

We proclaim and so you have come to believe

1Cor. 15:1 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

1Cor. 15:3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Karl Barth said of this chapter that “it forms not only the close and crown of the whole epistle, but also provides the key to its meaning from which light is shed on to the whole, and it become intelligible...as a unity.” The key is God’s *grace*, disclosed not only in Jesus’ death and also in his resurrection. On account of the start of Lent, we hear only the opening of this great chapter. It is not at all forbidden to read it all!

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Among the divisions and problems in the Corinthians community we find that some Christians there believed fully in Jesus risen from the dead but did not believe that the dead would rise in Christ. In contemporary faith, we probably find the same gap in understanding. Even in the Bible itself, for many centuries the Israelites believed fully God as saviour without believing in an afterlife. Nevertheless, Paul is unhappy and right-

ly. The late Jewish understandings of the resurrection show great variety. In Paul’s apocalyptic grasp, resurrection is both an end-time and a communitarian event. Jesus’ resurrection is no mere resuscitation but an unexpected anticipation within history of the resurrection of us all when history is over. There can, therefore, be no separation whatsoever between faith in Jesus risen and faith in our own resurrection.

KIND OF WRITING

The sequence of chapter 15 can be best grasped in the light of ancient rhetoric.

Introduction vv. 1-2 The tradition
Statement of Facts vv. 3-11 Witnesses
Thesis I v. 12 Christ’s resurrection
Proof I v. 13-24 Logical follow through
Thesis II v. 35 What kind of body?
Proof II vv. 36-56 Using imagination
Conclusion v. 57 Final exhortation

Our reading encompasses the introduction (*exordium*) and the statement of facts (*narratio*). Paul is, therefore, laying the foundation of the future argument by reminding the Corinthians of what *they already believe*. He will then go on in the proofs to draw out the logical and imaginative consequences of those convictions.

RELATED PASSAGES

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. (Romans 5:8–9)

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:4–5)

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God’s family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:1–3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 1-2 Paul combines the language of Rabbinic tradition with the typical vocabulary of the *kerygma*. He ends with a scarcely veiled threat: *unless you have come to believe in vain*.

Verses 3-5 An even earlier credal statement may lie behind these verses:

that Christ died for our sins
in accordance with the scriptures
and *that* he was buried
and *that* he was raised on the third day
in accordance with the scriptures
and *that* he appeared to Cephas,
then to the twelve.

Verse 6 The note that some died is pertinent to the argument: even those who experienced the Risen Lord also die.

Verse 7 This must be James, the brother of the Lord. Paul regards him as an apostle (Gal 1:18-21). This appearance is not found in the Gospels or the Acts.

Verses 8-9 Paul too has an undeserved place among the witnesses. His call was a miscarriage, i.e. an untimely, unexpected birth. His persecution underscores the reality of his encounter with the risen Lord.

Verse 10 Grace frames this verse—but does not hide an outburst of pride.

Verse 11 Thus Paul closes his reminder of the tradition: Jesus is definitely raised from the dead. The Corinthians already believe this but some do not draw the logical consequences, which Paul will do for them, in a forthright way, in the first proof, vv. (12)13-24.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We all stand in a line of tradition and are indebted to those who go before us. To whom do I owe my faith in Jesus, risen from the dead?

2. Paul notes the risk of believing *in vain*, that is without enjoying the richness of faith to the full. The key is a huge “yes” to God’s grace in Christ.

PRAYER

Faithful and life-giving God, all we have and are comes from you and you hold out the gift of life in abundance, both now and in the life to come. We thank you for giving us the victory in Jesus.