

## Body Parts? The Relevance of Resurrection (1 Corinthians)

### Introduction: Resurrection and Despair

Who am I speaking of?

After the death of his daughter Annie on 14th April 1868 his soul was seized with a dark melancholy from which he never recovered. He began to walk firmly towards the dark tower. On 23 June, 1870, the day *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* was published in Melbourne, he had drinks with Henry Kendall followed by more with yet another citizen in the kingdom of nothingness, Marcus Clarke, after which he made his way back to his home in Broughton, defeated, lonely, and puzzled, that he the daydreamer, the man who had known ecstasy and madness, now yearned only for the long sleep'. At dawn the following morning he shot himself at Brighton Beach within the sound of the sea, which had once held out the promise of renewal and resurrection, but now only murmured the vast indifference of nature in Australia to all man's strivings and sufferings.

Who? The famous Australian poet, Adam Lindsay Gordon, as described by historian Manning Clark. Gordon wrote about the sound of the sea holding out a promise of resurrection. But his life ended in blackest despair. According to Aeschylus, the most famous of the ancient Greek gods, Apollo, declared: "*When the dust hath drained the blood of a man, once he is slain, there is no resurrection.*"

### Resurrection and Christian Faith

In 1 Corinthians 15 all true Christians are assured that God has given us victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ (v57), and that we shall all receive a glorious resurrection body:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at that last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (vv51-52).

There were no Bishop Spongs or Barbara Thierings in Paul's day, but in all ages there have been non-Christian ways of thinking which have made it hard for people to believe in the resurrection. The famous French Christian philosopher Pascal, responding to those who dismiss Christian teaching in bodily resurrection as pious and idealistic nonsense, asked,

What reason have atheists for saying that we cannot rise again? Which is the more difficult, to be born, or to rise again? That which has never been, should be, or that what has been, should be again? Is it more difficult to come into being than to return to it. (*Pensees*, XXIV).

Thomas Watson rightly stated, "*We are more sure to arise out of our graves than out of our beds.*" Our conviction as to the absolute certainty of our future bodily resurrection is rooted in the historical fact that Jesus Christ bodily rose from the dead. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that the bodily resurrection of Christ is something attested by eye-witnesses. From verse 3 Paul tells us that it is of first importance, of top priority, to believe in the historical fact of Christ's resurrection. We are left with no choice. If Christ did not rise bodily from the dead then Christianity is destroyed. There are some who call themselves Christians who do not believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead. By their very failure to believe in Christ's physical resurrection such people prove their claim is bogus. It is absolutely impossible to be a true Christian and at the same time think Christ did not physically rise from the dead. Paul makes this patently clear in verse 14: "*And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is*

*useless and so is your faith."*

In the Corinthian church there were members of the church who were saying, "There is no resurrection of the dead." We read of this in verse 12:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Paul is saying those who speak in this way are contradicting the fundamental Christian gospel. In context he is saying that such people cannot claim to be Christians at all while holding such a view, because it is fundamental to all that we are as Christians that we believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Some non-Christians have claimed it was easy for first-century people, being typically superstitious, to believe in the resurrection. This is sheer nonsense. True, some believed in a general resurrection of the dead at the end of history. But as Alistair McGrath points out, the thing that makes the Christian proclamation of the bodily resurrection of Jesus so odd both in its time and still today, is that it concerns a definite person, a definite time and a definite place. There is absolutely no parallel to this in the ancient world and there has been nothing comparable ever in human history.

Some scholars observed that some early non-Christian religious groups believed in gods who died and rose again. By 1920 many scholars believed it was a proven fact that the resurrection of Jesus was just another example of this same kind of pagan belief. But these days even liberal scholars recognise this is not fact but a theory as full of holes as Swiss cheese.

Firstly, all such pagan ideas about dying and rising gods are myths, never presented in the form of a historical narrative such as in the Gospel accounts. Secondly, not one of these pagan myths about dying and rising gods ever refers to a specific historical figure. Thirdly, all of these myths are later than the New Testament. So, it cannot be the case that the early Christians borrowed from pagan ideas, but, if anything, it happened the other way around.

