's power sin ceases to have mastery over us, just as it had

no mastery over Jesus. By his Spirit we begin to show the world that God's plan is redemptive.

Many people who think they believe in Jesus do so in vain, not caring one bit that he rose from the dead and offers to put his own life into our hearts. For such people Jesus is either a social revolutionary or a moral philosopher. Such a Jesus is only a person in history, he has nothing to offer us today except, maybe, an example to follow. But the world has enough martyrs and philosophers. It needs a savior who defeats the curse of death by rising from the dead. The world needs Jesus, because Jesus is alive.

2. Eye-Witnesses

Many of you are aware that this spring I completed my dissertation and successfully defended it, and on May 17th I will be graduating with a Ph.D. in Church History from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, down in Hyde Park near the Museum of Science and Industry. For my dissertation I constructed a biography of a pastor who lived over two hundred years ago. The reason I bring this up on Easter Sunday is that in my research I became an expert on how mistakes enter the historical record. Something that is less than perfectly legible is misread, something that is translated is misunderstood, and sometimes people remember something inaccurately.

For generations Bible scholars have evaluated ancient manuscripts in order to correct mistakes, omissions and mistranslations. Because of my own studies I now, more than ever, appreciate the science that goes into New Testament reconstruction. I am willing to concede a lot to the New Testament textual scholars, and here is why: What the textual analysis of the New Testament has done is challenge those beliefs that have grown up in the Church only through human imagination, but which have no true scriptural basis. For example I can accept the consensus of textual scholars that the original gospel of Mark ended at chapter 16 verse 8. Many

of the Covenant's theological founders such as Paul Waldenstrom, David Nyvall and Nils Lund brought such tools to their reading of scripture. As part of the Master of Divinity at North Park, pastors are trained to recognize and engage in New Testament text analysis, so that when we read scholars who use these tools in their commentaries we can evaluate their arguments.

Through this science New Testament scholars, be they believers in Jesus or unbelievers, agree that the original Gospel of Mark proclaims: 1) that the stone had been rolled away, 2) the tomb was empty, 3) an angel appeared, and 4) the resurrection as announced. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him." Through this science New Testament scholars affirm that First Corinthians was actually written by the Apostle Paul about twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. That is also not disputed. Whether you believe or not that Jesus rose from the dead; the fact is, the first apostles believed it, and shared the conviction that they saw him alive again, and this was of First Importance, it was THE basis for their faith in Jesus.

Right now there is a lot of bad information going around about the Bible. Some try to say that all the stuff about Jesus rising from the dead and being God was added on later. No: Paul describes that Christ appeared to him alive, and he relates the testimony of his appearance to hundreds of other people, including all of the original apostles, people who are still alive when Paul is writing. Some try to say that other gospels were written that have as much value as the four that are in the Bible. The same scientific rules that apply to New Testament studies, as they are applied to these other writings, like the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and so on, conclude that those other writings all come from centuries later and have no basis as eye-witness accounts. The accusation that what was accepted for the scriptures and what was rejected was arbitrary, is simply false. The more that modern scholarship has brought science to textual analysis, the more

clearly the principles for understanding what was chosen have come to be understood. Ancient people were neither naïve nor stupid. They knew the difference between the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Judas, that Mark was the authentic product of witnesses, while Judas was a much later fabrication of a mind caught up in a cult.

3. This is It

This is it, Jesus rose from the dead. This is of first importance. Nothing else is more important. To respond to Jesus and enter into new life, believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead, means opening your life to the priorities of God, and that will turn your life upside down pretty quickly, to the point that some of you might be wishing you could wait until after baseball season.

For some people it is bad news that this is the only good news. Some want to believe in Jesus, but as a nice guy who lived two thousand years ago; they do not want to engage the ethical demands of believing he lives again and that he calls us to show his character to the world in the power of the Spirit he places within us. Seeking to justify themselves, many attack the Bible as the foundation for this belief that Jesus lives today. It is filled with mistakes, so it is claimed.

If the four gospels all agreed with each other in every detail – about the number of women at the tomb, about the number of angels at the tomb, about whether Mary Magdalene was ever alone at the tomb – I would conclude that they all came from only one original eye-witness. What would be the point in having four gospels if they all agreed on every detail? But some say, well if the Bible is supposed to be perfect why are there these discrepancies? Some Christians have replied with a theory that all of these discrepancies disappear when we get back to the original manuscripts which, by the way, do not exist anymore. Friends, brace yourselves: I am

absolutely convinced that some of those discrepancies, like which women and when were at the tomb, do not disappear in the originals.

The Bible was written by dozens of people, most of them anonymous, presenting multiple points of view on its events, starting with Creation itself. To me that is a sign of its strength, that is a reason why the Bible has credibility with me. The Book of Mormon was written by one person, and we know who it is, presenting one point of view. The Koran was written by one person, and we know who it is, presenting one point of view. To me those are strikes against those books, and I do not believe they come from God.

The perfection of the Bible's testimony is that it is the testimony of communities as they test the Spirit in one another. If there were only one eye-witness to Jesus being alive again, and that eye-witness wrote a book and called it the New Testament, then the Church would be a cult. We have hundreds of eye-witnesses, and we have dozens of authors of scripture, and through it all God continues to build and grow the Church.

I believe that the Bible is God-breathed; I believe that the Bible has discrepancies in the original manuscripts, I believe that the Bible is the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. The Bible's perfection is in the diversity of its multiple witnesses, every one of whom claim that women were at the tomb first, the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, an angel spoke, and Jesus was alive. As an historical investigator, I am far more impressed by the consistencies than I am worried by the discrepancies. And later, after the Apostles got started on their Pentecostal mission, Jesus even appeared to Paul, and there was controversy over whether Paul could properly be considered an apostle. But Paul did his writing first. As an historical investigator, I am impressed at just how early this accounting of resurrection appearances is given in the history of the Church, and, I am impressed at the importance with which Paul

addresses this doctrine as the key to true faith. The resurrection is not a theory or a controversy among the apostles. The apostles argued over whether Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised. None of the apostles argued over whether Jesus had risen from the dead, not after Thomas fell at his feet crying out, “My Lord and my God!”

Conclusion

This is it. The Bible’s claim from the very origins of the Church is that Jesus is alive. To hold firmly in that belief is to join Jesus in his life, with his Spirit filling yours. This is what is preached, this is what is believed, this is what you are called to hold firmly in your heart. Amen.