

1 Corinthians 15:1

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

Recently, I visited a family home where the lounge was rather like a shrine to the Beatles

- Meeting the younger gentleman of the house, I thought I had better ask some advice
- *The Long and Winding Road* I asked, classic or abomination with the women's choir
- 'Classic' came the immediate reply – obviously a person of taste and judgment
- but which is the best Beatles song ever?
- *Yesterday*, no actually it's *Eleanor Rigby*, no it's *Let it Be*
- Perhaps it is *The Long and Winding Road* after all? Or perhaps it's *Hey! Jude*

The Russian composer, Peter Tchaikovsky, wrote a variety of works

- But which is the best – of course, it's The Swan Theme from *Swan Lake*
- But on reflection I think it's the opening of the *Piano Concerto*
- But then again, I think it must be (has to be) *The 1812 Overture*
- But really, as everyone knows, it the overture *Romeo and Juliet*
- Though clearly not everyone agrees with me because *Romeo and Juliet*
- Does not even make it onto the *Naxos CD The Best of Tchaikovsky*

Of course, it is all a matter of your own opinion

- But I thought I might check out what others thought were the top 10 Bible chapters
- Those wonderful Bible students, *The Navigators*, were sure to help
- But when I looked up their website I didn't agree with them at all, so I moved on
- I thought let's just limit our top 10 to Paul's Letters, that'll be interesting
- But most lists included 1 Corinthians 13 'The greatest of these is love'
- When everyone knows that in 1 Corinthians the best chapter is chapter 15!

The great Welsh preacher of the last century, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones

- Who preached at Westminster Chapel in London for more than 25 years
- Not all in one sermon of course! They were typically three-quarters of an hour
- I had the privilege of hearing him twice – in my teenage years
- I was absolutely mesmerised by the brilliance of his preaching, the urgency of it
- He began saying his text was one of the most important and relevant Bible passages
- I told my Baptist colleague in Wales this, he replied, 'he said that most weeks!'

So here we are then, 1 Corinthians 15, one of the most important and relevant Bible passages

- Verses 1-11 reiterate the fact of Christ's bodily resurrection
- Verses 12-34 outline the consequences of belief and unbelief in this fact
- Verses 35-58 give us further insight into the resurrection body
- But in case you should think that I being fanciful
- Let's not miss that the Apostle Paul, writer of so many New Testament Letters, said
- That what follows in verses 3-8 is 'of first importance'
- That is the account of the death and resurrection of Christ
- These doctrines are central to the gospel message, for, as Paul shows, Christianity is:

I A HISTORICAL FAITH

II A THEOLOGICAL FAITH

III A PRACTICAL FAITH

I A HISTORICAL FAITH

One of the important differences between Christianity and so many other beliefs

- Is that it claims to be rooted in history
- Luke, who wrote between one-quarter and one-third of the New Testament
- And who therefore wrote even more of the New Testament than Paul or John
- Shows that the essential message of Jesus Christ is rooted in history
- Jesus was born in the time of Herod, King of Judea (Luke 1:5)
- When Augustus was Emperor and Quirinius Governor of Syria (Luke 2:1-2)
- Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the time (Luke 25)
- The gospel accounts are clearly meant to be read as history

At the climax of his first letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul sums up the essence of faith

- It is a historical faith, Christ died and rose again according to the scriptures
- Paul cites two kinds of witness to the historic events of Christ's death and resurrection
- The Old Testament scriptures (perhaps Isaiah 53:5, 6 and Psalm 16:8-11)
- And the testimony of eye witnesses
- Paul writing within 30 years of the death of Jesus states clearly, 'Christ died'
- Each of the four gospels states clearly, 'Christ died'
- 600 years later the Quran said that someone like Jesus Christ died in his place
- 1750 years later the German, Karl Friedrich Bahrdt, concluded Jesus only fainted
- The Jewish Talmud records that Jesus died on the cross
- The Roman historians Tacitus and Lucian affirm that Christ died under Pontius Pilate
- In fact, the death of Jesus Christ is the best attested death in the ancient world
- But to leave the reader in no doubt, Paul continues, 'he was buried'
- It's implausible to conclude the disciples stole the body or went to the wrong tomb
- Historians seem to recognise the absurdity of most of the proposed alternatives
- His burial shows the genuineness of his death and, therefore, his resurrection