So, the teaching of the early Christians concerning the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead is utterly unique. You can't even explain it as due to a kind of wish-fulfilment. What a peculiar thing to do - to respond to the catastrophe of Jesus' death by suggesting, in unprecedented fashion, that Jesus had actually been raised from the dead. As McGrath points out, "The history of Israel is littered with the corpses of pious Jewish martyrs, none of whom were ever thought of as having been raised from the dead in such a manner."

Don't get taken in by what non-Christian scholars say by way of criticism of the resurrection. Sometimes they come up with theories which convince and persuade some for a period of time. But just think of what has happened in our lifetime to the theory of Jesus' resurrection being another example of a myth about a dying and rising god. It once was accepted by scholars as a fact, now we can see it's hogwash. As McGrath asks,

How many more such theories, which now seem persuasive and to pose a challenge to the Christian faith, will be treated as obsolete in fifty years' time? Christianity can hardly be expected to abandon its proclamation of the risen Christ as Saviour and Lord on such flimsy grounds.

### Resurrection and the Human Body

Plato said: "*Absolute and eternal immutability is assigned only to the most divine of all things, and bodies do not belong to this order.*" In other words, that which really matters never changes. But the body changes, and indeed eventually becomes subject to the supreme change, death. Therefore the body is insignificant.

I buy bread and milk and it's placed in a disposable bag. At home I take the groceries out of the bag and the bag is thrown out. Are our bodies as worthless as the shopping bag, their only value being that for a short time they hold the goodies, the human spirit?

The Builsa, an African tribal people teach that a person is like a bicycle wheel. The body is like the tyre, the soul like the inner tube; the spirit like the air inside the inner tube. On death the soul and spirit go to their supreme god, Na Wen, who immediately judges that person. Like Plato, like most in the ancient Greek world, these African people don't think that my body is really "me." They think of it as just like a bicycle tyre that wears out and is then chucked out.

There are many people today who treat the human body with contempt. Many years ago, before I married, I had a girlfriend who was a hospital sister and later became Director of a School for Nursing. At that time she often cared for terminally ill patients. To her it was of immense importance that the body of a deceased person be treated with profound respect. There were times when she would get very upset when a certain patient died, not merely because she sincerely loved the patient concerned, but because, in her opinion, other hospital staff had not treated the body of the deceased with sufficient dignity.

In what contexts do modern people most often hear Christian teaching about the resurrection? You will probably answer at funerals and on Easter Sunday.

It is highly unfortunate that Christians primarily connect biblical teaching about resurrection with *dead* human bodies, because in 1 Corinthians Paul's lays great stress on the relevance of resurrection to the way we use our *living* human bodies.

Some have a high regard for at least some human bodies. I think of one man who married a girl because she had a fantastic figure - \$1 million. But we must grasp the biblical teaching about resurrection if we are to truly treat living human bodies with respect and dignity.

Romanian tyrant, Ceausescu, wanting to build a strong labour force demanded that all good Romanian families produce five children. He decreed, "*The fetus is the property of the entire society.*" This monster claimed that a person's body belongs to the State. But Paul states in 6:13: "*The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.*" It is not the State or society which has the right to decide what to do with you do with your body. It is the Lord. Our State may not act with the despotism of Ceausescu, but it too often treats peoples' bodies as though they were its property. For example, the State turns a blind eye to prostitution and tragically to paedophiles as well. The State says homosexuals

have the right to use their bodies in a manner which the Lord says is an abomination.

Having made the point that our bodies belong to the Lord, in 6:14 - the very next verse - Paul continues: "*By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.*" This is 1 Corinthians 15 in shorthand. But note how it follows on from what Paul has been saying in 1 Corinthians 6. You and I must not use our bodies for sexual immorality. As Christians our bodies belong to the Lord and we are not free to use them as we please. We must remind ourselves that our bodies are destined for resurrection, the same kind of wonderful and glorious resurrection experienced by Jesus. Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so he will raise us too. This is what it means for me to realise that my body is the Lord's. He is not a tyrant like Ceausescu who bullies me into using my body to do his bidding. He wants to take my body and raise it so that I will share the glory of Christ. To take my body now and use it in an immoral or improper fashion is to spurn God's kindness and goodness.

