

# “Trusting What We’ve Been Given”

1 Cor. 15:12-19, 20-34

11/12/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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## **1 Cor. 15:12-19**

Paul had first met the Corinthian Christians in his second mission trip (around the year 49) and stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. During this time, he wrote his letter to the Thessalonians, the very first New Testament document written in the year 50. He had been with those new Christians when they began that house-church but that church had so many troubles that he wrote to them numerous times.

You know that among the reasons this new congregation had so much trouble was that Christianity was new and there were no writings or creeds in existence that determined the normal operating procedures. Orthodoxy and heresy, of the religion about Jesus, was being formed by ① oral tradition, ② the strength of personalities in Church circles and ③ personal experiences. Obviously Paul was one of the most influential leaders as he had begun the church and had played a large part in influencing what was accepted as ‘the way it ought to be.’

Just about everything that we take for granted today, in terms of theology and church procedure, was not clearly established in that Corinthian church. From wherever we read from this letter, we see that this was a very troubled congregation. At this point in our study of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, we are well familiar with their numerous difficulties.<sup>1</sup> We

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<sup>1</sup> In their *agapae* meals (where they celebrated communion in the context of a church dinner), some were drunk, a few were acting like gluttons, while others were sitting at the table with no food at all. There were members who were living a hedonistic life style, justifying their vices by saying that this is the new kingdom of God, so anything goes. There were factions; people who liked Apollos more than Paul, and they were arguing over popularity issues. Some were abrasive with others, some were harshly judgmental on the ones who felt free to purchase steaks that were sold at the pagan temple meat markets. There were groups of single and married people, in the church, who had decided to become celibate for Jesus because they thought they could be more spiritual if they gave up sex.

Probably the group that Paul spends the most time trying to straighten out are the ones who were into the charismatic gift of speaking in tongues. They had become proud of this gift and had wrongly argued that you didn’t have it spiritually unless you are involved in the experience. Paul takes three chapters trying to teach them that the gifts that benefit the whole group, like teaching and prophetic insight are more beneficial gifts and the use of any particular talent should only be with the benefit of the

would expect that the casualness of the house church setting and their departure from many of the Jewish worship customs, would naturally call for the establishment of new standards for how a church should go about its worship and ministry. Chapter 15, of this letter, deals with the problem of erroneous teachings about the resurrection and a rather strange distortion of the sacrament of baptism. Even after studying the detail of all their other problems, the casual reader would still have a challenging task of understanding chapter 15, so here it is, before we hear additional parts read.

The people had not had years of teaching about the matter of the resurrection of the dead. The concept of a next life had been around since the Persian era, during Daniel, but by the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the Jewish Pharisee movement and several Roman mystery cults had developed a sense of life beyond life. Old Testament Judaism had been vague about matters after death and in a few places, their teachings even seemed to imply that souls (of those who had died) were in a remote region somehow away from God’s presence.

Therefore, some of these Corinthian Christians *may* have heard something from the Pharisees or Mithraism<sup>2</sup> at some point in their life. They certainly had heard theories of heaven from the Greek and Roman religions. Undoubtedly, most of them had heard summaries and opinions of what Jesus had said about the next life and the “many mansions” (that were said to have been prepared for those who believed). The difficulty is that they didn’t have these teachings from Jesus in written form because the first gospel would not be written for another decade by Mark.



The first thing Paul did was summarize the traditional teachings about Christ and His resurrection in verses 1-11. In a word, it was the belief that Christ had died for their sins, was buried, raised from the dead and had finally appeared alive to a multitude of people. And, by the way, since Christ’s resurrection, some Christians had fallen asleep (in his words) or had died.

Why would Paul mention that some believers had died since Christ’s resurrection?

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group in mind.

There were also incidences of people interrupting the worship services by calling across to the other side of the room, and the practice of women being overly casual in removing their veils during the service was considered too liberal (in Paul’s opinion).

