

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

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Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-20; 35-58

Introduction

I am going to share some of my thinking over the last few months. Some things may be new, and seem controversial and provocative, but my objective is to help to rebalance truth that has become unbalanced through church tradition and biblical misunderstanding. Inevitably when doing this, in order to make the points clear, the case has to be somewhat overstated. So I cannot hope, in a short message, to achieve "balance", nor deal with every side issue.

I want to explore the following questions:

- What is the core fact in the apostolic preaching of the gospel?
- How will that fact affect the way we preach Christ?
- What implications does that fact have for our hearers?
- How does it affect the way Christians live out their lives?

I will be concentrating very largely on the record of the earliest Christian preaching, the very earliest phases of the development of the Christian message, as we find it in the Acts of the Apostles. There are good reasons for this, for there we shall find the Christian message at its purest and very simplest. As that message was sufficient to save those who heard it, it is enough for us too, and the quality of Christian fellowship and church purity was then at its highest.

Later, when the church had to battle with perversions of the gospel, particular issues had to be spelled out more precisely to deal with such problems as Judaistic legalism and pagan mystic gnosticism. Unfortunately the teaching to address these problems (found in the apostolic letters) have made things seem much more complicated, and has come rather to dominate the thinking about the content of the gospel in Evangelical churches. People are often struck by the different "flavour" of the teaching in the four gospels and Acts as compared with the letters, and this difference of purpose is an important reason for the difference.

Acts is the only record we have of what the apostles proclaimed when talking directly to unbelievers. The various apostolic letters, on the other hand, were written either exclusively or mainly for Christian believers, and for the most part sought to tackle particular issues which were causing problems for Christians. As such, those letters were, like this message, not balanced presentations of truth in a

vacuum, but one-sided correctives. This is often forgotten, because it is not always immediately apparent that this is the case.

A lot of teaching, especially in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews is addressing Jewish problems, for example. Thus Romans needed to tackle Jewish believers who thought themselves better than Gentiles. Galatians is against those who insisted that Christians should, in effect, become Jews. Hebrews is to show believers of Jewish background who were under pressure to adopt full Judaism the apostasy involved in doing so. Of course, beyond question, we can learn a great deal about the Faith from studying these books, but this teaching was not necessary for the salvation of early believers, nor indeed is it for many modern seekers.

Much is gained by returning to re-emphasise the initial simplicity of the gospel. Acts shows what was of key importance, and that is what where we should start in our proclamation of the gospel. If distractions emerge for our hearers then we should address them – but we face different pressures in our culture from those that faced the early church. So, for example, the question of the continuity or otherwise of temple worship and animal sacrifices is not an issue today, but the truth about God being in control of events, which would have been unquestioned by first century Jews, is now the biggest barrier to faith for many today.

When we read the preaching of the gospel in the Acts of the Apostles, it is all too easy to think the message must have included everything which, as a result of long tradition, we have come to consider to be essential parts of the gospel. We often continue to think this the case even though the matter is never mentioned. It is very difficult to reconsider the text with a fresh mind, and see what is actually there, and, equally importantly, what is not there. I have tried to set aside my preconceptions, and see what the apostles in Acts really said in their first contacts with their hearers. I did not find this easy, as it involves trying to understand the position and needs of the hearers, as well as the preoccupations of the messengers. Doubtless the apostles later said much more to those who became Christians, just as Jesus did with his disciples.

I conclude that the apostles' witness to Christ's Resurrection was their key initial message, as signifying and proving that Jesus was the Christ, the long expected Jewish Messiah, the Lord and Saviour who would rule and judge all men. To those who believe, everything else in the Christian life follows from that.

The new believers who responded to this message were commanded to repent and be baptised (Acts 2:38 etc.), to "wash away their sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). For the sake of brevity this message confines itself to considering the initial phase of the apostolic message – what exactly it was the hearers were commanded to believe.

You must test what I say, and if you have problems after you have considered the issues, I'm open to discussion.