Christ rose on the third day – using inclusive reckoning including parts of Friday and Sunday

- While it is less clear which scriptures point to Christ's resurrection on the third day
- Though there are numerous allusions to deliverance after the third day
- Perhaps Paul meant only that the scriptures testified to Christ's resurrection
- In Acts, Peter uses Psalm 16:8-11 and 110:1-4
- In any event Paul validates the historical reality of the resurrection citing eyewitnesses
- The resurrection was witnessed by Peter, the Twelve (i.e. the faithful disciples)
- By 500 people, by James the Lord's brother and by all the Apostles including Paul
- The number of witnesses and occasions rule out mass hallucination
- Refutes the contention that the appearances were the projections of individuals

Over and above Paul's list, the gospels mention the women to whom Jesus appeared

- No doubt Paul omits to mention them because, strange as it might seem to us
- Their testimony was not considered valid in much of the ancient world

It is the gospel of Christ's historical death and resurrection that Paul received and passed on

- And it is this gospel that the Corinthian Christians received and believed
- And on which they have taken their stand, in the hope of salvation

II A THEOLOGICAL FAITH

Despite some of the conjecture about the possibility that Christ did not die upon the cross

- There is nothing particularly remarkable about the statement that Christ died
- The vast majority of people who ever lived have died
- The number of people alive now, compared with the number who have ever lived
- Could suggest that the normal state of the majority of people is to be dead
- The remarkable thing about Paul's basic Christian doctrine is not only that Christ died
- But also that Christ died for our sins

The statement 'for our sins' does two things

- The first is that implies that 'Christ was sinless'
- According to the consistent thread of biblical teaching 'death is the wages of sin'
- When Christ died one might therefore normally conclude that he had sinned
- If he had not sinned then, even according to the Bible, he would not have died
- So Christ had, in some way, to be drawn into the condemnation of sin, that is death
- The expression 'for our sins' shows both how and why Christ died
- And points to a vicarious atonement – that is he paid the penalty of our sins for us
- There are those who, quite wrongly, imply that Christ died only as an example
- And not under the crushing burden of sin
- But I have not heard them explain how a sinless one can die
- But the Apostle Peter explains it very clearly
- 'He, himself, bore our sins, in his body on the tree' (1 Peter 2:24)

The statement that Christ was buried may not seem very important to us

- but it refutes the error of Docetism, those who say Christ only seemed to be human
- the root cause of this is often a belief that matter is inherently evil
- but Christians do not believe that matter or the physical or the flesh is inherently evil
- God looked at the world that he had created and pronounced it good
- Jesus' burial certifies that he really died and points to the reality of the resurrection

It is because God seeks to restore his original creative purposes

- That immortality of the soul is not good enough – God's purposes are not thwarted
- When Jesus was raised from the dead he was raised for ever
- The gospel message stresses the resurrection
- the message the Corinthians first believed
- Paul uses the same verb form (re Christ) seven times, (vv. 4, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20)
- This is the message that the Corinthians first believed

There are parts of Paul's letters in which he explicitly states the questions he has been asked

- Though he does not do that here it is clear that some are saying
- That there is no resurrection of the dead, an important point is that
- by denying the resurrection, the Corinthians were not denying life after death
- virtually everyone in the ancient world believed in some form of life after death
- but while Greek forms of belief looked to the disembodied immortality of the soul
- the Jewish and Christian doctrine is a bodily resurrection

The famous British philosopher of the last century, Bertrand Russell, said

- 'I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive'
- but Paul used the same verb for the believer as he did for Christ (vv. 15-16)
- he affirms the historic fact and emphasises its present reality, Christ has been raised

If the dead do not rise then there is no resurrection of Christ

- Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus Christ
- vv. 12-19 stress the absolute necessity of bodily resurrection
- both for Christ and for believers – to prove the Christian faith to be genuine and valid

In 1984 David Jenkins, then Bishop of Durham told the audience of ITV's *Credo* programme

- that the resurrection was more than a conjuring trick with bones
- on that point he and I are agreed but his underlying assumption is that
- resurrection language expresses theological truths in mythological garb
- the media picked that idea up as if it was strikingly new when it was not new at all
- but let's simply address the idea that the resurrection is a myth
- which here I define as a story which contains theological truth
- but which is not necessarily history

Any idea of a resurrection myth seems most unlikely to me, as Craig Blomberg reminds us:

