

22 October 2023

Why Did Anyone Put Up with This? / The Gospel of Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

For over a month now, we've been looking at the 1st century church that Paul planted in the Greek city of Corinth by examining Paul's letter to that church, 1 Corinthians. It's been messy. Let me summarize briefly the problems in Corinth that Paul felt the need to address. They had rival factions in the church, each claiming their loyalty to a different leader. They were ignoring sexual misbehavior among their members (I didn't even preach on this one, but apparently someone in the church was having an affair with his stepmother.) They were suing each other in the Roman courts and fighting over purity rules such as whether one could eat meat offered to pagan idols without being defiled. Some were dishonoring the Lord's Supper by pigging out and getting plastered, and most of all by not sharing it, and others were taking over worship services by drawing attention to themselves and speaking in incoherent tongues. Those who spoke in tongues were fostering still more division by suggesting that those who did not weren't *really* spiritual. In short, these brothers and sisters in Christ were selfish, argumentative, disrespectful toward each other, petty, and arrogant. I imagine there were some good things going on in the church, too, that Paul didn't have time to mention between trying to put out fires, but even so, you have to wonder, why did this group even stay together? Why did anyone put up with this?

You know, if you think about it, that question could be asked of Christians in general. Given the history of the church, why are we still here? Throughout our 2000 years of history, we too have had rival factions in the church, each claiming loyalty to different leaders. We have had sex scandals from day one, have taken each other to court, have fought over purity issues like alcohol and dancing and Halloween and rock music played backwards or even forwards. We have excluded people who were different, often burning them at the stake to discourage others, and we invented a thing called Inquisition to torture those for whom we thought burning was too nice. We have gone to war with other religions in the Crusades and have gone to war with slightly variant versions of our own religion in the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. Christians have squandered our credibility by throwing our support behind slavery, colonial conquest, and Nazism. We have been led by corrupt popes and pastors, all intent on enriching themselves from the people's offerings, and have been the last stubborn holdouts clinging to racism and sexism and homophobia. Why are we still around? Why is the Church still even a thing? Why does anyone put up with all this? Paul closes his letter – and we close this series – with his reply to that question.

We read 1 Corinthians 15, verses 1-11:

15 Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through 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.

³For 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, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then

to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards 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. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

I memorized this scripture once. Not in Sunday School. I memorized it for a master's level class called Introduction to Evangelism at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Most of us good Southern Baptists in the class assumed we'd be taught techniques for persuasively presenting the Gospel, but this professor wasn't so concerned about that stuff. He wanted, before anything else, to make sure that we understood what the Gospel actually is. So he made us all memorize this passage – *For I delivered to you, as of first importance, that which I also received: how Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures.* After the first week of class, we started every session by standing and reciting these verses together. Kind of Mickey Mouse, you think? To make a bunch of adult college graduates stand and recite? Maybe, but that prof didn't care. What he cared about was that no one would leave his class thinking that evangelism was marketing or church recruitment, or that the Gospel was increasing numbers at church or advancing denominational influence or winning some Culture War. In his class, by God, we were going to learn that the Gospel is that Jesus died and was raised to restore our relationship to the Father. That's it: that's the Gospel. Everything else is commentary.

Well, maybe not *everything*. There is one more part of this passage in 1 Corinthians 15 that is crucial. After those first verses – after the words *and that he was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures* – Paul lists several of the people still living who were witnesses of Christ's resurrection: Peter, the disciples, a random crowd of 500 people, James, and so on. But then he turns to his own witness. *Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church. But by the grace of God, I am who I am.*

The Gospel – the good news – is not just what Jesus did for us. It is what Jesus' death and resurrection can do to us. These are not cause and effect but rather two sides of the same coin, a coin called New Life. Jesus inaugurated it in his resurrection; we can claim it. Jesus, the Son of God, died a slave's death as a human. And somehow, by doing that, he erased the penalty of death and evil for the rest of us. Then God raised him from the dead, and somehow by doing that he conquered death itself for all of us. And because of new life, Paul adds, *we can be changed*. "Look at me," he says. "I've been dumping on you people all through this letter, but however bad you are, I was worse. I killed people for loving God, because their God didn't fit my ideas. I was the worst person I've ever known. But by the grace of I am different now." The Gospel is not just that Jesus was transformed, but that we can be. *That's* good news.

I have a friend who for years was the Executive Director of Anglican Schools in New Zealand. She spent a lot of time visiting schools, talking to students, and after a while of doing that, she began a project. She began asking the students: "What would be good news to you?" It's a bit heartbreaking. She got answers like, "Being sure that my parents would still love me if my grades dropped" or "Having a friend who I know wouldn't text about me behind my back" or even just "Having something in my life worth living for." I went to a seminar a couple of weeks ago on dementia care, and the speaker said that researchers had asked people living with

dementia what they wished for most – basically, “What would be good news to you?” Their top answers were things like, “Having friends who still come to visit me even though I make them feel uncomfortable” or just “Having something left in my life worth living for.”

Our world aches for good news. I have some. We have someone who will never leave you, never betray you, who loved you so much he died for you. Even better news, having died, he shattered the chains of death, so as to give us an eternal future. Because we have that hope, whatever we have done, whatever we have been, we can become different. That’s good news for every age.

And that, Paul reminds the Corinthian church, is why you are together. It feels as if you’ve forgotten that, so I’m reminding you. Christ was raised, and because of that we are being raised. Without that, we’re nothing. Without that, we’re marketers and church recruiters, trying to advance our institution. You Corinthians are kind of a dumpster fire right now, but because of the Gospel you can be different. Look at me.

And that, I remind you today, is why the church is still here, even after 2000 years of witch-burning, heretic-torturing, Crusade, religious war, compromise, and corruption. The Church is still a thing because underneath it all, on the floor boards of the clown car, is good news. You are loved forever. You are forgiven of whatever. Christ was raised, and because of that you have hope and you have purpose.

For I delivered to you, as of first importance, that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures.

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In John 6, after Jesus had delivered a long, confusing, and demanding discourse, a lot of the people who had been following him began to withdraw. So Jesus asked the Twelve, “And what about you? Are you going to leave too?” Peter replied, “To go where? You have the word of life.” Same. Every time I get fed up with the church and fantasize about leaving, I think, “To go where? Here is the word of life.” We have been entrusted with that word. Hold on.