I hope that if I achieve nothing else, that I shall help you to think about the content of message you give people when you talk to them about your faith in Jesus, and their need for repentance.

What is more significant, the Crucifixion or the Resurrection?

Whilst acknowledging that both the crucifixion and the resurrection had to take place, Western church preaching tends to major on the crucifixion at the expense of the resurrection. So we need to see if we need to challenge our preconceptions, and open our minds to the potential need to change our emphasis more towards the resurrection.

There are historical and linguistic reasons for the Western overemphasis on the crucifixion.

The Greek Orthodox, needless to say, understand their own Greek language accurately, and still study the New Testament in the original Greek – and as a result they still retain the apostolic emphasis on Christ's resurrection.

The portrayal of the crucifixion in Christian writing and art only began long after crucifixion had ceased as a method of execution. Whilst crucifixion was still practiced, the cross was too appalling to use as a symbol of Christianity. Later the cross became a defining symbol in the Western Churches, which mistakenly emphasised on the Cross at the expense of the resurrection.

The Roman church used a Latin translation. Before the nineteenth century, western Bible scholars used Latin as their academic language, through which they learned their Greek, and they consequently translated from Greek into other languages like English via Latin. Unfortunately many subtleties of the Greek language have no counterpart in Latin, and look clumsy in English, so many vital points were unrecognised, leading to translations with the wrong emphasis. 1 Corinthians 2:2, about to be considered, is one such case.

This verse is often quoted: "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" So runs 1 Corinthians 2:2 in the New American Standard Bible, and the other versions say much the same thing.

Does this verse mean that Paul confined himself to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ when he was preaching at Corinth, and that therefore the Cross and theories about Christ's sacrificial atonement are the most essential part of the gospel to proclaim?

Well, er, no, actually.

As we read, Paul provides a fuller account of the content his preaching at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Although Christ's dying for our sins and being buried formed an important part of the preaching at Corinth, the Resurrection of Christ, and the witness testimony to the facts of the Resurrection, were at least equally important. Comparison with Paul's recorded preaching in Acts (Acts 13:30-39; 17:18, 31) suggests the Resurrection was rather more important in the initial presentations.

In Acts, as we shall see later, the emphasis of the apostles in their preaching was on being saved through the **Resurrection** of Christ. Peter, to whom Jesus particularly assigned responsibility for the message, is perhaps even more Resurrection focused in his preaching in Acts than Paul. "By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3)

So how does this square with 1 Corinthians 2:2 then?

1 Corinthians 2:2 is more literally translated in English as "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, this One having been crucified". Or, more idiomatically, "the One who had been crucified".

Note the change of emphasis of this translation, and just how well it **now** fits with 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Paul is saying he is preaching about Jesus, not just **any** Jesus, but the specific Anointed One (the Christ, the Messiah) who **had been** crucified. See the implication that this One, having been crucified, is now being represented as no longer dead but alive!

So, although the crucifixion remains important, it is not the end of the story, and we should probably give more weight to the resurrection in preaching.

In 1 Corinthians 15:8 Paul claims to be a "witness of the Resurrection", a concept that occurs several times in the Acts of the Apostles.

The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Scripture shows that Jesus Christ's **bodily** resurrection is **the** central historical **fact** of Christianity.

Firstly, it is the **pivot point of our faith or unbelief** - Romans 10:9-10: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and **believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead**, you will be saved. For man **believes with his heart and so is justified**, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved." Thus our being reckoned righteous by God rests on the basis of our **heart attitude** to the

Resurrection. The cross is not mentioned in this passage, just that **God raised Jesus from the dead**.

Either we believe Christ's bodily resurrection happened as a factual event, or we do not - there is no possible middle ground.

It is worth noting that thinking about the fact of the resurrection does not engage our emotions, unlike the crucifixion, which commonly provokes complex (and often unhelpful) emotional reactions to its gruesome character. So we can test the apostles' claim of Christ's resurrection quite dispassionately as a fact of history.