- the disciples not close to a psychological mood favourable to resurrection (Jn. 20:19)
- Christians never came to venerate a holy site where founder buried
- Early on, worship moved to Sunday, the first day of the week (e.g., Acts 20:7)
- The gospel spread from the Jewish world to the Greek world
- If the resurrection story is theological truths in mythological garb
- It was in fact the wrong mythological garb for the Greeks

In fact, the historical claims for Christ's death and resurrection

- Set Christianity apart from all its major rivals
- Western religions - Islam, Mormonism have prophets Muhammad or Joseph Smith
- But they do not claim that deity or resurrection for their originators
- The beliefs of Eastern religions do not require historical existence for their founders
- Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism – are philosophies not claiming historical-truth
- But Christianity is not simply an admirable collection of proverbial truths
- It lives or dies with the resurrection, if it is false then Christianity is worthless

No thoughtful reader of the gospel narratives can come to the conclusion

- That Jesus was merely a good, moral teacher
- The implicit and explicit claims to divinity
- Controlling the wind and waves and forgiving sins to quote but two examples
- Can only lead the reader to the conclusion that he was a demon-possessed liar or God
- The preaching of Acts confirms that the Apostles believed him to be the Christ
- Uniquely the Son of God, in whom all the fullness of God dwelt in bodily form
- Paul does not permit his readers to conclude that Jesus was a good teacher

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

(Romans 10:9)

We have seen that Christianity is a historical faith, it is a theological faith, it is also:

III A PRACTICAL FAITH

The death and resurrection of Jesus are an integral part of the gospel

- It was this gospel that Paul had received, believed and preached
- It was this gospel that they had received and believed
- And by continuing to believe they can demonstrate the reality of their faith

Paul shows the absurdity of Christian belief and practice if the bodily resurrection is not true

- if there is no coming bodily resurrection of all Christians
- then Jesus himself was not bodily raised, and that makes Christianity futile
- faith becomes vain, meaningless and fruitless
- believers are still in their sins and are not made right with God
- and there is no hope for those who have died in Christ – they have perished
- preaching that Christ has been raised is then empty and meaningless
- and Paul's own testimony about the resurrection of Christ is false
- therefore, he and his companions are liars

Paul also shows that there is no point living as a Christian if the resurrection is not true

- on trial for his life before the Jewish leaders, Paul summed up the charge against him
- it was his 'hope in the resurrection of the dead' (Acts 23:6; cf. 24:21; 26:6–8)
- if they are suffering for something that is not true they are most to be pitied
- for they are enduring hardship and persecution for the sake of an empty promise

The idea that the believer could have a life without sacrifice and even persecution

- would have been entirely foreign to Paul – but it is rather familiar today
- again, Craig Blomberg point out – there was a time when though they did not believe
- unbelievers used to imitate Christian lifestyles, from an innate sense of decency
- but now Christians seem to be imitating the lifestyles of unbelievers
- so that was unthinkable, even 50 years ago, for most unbelievers
- is now widely accepted and practised among believers, as Blomberg writes
- we used to say that some people were so heavenly-minded as to be no earthly good
- it is doubtful if many such people under the age of 50 currently exist

In his *Introduction to the Beatitudes* Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first. That is how revival comes. That must also be true of us as individuals. It should not be our ambition to be as much like everybody else as we can, though we happen to be Christian, but rather to be as different from everybody who is not a Christian as we can possibly be. Our ambition should be to be like Christ, the more like Him the better, and the more like Him we become, the more we shall be unlike everybody who is not a Christian.

Paul's absolute dogmatism challenges the tolerance of a pluralistic age both then and now

- if Christianity is right then we must live by its message of Christ dying and rising
- if Christianity is wrong, all the other perspectives are still wrong
- the only other consistent alternative is that there is nothing
- therefore, eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die

Christians must have a radically different mind-set, a resurrection perspective

- this is not something that we can enrol for like a political conviction
- rather it comes from receiving and believing the Apostolic message
- Christ died for our sins, he was raised on the third day
- We accept it as history, believe it as theology and live it in practice

There are choices to be made and they are profound ones:

In Birdville Cemetery, Texas the following epitaph may be read

Beware ye people passing by,
As you are now, so once was I,
And as I am now, so must you be,
Prepare for death and follow me.

Contrasted so powerfully with the words of Job

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand
upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my
flesh I will see God.

Job 19:25-26