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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibc-01.php

Does 1 Corinthians 15 Hold Water?

J.M. Ross

The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is one of the most familiar chapters in the Bible. It is often read on Easter Day and at funerals. It gives comfort to many because it appears to tackle what is a real problem to people in the twentieth century - the problem of survival after death. The age in which we live is so heavily influenced by the scientific viewpoint that it finds it difficult to believe that life after death is possible. The great attraction of Spiritualism is that it professes to give proof of such life; and the same comfort is found in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, which seems to give assurance that the life of our loved ones is not extinguished at death, and we can hope to rejoin them in another existence beyond the grave.

Unfortunately this is not what the apostle Paul is arguing about in this chapter. Our first task, therefore, is to discover what it was that Paul was really contending against.

A number of options were open to the Christians at Corinth. (1) They might hold the Epicurean view that survival after death is impossible.

(2) They might hold the similar Sadducean view, though it is unlikely that many Jews in the Greek milieu of Corinth would hold to the ancient Jewish belief preserved by the Sadducees.

(3) They might hold the Pharisaic view that at the end of time there would be a general resurrection, or at least a resurrection of all believers.

(4) They might hold the Stoic belief that at death the individual soul was re-absorbed into the world-soul.

(5) They might hold the common Greek belief, preserved in the Platonic tradition, that the soul is inherently immortal and at death is freed from imprisonment in the body, so that it can enjoy for ever a bodiless and therefore perfect existence.

It would appear from Paul's argument in 1 Cor.15 that it was the last of these positions that was in his view wrongly held by some of the Corinthian Christians.

They believed in immortality but not in a bodily resurrection. Doubtless this was the view condemned at 2 Tim.2.18 in the statement that Hymenaeus and Philetus erroneously believed the resurrection to have taken place already. That the Corinthian objectors believed in survival after death is clear from their practice by which some converts to Christianity were baptized on behalf of their deceased relatives (verse 29); that they doubted whether there could be a bodily resurrection is evident from the objection dealt with at verse 35 -- "How are the dead raised? With what body do they come?"

It is clear, therefore, that 1 Cor. was written not to prove the immortality of the soul but to prove the bodily resurrection of the dead, presumably at the second coming of Christ, which was expected shortly. To convince the Corinthians of this resurrection Paul begins the chapter by reminding them of the essentials of the Christian belief (a primitive creed not in Pauline style which includes the resurrection of Jesus); he follows this with a recital of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, to show that there are solid grounds for this belief; he then argues that because Christ was raised from the dead it is impossible to contend that there is no resurrection, and then proceeds to refute objections

This is not the only place where Paul used the resurrection of Christ as proof of the resurrection of others. At Rom.8.11 (in the context of the Holy Spirit) he declared that "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will give life also to your mortal bodies through the Spirit that dwells in you." At 2 Cor.4.14 he wrote, "We know that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and present us to him with you." St. Luke must have known of this argument because at Acts 4.2 he says that the Sadducees and others were greatly disturbed because Peter and John were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

But we now have to ask whether this argument would have convinced the Corinthian sceptics. It does not necessarily follow from the resurrection of Jesus that disbelief in the bodily resurrection of others is

illogical. Christ was unique. According to the Gospels he was born of a virgin, he could still a storm, walk on water, wither a fig-tree and bring back dead people to life. It could be argued that what is true of Jesus is not necessarily true of ordinary Christians. He had to be raised from the dead in order to demonstrate his divinity, but in the case of his followers there was no such necessity.

Supposing that the Corinthian objectors had on this ground felt that Paul's reasoning did not hold water, how would Paul have replied? I suggest that his reply would have taken the following line.

"Your objection would be valid if there were a clean separation between Christ and his people. But this is not the case. Christ and his church are fused together, so that whatever is true of the one is true of the other. That is what we mean by saying that we are in Christ and Christ is in us. When the risen Christ appeared to me on the road to Damascus he did not ask me why I was persecuting his church, but 'Why are you persecuting me?.. .I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.' (Acts 9.4,5). The church is the temple in which Christ dwells (2 Cor. 6.16). The bodies of Christians are organs of Christ (1 Cor.6.15)."

At other places in 1 Cor. Paul practically identifies Christ and the Church. At 1.13, after reprimanding the factions in the Corinthian Church, he might be expected to ask, "Is the Church divided?", but in fact he asks, "Is Christ divided?" At 12.12 after comparing the Church to the human body, he wrote: "Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body. so also" -- and we might expect Paul to say, "so also is the Church", but in fact he says, "so also is Christ." Similarly, at 10.16 he says that the cup of blessing which we bless and the bread which we break are not merely a fellowship meal between Christians (as many people today might say), but are a participation in the blood and body of Christ. Thus, in Paul's thinking, Christ and his Church are so intimately conjoined that whatever is true of Christ is true of his people. If he rose from the dead, then his people must rise too. The resurrection of Christ was only the aparchē, the first-fruits (15.20). It would be

Ross, 1 Corinthians, IBS 11, April 1989

unthinkable that he would rise from the dead and not take his people along with him.

The same conjunction of Christ and his Church is found in Paul's references to suffering. At Phil.3.10, he says he desires not only to know the power of Christ's resurrection but also to share in his sufferings, for the sufferings of the Church are the sufferings of Christ and the sufferings of Christ are the sufferings of his Church. At 2 Cor.1.5 he says that the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, and at Col 1.24 he claims to fill up in his flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body which is the Church.

The question raised in this paper has not been much discussed in commentaries on First Corinthians, but Richard Kugelman in the Jerome Bible Commentary points out that "The glorious resurrection of the body is a consequence of incorporation into the risen Christ," and Margaret Thrall, in her commentary on 1.Cor. points out that both in ch.15 and in Rom.5.12-21 Paul uses the analogy of Adam to argue that what happened to Jesus affects his followers as well; what happened to him affects potentially the whole human race. Christians are the body of Christ, included within his personality, so that his experience of resurrection will become theirs .

No doubt the connection between Christ and his Church, almost to the point of identification, was so obvious to Paul that he did not think it necessary to make it a proof of the resurrection in ch,15, but if we bring it in on Paul's behalf then we can say that the chapter can hold water.

This paper has been concerned simply to elucidate what Paul said to the Corinthians. Whether we today believe that the departed still have to wait till the general resurrection before receiving bodies, or that they receive the bodies immediately at death, and whether this applies to all mankind or only to Christians, are questions outside the scope of this paper.