Secondly, 1 Corinthians 15:15-19 makes clear that if Christ did not rise, then Christianity is **false**, our faith a futile delusion. Christianity hinges critically on Christ's resurrection being true! No other religion lays its credibility on the line by depending absolutely on the truth of an historical event, still less on one that is humanly speaking so incredible.

As we read, it was also a **bodily** resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:42-46). This speaks of two kinds of body of different natures, first the **perishable physical** body, then its resurrection as an **imperishable spiritual** body.

There is no room for fudging – any ghostly apparition theory to explain Christ's resurrection appearances that leaves Christ's physical body behind on the earth simply will not do. The lack of **physical** remains of Christ's body after the Day of the Resurrection was a big problem for the Jewish authorities, who couldn't produce Christ's body, though they had extremely good reasons for wanting to find it. That the body had vanished was never disputed! The story the Jews put about that the disciples stole it convinced nobody, and the lack of mention of this story in Acts suggests the authorities quickly abandoned the story.

Thirdly, Jesus really did rise from the dead! I cannot take the time to consider all the ramifications and proofs of the Resurrection story, so I refer you to "Who Moved the Stone" by Frank Morison, first published in 1930 but still in print (Second edition published in paperback by Faber and Faber Ltd in 1958. ISBN 0571032591). What gives this book particular authority is that the author began to write this book with the intention of disproving the Resurrection but found instead that the evidence supported the biblical story.

Christ's resurrection is well attested, and let no one doubt that Jesus Christ had been certified as fully and thoroughly dead. The scripture reveals facts that rule out all possibility that he was not really dead, which might have allowed him to recover naturally.

The scourging which Christ received before the crucifixion was not infrequently, fatal, which explains why Simon of Cyrene was called upon to carry Jesus' cross because of his weakness. And the centurion, who had seen many such deaths, was certain that Jesus was dead, and testified to Pilate. For absolute certainty, a sword was thrust into the side of Jesus, and blood and water had flowed out separately, indicating certain death. So, without doubt, Christ was dead when laid in the grave, and was bound firmly with grave clothes, which would prevent anyone reviving naturally from freeing himself (compare John 11:44). And the entrance to the grave was sealed with a heavy stone. Jesus was resurrected through the binding grave clothes, with a new kind of body - one now beyond the natural physical one we know, and unbound by physical constraints.

Christ's dead body was laid in the burial cave on the day he died, tightly bound in the usual grave clothes. On the third day His body was gone. The disciples saw, and commented upon, the presence and condition of the grave clothes that were left behind. This proved to them beyond doubt that the body had not been stolen, nor had it been unwrapped from its grave clothes and taken away (compare John 11:44, where Lazarus emerged still partly bound up). Presumably the grave clothes, one for the body and one for the head, were there just as they had been placed to clothe the body - but no longer had a body inside them. As 1 Corinthians 15:5-7 testifies, many saw the risen Christ thereafter, until the day he was taken up into heaven (Acts 1:9-11). The apostles had no doubt that Christ's body had left the grave and been resurrected.

Importantly Christ's resurrection body had changed its character, unlike that of resurrected Lazarus (John 11:44), who one day died once more. Christ's body had become **spiritual** (1 Corinthians 15:44) and was now capable of appearing and disappearing (Luke 24:31) and passing through walls (John 20:19). Nevertheless **Christ's original physical body had left the grave in order to become a spiritual body**, and Christ was now bodily present, and touchable. The disciples' initial reaction was to think they had seen a ghost, a disembodied spirit (Luke 24:37), but Jesus encouraged the disciples to handle him and check for themselves that he had flesh and bones, unlike any apparition (Luke 24:40). Unbelieving Thomas was likewise invited to touch (John 20:27). And yet Christ with his spiritual body could, if he chose, still engage in a normal way with the physical world (e.g. John 21:13), and eat normal physical food (Luke 24:43). He was definitely not a "ghost".

In the resurrection of Christ the character of the true God is revealed, as the God who does things that are humanly and naturally **impossible**.

