

A MATTER OF FIRST IMPORTANCE

By D.A. Carson

What Paul passed on to the Corinthians in his initial evangelization of them was “first of all” (1 Cor. 15:3): Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, He was buried, He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and appeared to a large number of disciples. “So we preach,” Paul writes, “and so you believed” (15:11). Not surprisingly, these matters of “first of all” have found their way into many Christian creeds.

They are not naked points, unrelated to each other: the Jesus who died for our sins is the same Jesus who was buried, and who rose again the third day and was seen by witnesses. These matters of “first of all” constitute one glorious event, the climax of redemption, the substitutionary death and resurrection of the eternal Son of God.

Yet each of the items on the short list has broad, complex connections with Christian theology, and two of them sustain interlocking connections with many of the themes in the two canonical Corinthian epistles. One of the two is the confession that Jesus rose from the dead, and it is on this that I wish to reflect this month.

1. *The most obvious expansion of this confessional item is in 1 Corinthians 15: Jesus’ resurrection is the harbinger of our own.* Apparently many Corinthians were able to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, but their unquestioning assumption of some brand of culturally dominant neo-Platonism — the view that things spiritual and immaterial are intrinsically good, while things physical and material are intrinsically bad — made it very difficult for them to accept that they too would rise from the dead with resurrection bodies. Jesus’ resurrection was an odd exception. But Paul will not let them get away with their misapprehension. He perceives a direct threat to the resurrection of Jesus Himself. If people think that the final resurrection from the dead is implausible or even impossible in principle, while somehow holding that in Jesus’ case a marvelous exception has been made, it cannot be long before the skepticism of the one bleeds into the other. And if Christ has not risen from the dead, the entire structure of redemption comes apart, and the entire race is damned (15:12-19).

But more is at stake than an argument by analogy. Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead an isolated individual and nothing more, merely to be followed by more isolated

individuals. Just as all of us are connected with Adam in his sin, so all believers are connected with Christ in His resurrection life (15:22). To deny that there is a resurrection of the people of God is to misunderstand the nature of Christ as the new Adam, the blessed privilege of belonging to the new humanity, the organic connection with Jesus Christ Himself who is the “first fruits” of what is to come.

2. *Rightly understood, the theme of the resurrection of Christ and its connection with our resurrection still to come, helps to correct some serious misapprehensions about where Christians are located in the stream of redemptive history.*

Christians sometimes fall into one of two extremes. On the one hand, some emphasize the return of Christ, and look with such eagerness to the future that everything in this age is vile in comparison. They seem to have little place for gratitude to God for the saving blessings we have already received: sins forgiven, the gift of the Spirit as the down payment of the promised inheritance, bold access into the presence of God, certain promises that the God who has justified us will unfailingly bring us into the heavenly courts on the last day. We might call this “overly-futurist eschatology.”

On the other hand, some Christians are so enthusiastic about the blessings they have already received that they scarcely give a thought for the future. They find it difficult to believe that suffering is also part of our calling (Phil. 1:27-30). Instead of being homesick for heaven, they start to act in a triumphalistic way as if heaven is already here, bar one or two minor incidentals. Tell that to Christians in Rwanda. This might be called “over-realized eschatology.”

Many have noticed that the Corinthians suffer from “over-realized eschatology.” Already they think of themselves as kings, while apostles are treated like dirt (1 Cor. 4). Their conception of the Spirit leads them to think that the *charismata* are signs of heaven breaking into their life, while Paul thinks such gifts are provisional and of short duration (1 Cor. 12-14). They are easily seduced by triumphalistic leaders, precisely because they have few categories by which to understand that during this period between the first and second comings of Christ, our weakness affords Christ wonderful opportunities to display His strength (2 Cor. 10-13). Even their denial that there is a resurrection may in the end be tied to overly-realized eschatology: they may think they already have all the life there is, and at death, or at the end, they merge into an immortal existence – but one that is bodiless. Where does one find overly-realized eschatology today?

Dr. Carson, a professor of New Testament, is author of Showing the Spirit (Studies in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Baker Books. 1987).