<sup>2</sup> The official state religion at the time

Over in 2nd Timothy 2:16-19, there may be a clue that perhaps shows some of the wrong thinking in these early years of pre-New Testament Christianity.

Two characters named Hymenaeus and Philetus were teaching in the Ephesus church that the resurrection was past, so since they were living after the resurrection, this present life was all there is.<sup>3</sup> This teaching implied that everyone was already living in the new kingdom of God, so anything goes – if it feels good, do it.

That theory broke down almost immediately because as soon as one of their church members died, it became obvious that they had not crossed the threshold into the eternal kingdom so everyone else who survived was thought to have missed out on being restored into the kingdom of God. This caused confusion and misunderstandings in that church and in Corinth about the resurrection of the dead.

In verses 12-19, which we will now hear, Paul was trying to expose the foolishness of those who were saying (in that church) that ‘there wasn’t actually a coming resurrection from the dead.’ Some, after seeing that death was still with them, were saying: ‘There you go. All there is is *this* life, and you only go around once, so we might as well grab all the gusto we can.’

Paul’s point was clear for the Corinthians: if Christ had not been resurrected, then the whole belief system of Christianity and the point of gathering the community of faith into churches is a colossal waste of time. Christians would deserve the most pity of all in the world if the pivotal truth of the resurrection turned out to be false.

Fortunately, the Corinthian people apparently didn’t buy into this disbelief in the resurrection. Despite these circulating theories and opinions and interpretations about the next life, most of them still held on to the hope in a life to come. But as far as we can put this together, . . . Paul thought that church members were being swayed by still another misconception about the next life.

Some, who had lost loved ones, were mistakenly thinking that when Christ returns, only those still alive will be resurrected. That meant that those who had already died before the expected second coming were just out of luck.

Believing that, those who were upset about the death of their friends and loved-ones began to distort the practice of baptism. When non-baptized loved ones died, surviving relatives started performing substitute or vicarious, baptism ceremonies. As strange as it may sound, friends or relatives of the deceased had themselves baptized on behalf of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* ISBN: 0-8006-6002-1.

deceased – somehow thinking that it would save them or fix things for them over in the next life.

In response, Paul tried to explain his theology of progression. He said that the first humans (symbolized by Adam) brought sin into the world, which resulted in death. But Christ was the first evidence (*first fruit*) of a *new* progression where death would eventually be eliminated. Paul’s argument was that although Christ was definitely resurrected from the dead, until the second coming (at the end of time), believers were going to have to put up with the pain of physical death. Here was Paul’s argument.

#### **1 Cor. 15:20-34**

Paul, here, was making a convincing argument. He was basically saying that it is obvious that they do not doubt the resurrection of the dead. They wouldn’t be doing this remote-control baptism for the dead if they didn’t already believe in a next life.

Paul was essentially saying, ‘Look at history – it makes sense. The flow of events through time and the coming of Christ in history have all been leading up to something.’ What they, as a congregation, should keep in mind was that they should take first things first. There are stages or a progression to these world events and not everything destined to be has already happened.<sup>4</sup> He was telling them that the Corinthian congregation had just gotten side tracked with this magical view of the sacrament of baptism.



When we think about their attempt to do proxy-baptisms for the dead, we probably have to realize that the Church has, through the centuries, done similar things out of fear or superstition. Sometimes people get a little sidetracked for one reason or another.

I sometimes wonder about the Roman Catholic practice of extreme unction (or anointing the near-dead with holy water). I can’t help but wonder if there is some hope that the act will influence that soul’s state in the next life. Of course, any ritual or act of worship we can do to ease the pain of death and promote comfort may be worth trying.

Perhaps you and I, through the years, have adopted certain habits or made sure various rituals were retained in hopes that they would “guarantee” something good coming about. I happen to have a quirky little habit of dumping a little wine down the drain, right after I uncork a bottle. Linda asked me, once, why I was doing that.