Christ's Resurrection in the preaching in the Acts of the Apostles

God calls on each man to respond to the apostolic testimony concerning this historical event. This key fact of the Christian faith therefore always provokes resistance and opposition in hearers. Everyone "knows" that once someone is certainly, thoroughly and undeniably dead, they will never live again.

Speaking of Christ's death does not make the same uncomfortable impact on the belief systems of unbelievers – death is natural, and commonplace: it happens to everything that lives. Noble death and self-sacrifice are commonly found in other religions. Theories about sin and sacrificial atonement are religious ideas that can be open for discussion and debate. But Christ's bodily resurrection attacks the fundamental belief system of every person of whatever background, because everyone knows it is "impossible".

Even though they must have realised it would make their message "difficult" for people, the apostles' preaching in Acts always majored on their witness to the fact of Christ's Resurrection. This was irrespective of whether the hearers were Jews or Gentiles. Our salvation depends on believing this fact, as Romans 10:9 declares.

As we shall see, Christ's death is often mentioned in Acts, but as a necessary preliminary, although sometimes the responsibility for his death is very pointedly placed upon the hearers. We know from 1 Corinthians 15:3, that the fact that "Christ died for our sins" was regarded by Paul (and is by me) as one of the matters of first importance. Yet, remarkably and perhaps significantly, the sacrificial theology of Christ dying for our sins is never spelled out in the recorded preaching in Acts, even when preaching to the Jews. Perhaps the most important thing for anyone to know **initially** that Jesus is a **living Messiah**, and Christ's dying for our sins was something only taught to people once they believed the Resurrection and became Christians, perhaps being taught in relationship to their baptism? A fully satisfactory explanation seems lacking.

Let us review then, as briefly as possible, the verses in Acts that refer to Christ's resurrection, as follows (material in smaller type is expanded explanatory material, or indicates covers less important references to preaching or the resurrection in Acts):

- Acts 1:22 The key qualification of the "replacement" apostle was that he was to be a "witness of the **resurrection**" - not the crucifixion.
- Acts 2:24,30-32 The preaching of Peter to the Jews on the day of Pentecost – a long and well known passage – reaches a crescendo in Acts 2:32, "this Jesus, God raised up, and of this we are all witnesses".
The resurrection is also mentioned in Acts 2:24: "But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be

held by it" [The reasons for this latter comment are given in Acts 2:27,31. Acts 2:26 shows the basis of the impossibility of Christ staying dead, which was Christ's faith, and the prayer he made in Hebrews 5:7. He had to trust God to resurrect him, since being dead, he had no ability to do this himself. The consistent apostolic testimony is that **God** raised Jesus from the dead.]

Mention of Christ's death is limited to Acts 2:23: "*this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*".

NB: no reference to Christ as being a sacrifice, or any other explanation of the spiritual significance of the crucifixion. The people converted that day were however convicted of sin, and washed it away in baptism (Acts 2:41; 22:16)

- Acts 3:15,26 Peter, preaching at Solomon's portico, in explaining the healing of the cripple, explains that it was done because God had raised the Christ they had killed.

Concerning what the people being addressed had done in securing Christ's death: Acts 3:13-15: "*...Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life,...*"

Acts 3:17-18 "*And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers, But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled.*"

This message is similar to Acts 2, but has the first mention of the fact that the promised Messiah was prophesied to be killed. The sacrificial theological implications are not spelled out, as these Jews presumably only needed to know that a killed Messiah was to be expected.

Concerning the resurrection: Acts 3:15: "*... whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.*" Acts 3:26: "*God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first,...*"

- Acts 4:2 "*Proclaiming in Jesus the **resurrection of the dead***" - this was the content of Peter's preaching as viewed by the priests and Sadducees. They, of course, believed resurrection was impossible.
- Acts 4:10 Peter answering the charges concerning the healing of the cripple, says, "*...by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom **God raised from the dead...***"
- Acts 4:33 "*And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the **resurrection of the Lord Jesus...***". This summarises the content of the

very early apostolic message, and nothing else is mentioned alongside the resurrection here.