Indeed, Paul asks us: "*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?*" The reason God will raise Christians from the dead is precisely because we are united to Christ himself. So we are included in Christ's resurrection. Christ was raised so that all who belong to him should be raised also. Therefore, if I am really holding fast to the gospel, if I am a true Christian who understands the gospel concerning Christ's resurrection, then I will understand that my body is part of Christ; that my whole life is inextricably caught up with Christ; that I can never act or think independently of him. In verse 17 Paul says, "*But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.*" But to be one with him in spirit means that my body is his as well. Jesus wants to express himself through what I do and say with my body.

Paul points out that it is preposterous and monstrous for a Christian male to take his body and join it to that of a prostitute. This is to treat his body as though it was separate from himself, and to treat her body as though it were separate from her person. This is a great misunderstanding of sex. Sexual immorality involves a distorted anthropology, a corrupted view of the meaning of persons. It fails to see that I am what I do and say with my body, and so is everybody else. Thus the sexual act is not reducible to the joining of two bodies. It involves the joining of two persons. Sex is God-ordained and is truly wonderful and good in the right context. But our union with Christ is of a higher order still. It is a union with him in spirit, not a bodily union. The sex act involves a union of bodies which therefore also includes a union of spirit. As Christians our union with Christ essentially involves a union of spirits which also means that our bodies are joined to him, that is, our bodies becomes members of Christ.

The doctrine of the resurrection drives home to us how highly God regards our bodies. We are united to our risen Lord by the presence of the indwelling Spirit of God. Because the Holy Spirit dwells in us our body is a temple (v19). "*You are not your own; you were bought with a price*", Paul reminds us in verse 19. Our bodies belong to the Lord. They are of immense value to him, and the value of our lives, our bodies, is measured by the price he paid; the price of Christ's own precious blood. There is no figure you and I can set upon the value of our bodies. They are inestimably valuable to God. He bought them precisely so he could make them his temple, so that we might benefit from the fruits of Christ's resurrection, by being united to the risen Christ, becoming members of Christ, and having his Spirit indwell us. It is therefore

imperative that we honour God with our body.

So, what we do with the body is of immense importance because the body will be raised, just as the body of Christ was raised from the dead. It is for this reason that I must not allow my body to be mastered by anything (v12). "*'Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food' - but God will destroy both*", says Paul (v13). My present body is temporary. "*'Everything is permissible for me' - but not everything is beneficial*", Paul points out. To confuse freedom with license is to allow my body to be mastered and that is a No-No for Christians. I must not be mastered by my bodily appetites. I need to understand that my body and the things I would use to satisfy my bodily appetites will one day be destroyed by God. And I need to understand that my body does not belong to me but to the Lord. God intends to raise me bodily. My body is a member of Christ himself. So, it is unthinkable to take a body which belongs to Christ and to unite it with that of a prostitute.

### Resurrection and Spirituality

In 15:42 Paul begins to tell us how it will be with the resurrection of the dead. He continues:  
 The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

The resurrection body will be what Paul calls "a spiritual body". This is so important that Paul repeats it in verse 44: "*If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.*" In this letter to the Corinthian church Paul has been dealing with a major matter: Who are "the spiritual ones"? It is precisely because certain church members in the Corinthian church are denying the resurrection of the dead (v12) that these same church folk have such distorted ideas about what a good and powerful Christian looks like.

There are some who think that their superior doctrinal knowledge makes them more spiritual. Paul attacks such spiritual pride on the part of some Corinthian Christians who look down their noses at Christians who won't eat food offered to idols because they assume these other gods do exist. There are others who think that their dramatic spiritual gifting or experiences make them more spiritual. Paul attacks such spiritual pride also, for example, in his treatment of spiritual gifts. The doctrine of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is essential to Paul's attack on false views about spirituality in the church. The body of each and every Christian will be raised as a "spiritual body". All believers will be raised as 'spiritual ones'. Consequently, there is no spiritual elite among Christians.

To sum up. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul uses the doctrine of bodily resurrection:

1. To distinguish between those who have true Christian faith and those who don't.
2. To establish the dignity and value of our bodies and our need to avoid abusing them, for example, through sexual immorality.
3. To underscore the fact that there is no spiritual elite.

May the Lord help us to so understand the significance of the doctrine of the resurrection that it will define us as the Lord's people; that it will enable us to treat our bodies and those of others with dignity and in a manner that honours the Lord; and that it will remove from our hearts any suggestion of spiritual superiority.