

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

First Letter to the Corinthians

Acts – Paul in Ephesus

Readings: *1 Corinthians 15:1-16:24; Acts 19:23-41, 20:1*

Reflections:

- Regarding the resurrection – resurrection a provable fact: Paul now transitions to address the issue of the resurrection. He begins by repeating the earliest creed that we have from the first Christ-followers. Like the memorized formula for the Lord's supper, this creed probably dates to within five to ten years of the beginning of the church and was widely circulated as the foundation conviction of the first Christ-followers. This first creed stated:
 - Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures;
 - He was buried; he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures;
 - He appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve.
 - After that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time;
- (“most of who are still living although some have fallen asleep” is most likely an insertion by Paul).
 - Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”
- Finally Paul adds his own conclusion, “Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”
- We see in this creed a very basic pattern that aids memory. We also see a very clear theology of Jesus' death being equated with the final sacrifice for sins and his resurrection from the dead as a fact of history attested to by many reliable witnesses. This passage is one of the strongest and best evidences for the truth and validity of Christianity. This is exceptionally early and we see that the first Christ-followers maintained the practice of those who were witnesses to the resurrection publically verifying the historicity of resurrection with personal testimony. It is interesting that in this creed there is no mention of the women and yet when the biographies are written the women are consistently honored as being the first to encounter the empty tomb

and risen Christ. We also see that Paul maintains a very humble posture and does not attempt to place himself in the same category as the other apostles but uses the term as one being “abnormally born” to help describe the fact that he saw himself as the least of all the apostles because of his role as a persecutor of the church. This humble position motivated him to serve with greater passion than the other apostles. His gratitude motivated him. The clearer we see the immensity of the grace that saves us, the more we will be motivated by gratefulness rather than by ambition or duty.

- Resurrection is central: Paul now wants to make it very clear that the resurrection of people has been guaranteed by Christ’ resurrection. Paul is right in saying that if Jesus was not raised from the dead, he and his friends should be pitied more than all people. To live with such suffering, persecution and early death (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-28) for a lie would be the worst fate a person could face. Paul never knew Jesus prior to the resurrection and so he would have absolutely no motivation to promote a lie. His testimony is one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the truth of the resurrection.
- Our resurrection certain: Paul now explains the ultimate triumph of Jesus at the end of time when he returns, raises his followers from the dead and triumphs over all spiritual powers and even death itself. Just as Adam opened the way for all of us to die, so Jesus opened the way for all of us to live eternally. In the story of God we see how in the depths of humility and self-sacrifice God triumphed over all the power and pride of Satan and his evil forces. Paul was aware of the conclusion of this story and this gave him great confidence even in the face of severe suffering. He knew the end of the story and he trusted in God to complete his will through Paul.
- Conduct based upon hope: Paul now makes a very interesting statement. He refers to those that are baptized for the dead. The meaning of this statement has been debated for centuries. Most scholars assume that in the early years so people decided to be baptized for loved ones who had passed away without having a chance to hear about Christ. In a sense, they were standing in believing they would have responded if they had a chance. Paul does not promote or affirm this practice, he simply references it as evidence that the Corinthians were practicing this to some degree and there for acknowledging their hope in the resurrection. There is no evidence beyond this one cryptic statement by Paul that the early Christians promoted or continued this practice. Paul also references his battle with wild beasts in Ephesus. These games were a part of the Roman Empire combining persecution with sports. The Romans were particularly cruel and barbaric to those they oppressed. Paul admits, if this thing with Jesus isn’t true then we should just party because before you know it we’ll all be dead. Paul challenges them to pull back from those who are leading them astray and repent of sinful behaviors and relationships. A key part of remaining solid with God is ensuring that in all of your relationships either others are helping you grow closer to God or you are helping

them get closer to God. We need to pull back from relationships that are moving us away from God or we are being used to pull people away from God.