- Acts 5:29-32 Peter and the apostles reply to the Council that, "*we must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers **raised Jesus** whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted Him at his right hand as leader and saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has give to those who obey him*". They proclaim they are witnesses (v32) to the resurrection (v30).
The content is similar to Acts 2. Repentance and forgiveness is here linked directly to Christ's exaltation as leader and saviour.
- Acts 7 – Stephen's defence is not a presentation of the gospel. It confines itself to a review of the consistent pattern of rebellion of the Jewish people against God, culminating in Acts 7:52-3 "*Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it*"
No mention of the Christ's purpose.
- Acts 8 Philip (not an apostle) at Samaria Acts 8:5 "*...proclaimed to them the Christ [i.e. the Messiah]*" Acts 8:12 "*But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name [i.e. authority – which Philip was exercising in his miracles] of Jesus Christ...*"
No real indication of the content of what was preached – the terminology is very similar to the preaching of Jesus and the disciples in the Synoptic gospels (see e.g. Mark 1:15, Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:2,11,60)
- Acts 8. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Eunuch is reading Isaiah 53:7-8, and Philip starts with that scripture, which refers to the death of the Messiah. This could readily lead into telling the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, along similar lines to the apostolic messages already considered. However, it seems more likely to have covered the earlier part of Isaiah 53, on Christ's bearing our sins, though as Acts only quotes verses 7-8, the rest of Isaiah 53 may possibly not have been referred to. As no details of what Philip said are provided we cannot draw any definite conclusions about the precise content of Philip's preaching, beyond the fact that the need for water baptism was included, as in Acts 2.
- Acts 10:40 Peter preaching to Cornelius gives more background about the life and works of Jesus, but otherwise, in spite proclaiming the message apparently without any expectation of a result, gives essentially the same

message as in his earlier preaching.

Acts 10:39-41: "*They [the Jews] put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses*".

- Acts 13:30,33-34; Peter preaching to the Jewish synagogue at Antioch starts by a review of Jewish history and the expectation of the Messiah as descendant of David, gives the same message about the Resurrection, quoting extensively from King David's writings in support. Acts 13:32-33 helpfully define what actually constitutes the "good news" – it is the resurrection. "*And we bring you the **good news** that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by **raising Jesus***". This is supported with quotations from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10. The good news is that we aren't going to stay dead! The core of the message at Antioch is Acts 13:28-31: "*Though they could charge him with nothing deserving of death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people*"
- Acts 16:29-32 The Philippian gaoler. There is very little content in this message: he is told to "*believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved*" (Acts 16:31. Trust in the person of Jesus appears paramount here – as **Lord** – which hence must include the heart belief that Jesus is alive (compare Romans 10:9).
- Paul at Thessalonica synagogue: Acts 17:2-3: "*... argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ [i.e. the expected Messiah] to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ [Messiah]."*" It is very difficult to decide from this text exactly what this argument actually included. However 1 Thessalonians chapters 1 and 2 give a clearer view of the gospel that was preached to them, which, as always, certainly majored on the resurrection (see especially 1 Thessalonians 1:5,10). For this purpose the preaching needed only to include the fact of the suffering servant passages, to prove that expected Jewish Messiah did have to die and be raised. (The concept of a Messiah getting crucified was the major stumbling block to the Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23), not least because crucifixion implied the curse of God, so proof that His suffering did not preclude Jesus from being Messiah, but rather established Him as such, was the key point.) The key starting issue in preaching to Jews is "*Is Jesus their promised Messiah?*" All else is secondary. Hence, although unlikely

in view of 1 Corinthians 15:3, Jesus bearing our sin might not have been mentioned at all.