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<sup>4</sup> Now having gotten through all that, if you read the rest of chapter 15, you’d see Paul trying to answer their question about what kind of body a person gets in the next life. But if we were to distill the point of today’s text, it might be this.

I said it's just a little something I do privately. For me, it's a little reminder of the ancient Israelite practice of tithing. That, for me, it reminds me of the old Hebrew agrarian practice of gleaning. This would be where farmers would leave the corners of their crop unharvested for poor people to pick food for themselves. "It's a small reminder to myself to be grateful" I said to her.

Since we drink different wines, she said, "Could you be grateful with your wine and not mine?" ☺



We know that occasionally individuals have a magical view of the rite of water baptism – thinking that if they get their infant baptized, it will "guarantee" something down the line, either in this life or the next. But the Scriptures and Church teachings have consistently explained that our relationship with God was never dependent on doing a ritual or on the extent of our "being good." These rituals and sacraments have only been symbolic – reminding us of God's grace and non-conditional love.

Perhaps the height of Christians becoming preoccupied with a physical act or object (when talking about spiritual things) can be seen in the time when they came out with a product advertised as "The God Box." It wasn't around long but if you remember it, the product claimed to provide a direct communication line to Heaven. It was a plastic box in which people could place written prayer requests. The "God Box" sold for \$14.95 and was marketed by people from California (who also supplied earnest testimonials from users of the product).

One testimonial said, "When I heard about the God Box, I was out of work, my health was on the verge of collapse and I had no relationships. I was angry, bitter and suicidal. So I wrote out my problems and asked God for guidance and put them in the box. In five days I was directed to a new job; fear and terror of the future left me and I had peace of mind."

Well I didn't have \$14.95 (plus \$9 shipping and handling) for the "God Box" and I was a little nervous about asking the church board to get one for everyone in the church. I didn't order it but instead, I tried a shoe box of all things. The odd thing is that the shoe box worked.

In my usual pattern of trying to 'think outside the square,' I tried putting my prayer requests in a Cheerios box and, as it turned out, that also worked. Next I tried a toothpaste box into which I stuffed written prayers but the bottom flap kept slipping open.

In time, I took the big step of faith and tried no box. As you may have suspected, God seemed to hear those prayers as well.



Undoubtedly the Corinthians were not much different from many modern Christians regarding the notion of the resurrection. Christians, today, believe in a life beyond our earthly existence but our notions of the realities of the next life often seem a bit mythical and abstract. The fact that we will live in eternity often doesn't seem to relate to what we do here and now.

But Paul was reminding them that the resurrection of Christ is the bedrock of the Christian faith. Paul thought that it is only because of the power Christ had over death, that we are able to accept anything else about Christianity. Think about it, if you will, . . . would Christianity have been around very long if none of the disciples had seen Christ resurrected?

The belief in God's power over death and our experience of death, in one way, are reminders that we all are on a pilgrimage that is yet to be completed. We haven't entered the restored kingdom of God and things, now, are not what they ideally should be. We have work to do, growth to experience and justice to bring about.

Each of us have been given a tradition, a body of knowledge of Christ, as Paul says it: "that which you have received." Despite all the different versions of Christianity, all Christian faith expressions seem to agree that Jesus lived beyond the grave and it will be the same (in the future) for all of God's people.

So when a movie star, who happens to be appearing on the cover of tabloids, puts out a best seller, saying that he or she believes in reincarnation or a transmigration of souls or some other new and trendy philosophy, maybe we should say to ourselves, "Wait a minute." We have been given a body of beliefs and an tradition of faith that has had the integrity of its truthfulness verified in the lives of millions of people through the centuries. And while we should always be willing to question and reevaluate anything we believe as a life-long process, somewhere, along the course of our life, we come to know, within the inner core of our being, the truth of the reality of God.

By the way, it also happens to transform our lives. And if it wasn't true, . . . if Christ really didn't rise from the dead and if this life is all there is to reality, then what are we doing here? ■