- New bodies at the resurrection: The Corinthians couldn't get their minds around what a resurrected body would be like. Paul explains that just like a seed is transformed by being planted and apparently dying, so our bodies will be transformed into something new at death and take on a new splendor.
- Bodies to be spiritual: Paul's description here (from perishable to imperishable, from dishonor to glory, from weak to powerful, from natural to spiritual) aligns with what Jesus modeled in his death and resurrection. The resurrected body is trans-physical and transcends our natural physical laws. Just as we were aligned to Adam and inherited his body made of dust, so those who are aligned with Christ will inherit a resurrected body as he had.
- Resurrection and glorification: Whether a person has already died (sleeping) or is still alive, the return of Christ will initiate a complete, instantaneous transformation of our bodies into a new spiritual form. This Paul describes as a mystery. Indeed it is.
- Confidence in death: Paul then quotes from Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14 to affirm God's ultimate triumph over everything that oppresses humanity – death, sin and even the Law! Jesus is our complete salvation from everything that would place us in bondage. The salvation of Jesus should motivate us to be like Paul – doing everything we can with the time, resources and energy God gives us!
- Closing personal thoughts – collection for Jerusalem: Paul here references another region of house churches Paul leads that we have already been introduced to – The Galatians. Every time they gathered (note: on the first day of the week – Sunday) they were to take an offering for those in need. This gift was for a famine that had hit Jerusalem. Christians should consistently gather funds to give to those areas of the world where people are suffering and poor. Letters of introduction would be sent with groups so that people would know that they are duly appointed to carry funds or messages.
- Paul's future plans: Paul wanted to invest his time wisely. He preferred to only go to a region when he could take the time to really invest in the people. He didn't like just quick visits because it was a waste of all that travel time. The kingdom comes through relationships and relationships take time. Paul also wanted to maximize his time where he was having the most spiritual impact. We should guard against moving around but rather seek to make solid, long-term investments.
- About Timothy and Apollos: Timothy must have struggled with fear (see 2 Timothy 1:7). As a young leader, he may have easily become insecure about his role. We see how much Paul trusted Timothy even as a young leader, probably in his early twenties. Apollos is also referenced underscoring his recognition as a key leader.

- General exhortations: These short commands are great mental hooks for the normal Christ-centered life – “Be on guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong, do everything in love.” We see clearly that following Jesus is more like fighting a spiritual war than it is taking a spiritual vacation. We must see advancing the kingdom as a battle to be waged rather than winning the lottery so that we can enjoy the easy life.
- Regard for fellow workers: Paul builds up and affirms their key leaders. Paul wants to publically recognize and encourage those that serve well.
- Greetings: Paul here affirms the leadership couple Aquilla and Priscilla, reminding us that both men and women were affirmed in leadership.
- Benediction: Paul was apparently working with a secretary as he writes and finally signs the letter in his own hand, and writes a benediction so that they know the letter is authentic. Paul is definitely feisty. This benediction is one not read at the end of many church services, “If anyone doesn’t love the Lord – a curse be on him!” Paul is still worked up about those in the Corinthian church that are causing grief. Paul after talking about the return of Christ and the resurrection simply states, “come Lord” or in Aramaic “Maranatha!” Paul affirms his love for them before closing. The love of God moves a leader to own those he or she serves.
- Back to the story of Acts – Silversmiths incited: As we return to the story of Acts we find ourselves at the story of the idol makers in Ephesus getting mad at Paul for encroaching on their business. Religion is always big business. When someone declares the irreligious message, people always get upset because it always undermines those who are getting rich from religion. Paul was apparently using a theatre as a public venue for sharing the message. The religious money makers got a crowd upset and then it rushed in to seize him and his companion. Paul wasn’t in the theatre at that time but saw this as a great preaching opportunity. Talk about wanting to seize every opportunity to share the message! This crowd was clearly out of control and completely set on defending their religion to Artemis. Sex goddesses with their temple prostitutes apparently attract a great deal of loyalty from their male patrons.
- Town clerk calms crowd: The town clerk quiets the crowd by pointing out that Paul was not directly attacking their religion and therefore had not yet done anything wrong. Here we see how law and order can support the spread of the gospel. Christ-followers were not anti-government but rather saw themselves as citizens from another kingdom seeking to live peacefully as they shared the message of their king.
- Paul leaves Ephesus: One of the results of the kingdom coming to a city is that it can cause uproar among the religious. This is one of the ways the message is communicated through a community. The uproar helps gather people to hear the message. If the message Christ-followers teach causes no reaction or uproar among the religious (not by being offensive or attacking but simply by the irreligious nature of it), then the chances are key elements of Jesus’ message are missing.