- Acts 17:18,31-32. Paul in the market place at pagan Athens had preached "***Jesus and the resurrection***" (v18).
A fuller account of his message to this sceptical Gentile audience is then provided (v22-31), in which he first establishes God as the Creator, by developing their existing knowledge of an "unknown god", without raising objections from the hearers. The culminating issue that raises controversy and mocking, and which terminates the address, is Paul's proclaiming that the one who is the coming judge of all men has been raised from the dead. Note that some hearers believed this message, which is consistent with general apostolic teaching which focuses on the resurrection, and with what Paul preached to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). This refutes the commonly made claim (based on 1 Corinthians 2:2) that Paul was unsuccessful at Athens because he did not concentrate on the crucifixion there and so preached fundamentally differently at Corinth.
- Acts 18:5 "*Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ [i.e. the Messiah] was Jesus.*"
This verse shows that the key task in Paul's preaching to Jews was simply to prove to them that the Messiah was Jesus.
- Acts 19:8 "*And he [Paul] entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God*"
Note for a Jew, the kingdom of God is the sphere where Messiah rules.
- Acts 23:6,8; 24:15, 21. Paul defends himself by reference to the resurrection of the dead both before the Jews (a stratagem to divide his opponents), and later, the Governor.

For good measure, consider the opening of Romans, the book often considered as especially emphasising the sin problem and the need for sacrificial atonement. But that is not its declared message. For Romans 1:3-4, says: "*the gospel concerning his son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

The apostles' witness to the fact of Jesus's resurrection is the heart of their initial presentation of the gospel – to prove Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord and coming judge. To preach the same gospel, we must likewise concentrate initially on proclaiming Christ's resurrection as literal fact, with a view to our hearers' salvation.

**The Impact on the hearers of the message:
What do we really believe? Is our mind renewed?**

We can now move to the practical outworking of what we have studied, and its impact on us as hearers.

The resurrection of Christ demonstrates our need for a renewed mind (Romans 12:2), one not limited to thinking in terms of things only happening in the familiar way. Christ's resurrection is the key fact of Christianity that demands a response from every person.

Everyone from that day to this has faced a fundamental clash of beliefs:

- Did it really happen?
- How do we really know things?

Which type of knowledge takes the priority in our thinking?

- Do we generalise our common experience, our scientific knowledge, that dead people remain dead, to insist that this is true without exception, and that Christ's resurrection was impossible?
- Or do we deny that common experience and believe an "impossible", but well attested historical fact?

Since God raised Jesus from the dead, then God certainly cannot be some airy-fairy "idea", a God without content, a mere word or idea that makes no difference to the practical course of history. He is a **living** God who is **in charge** and **acts purposefully** and **powerfully** within the created world, doing things in history that experience and science declare impossible.

Certainly we can say that science (which is, after all, just formally analysed and codified experience) does **not** provide all sure and certain knowledge. It cannot explain the resurrection of Jesus Christ! At its best, science is just our current "best guess" at what God "normally" does. The Resurrection dethrones science as the key to all knowledge, and materialism is revealed as a woefully incomplete answer.

God is creative and **recreative** (Acts 17:22-31). He created the heavens and the earth for a purpose, from nothing, and he will roll them up like a garment (Hebrews 1:12) when his purpose for them is finished. He judged the Earth in the judgement of Noah's Flood, and he will judge the Earth in righteousness through Jesus Christ at the end.

God's final **proof** to all men that He has done or will do these things is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). Jesus and his resurrection is the rock against which men will stumble (Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8).

Now consider the broader impact of Christ's Resurrection:

- If God did the extraordinary once, before many witnesses, why should Christ's resurrection be the **only** time our general experience is wrong?
- Does not God work more generally within his creation in a way that transcends our understanding?

If we truly believe Christ's bodily Resurrection happened, then clearly with God "**nothing** shall be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:21). This is because God "upholds", moment by moment, "all things by his word of power" (Hebrews 1:3). Most of the time, God helpfully works things in an apparently predictable way, so we can generally make sense of our environment. But in reality God is always working events to suit what is best for his creation in the particular circumstances.

If God raised Jesus from the dead, then we can confidently expect God to supply all our needs according to Christ's riches in glory (Philippians 4:19), even when it seems impossible. Prayer becomes a real engagement with God who truly **can** change the normal course of events, through the power of Christ's resurrection (Philippians 3:10). We also gain the confidence that, though we may well die, we also shall be raised to life with Christ, just as Christ Himself was. For Jesus had prayed that He might be saved out of death to resurrection (Hebrews 5:7).

Let us not "fail to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19), limiting God to doing only what we can understand, like the fool of Psalm 14:1 who says in his heart "God does nothing" (literal translation). The Bible reveals God as the Living - active - God, who works out his purposes in history. At the core is the "impossible" resurrection of Jesus Christ, the spur for us to have faith for the "impossible".

Is our mind set on Death or on Life?

As mentioned before, the traditions of Western Christianity tend to concentrate on the death of Christ on the Cross, at the expense of His glorious Resurrection. We have seen that this does not correspond to the apostolic preaching in Acts. Undue emphasis on the cross is also damaging, because it conveys the wrong message, tending to focus our minds on the wrong issues.

Acts, and indeed the New Testament taken as a whole, encourages us to be forward looking and positive about our new Life in Christ, forgetting what is past

(Philippians 3:13-15). This way is perhaps characterised by Jesus's words: "*I am the Resurrection and the Life*" (John 11:25).

We are specifically commanded to "*keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God*" (Colossians 3:1-3). Again, "*whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things*" (Philippians 4:8)

These verses underpin the important Biblical principle that whatever or whomever we set our minds upon, we shall become, and reap accordingly. Romans 8:5-6: "*for those who live according to the flesh set their mind on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their mind on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*"

If, as often enjoined, the Christian lets his mind dwell on the crucifixion, and his past sins, and shortcomings, he is unwittingly **setting his mind on the flesh**, on things that are on earth, on the past, on himself, on his sin and failure, and on death - all ugly things. This leads to death, which was bad news at the beginning (Genesis 3), and remains so now.

I still recall my puzzlement when a student: I wondered in what way the Reformed "gospel", with its gloomy obsession with sin, yet declaring the practical impossibility of overcoming it, was supposed to be "good news"? By looking backwards, and trying (in practice) to achieve self-reformation, the Puritan misses the point, and indeed by perpetual reminder and by rule-keeping actually intensifies his sin problem (Colossians 2:20-23). It is as if I should ask you not to think of pink elephants for the next five minutes, you will find this impossible, unless you positively set your mind on something else.

Obsessed with sin, and their failure to overcome it, is it any wonder that the Puritans became so gloomy, negatively misanthropic and life-denying, as they concentrated, like the Pharisees, on keeping rules and the Law? How often the children of such people have rebelled against their upbringing and cast aside such inhuman shackles?

We must follow the better way. As commanded, we must set our minds on the things of the Spirit, and on Christ as He is **now**. Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father and we are in Him (Ephesians 1). God "*remembers our sins and misdeeds no more*" (Hebrews 10:1-18) – we are free to concentrate on doing good works just like Jesus did (see Galatians 5:1).

The Good News is that Christ **conquered** death in His resurrection, and so shall we (1 Corinthians 15:51-57). We now have the power of the Holy Spirit, to live the life God intended for us, a life of action, of doing exploits – God's "good works" – just like the men of Hebrews 11.

We have a breathtakingly destiny as we set our minds on the Spirit. We are being transformed into Christ's likeness by beholding His beauty: "*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit*" (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

He is alive and commands us to follow Him. As we consider and behold our risen and glorified Redeemer in the heavens, we shall become more like Him, and increasingly experience the power of his Resurrection Life, becoming more like Jesus. One day this process, already begun now by our beholding the Lord's glory (2 Corinthians 3:18, compare Psalm 27:4), will be completed. "*Beloved we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*" (1 John 3:2).

Jesus is Risen, Alleluia!

Maranatha – our Lord come.

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