

Resurrection and Salvation in Chapter Fifteen of the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians

Charles Buttigieg

The First Letter to the Corinthians

There is a great motive and background which prepared St. Paul for writing to the Corinthians. The first letter to the Corinthians was written near Easter time, between the years 54 and 57 A.D., before the end of the two and a half years at Ephesus, during his third missionary voyage, when a Corinthian delegation arrived to ask Paul certain questions (cf. 1 Cor 5:7ff; 16:5-17 and Acts 19:21). He had also received news from Apollos and from Chloe's household (cf. 1 Cor 1:11; 16:12 and Acts 18:27ff). There were then many divisions in the community, a major scandal of incest was present, and other problems. Paul in the letter answers to these problems with regards to marriage, the licitness of eating meat of animals sacrificed to the idols, the behaviour of women in the assemblies and above all to the eschatological and soteriological issues which are the subject of this study.

Together with the second letter addressed to the same church, 1 Corinthians is found among the first in the most ancient lists of Pauline writings. In the Muratorian Fragment (c.170 A.D.), they head the list of the nine epistles addressed to the churches, and are declared to have been written to forbid heretical schism. They are listed second after Galatians in Marcion's *Apostolicon*. They are also clearly attested to in the most important writings of the sub-apostolic age, such as: Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr. The authenticity of the letters, included among the 'Great letters' (considered as proto-pauline, as written by Paul or dictated) was even accepted during the radical criticism of the 19th century. We find the Tübingen School, which although doubting or denying the authenticity of all the rest of the letters, always accepted the genuineness of the letters to the Corinthians, Galatians and Romans.

A few serious criticisms are raised regarding the unity of 1 Corinthians. Some writers believe that it contains relics of a previous letter, eg. in 7:17-24; 9:1-10:22 and 15:1-55. It is convenient here to give a general outline of First Corinthians. One can see that the letter is divided into two parts corresponding to the double occasion which prompted the letter.

- (I) Introduction: Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-9)
- (II) Part I: Condemnation of Disorders in the Corinthian Church (1:10–6:20)
 - (A) Factions and Christian Wisdom (1:10–4:21)
 - (a) The Nature of the Dissension (1:10-17)
 - (b) The Message of the Cross (1:18-25)
 - (c) The Membership to the Corinthian Church (1:26-31)
 - (d) Paul's Method of Preaching illustrates the axiom of 1:25 (2:1-5)
 - (e) True and False Wisdom (2:6-16)
 - (f) The Spiritual Childishness of the Corinthians (3:1-4)
 - (g) The True Christian estimate of Preachers of the Gospel (3:5–4:21)
 - (B) The Incestuous Man and a Warning against Sexual Sins (5:1-13)
 - (a) The incestuous man (5:1-6a)
 - (b) Do not permit any moral irregularities within the Community (5:6b-8)
 - (c) Immoral Christians should be excommunicated (5:9-13)
 - (C) Litigation before Pagan Courts (6:1-11)
 - (D) The Evil of Sexual Sins (6:12-20)
- (III) Part II: Answers to Questions in the Letter of the Community (7:1–15:58)
 - (A) Marriage and Celibacy (7:1-40)
 - (a) Marriage and its Duties (7:1-24)
 - (b) On Virgins (7:25-38)
 - (B) Concerning the Eating of Meat that was offered to idols (8:1–11:1)
 - (a) On Knowledge and Charity (8:1-13)
 - (b) Paul as an example of Unselfish Charity (9:1-27)
 - (c) A Scriptural illustration: The History of Israel warns Christians about Self-Discipline and Renunciation (10:1-13)
 - (d) Practical solution of the Problem of eating Idol-Meat (10:14–11:1)
 - (C) Good Order in Christian Assemblies (11:2–14:40)
 - (a) Women must be veiled (11:2-16)
 - (b) The Celebration of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
 - (c) On Spiritual Gifts (12:1–14:40)
 - (d) On the Resurrection of the Dead (15:1-58)
- (IV) Conclusion (16:1-24)
 - (A) The Collection for the Poor Christians of Jerusalem (16:1-4)
 - (B) Paul's itinerary and some Recommendations (16:5-18)
 - (C) Greetings and Concluding Blessing (16:19-24)

The content of the letter is rich in theology and firm in its grasp of ethical and spiritual principles. It rebukes error, exposes and condemns sin. The letter has

distinguishing features found in many passages which are of great doctrinal and historical importance, especially with regards the Person of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, Resurrection and Salvation.

Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15

In the fifteenth chapter of the letter, which some biblical scholars say that it forms a letter on its own, one can see that there was a misconception of the primitive kerygma concerning the resurrection of the body, what was a problem for the Corinthians. In fact Paul wants to prepare a common ground with the Corinthians by the teaching of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The chapter contains the most early and detailed discussion on the resurrection within the entire Pauline corpus. We have here one of the major problems with regards to the eschatology in Corinth. The main focus in this chapter is not whether or not Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, rather it speaks of the consequences of Christ's resurrection for the believer. In this chapter, Paul seems to be confronting an overrealized eschatology among the Corinthians, or at least some of them who believed that there was no future resurrection since they, having been baptized, were already living the resurrection. Later this spiritualization of the resurrection was favoured by St. John Chrysostom (cf. *Homilie XLIV in epist. prim. ad Cor.*, PG 61, 9-32). This seems to have been the real reason, because it seems a bit puzzling how a group of people, only recently converted from paganism could have turned so quickly to deny the resurrection. Actually the Corinthians were not really denying the resurrection, but were claiming that they had already attained it, like Hymenaeus and Philetus in 2 Tim 2, 17-18, who deviated from the truth by saying that the resurrection has already taken place.

On the other hand, however, some hold that chapter 15 was really provoked by a denial of the resurrection by some party within the Corinthian community. But what was really the content of this denial? Scholars believe that the true problem with the Corinthians was about the bodily resurrection, this explanation can be well accepted, keeping in mind the Platonic background of the Greek Corinthians, sustaining the immortality of the soul and its freedom from the corrupted body. In the account of Paul at the Areopagus in Acts 17, 19, one sees the view that the Corinthians influenced by Stoic, Epicurean or Sadducean and Platonic ideas, could have believed in the immortality of the individual soul but not in the resurrection of the body. This is clear in 1 Cor 15:35-37, where Paul counters the objections

to the resurrection of the body. Hence Paul answered in a profound treatise about the resurrection of the dead, *anastasis neknôm* which literally means 'rising of the corpses', that is of the 'dead bodies'.

Others see here that the Corinthians failed to grasp the connection between the resurrection of Christ and that of the believers, as happened to the Thessalonians. They failed to understand how a dead person could be with Christ at the parousia and go to God. This is due to the Old Testament understanding of the assumption into heaven, that one had to be alive in order to be assumed as one sees in the assumption of the prophet Elijah on a chariot of fire in 2 Kings 2:11. Paul therefore explains in 1 Cor 15 the transformation by God of our mortal bodies to life. Therefore in this chapter, Paul wants to correct the beliefs with regards the resurrection since these surely affected the behavioural attitude in the community, as one sees clearly in 15:32-58. Surely then this chapter is a profound witness to the gospel message. The structure of Paul's discussion in this chapter may be outlined as follows:

The resurrection of the dead is constitutive of the gospel message (1-34).

The kerygma proclaims the resurrection of Christ (1-11).

Denial of resurrection of the dead negates the gospel (12-19).

Because Christ has been raised, all who belong to him will be raised (20-28).

Otherwise, hope, suffering and faithfulness are pointless (29-34).

Resurrection means transformation of the body (35-58).

What kind of body is the resurrection body? (35-49)

Both the dead and the living will be transformed (50-57).

Therefore our task is not in vain (58).

The Resurrection of Christ

About the Resurrection of Christ, Paul is very clear. Christ has risen and since he is the 'first fruits' (1 Cor 15: 20), his resurrection guarantees the bodily resurrection of those who are united to him: "But on the contrary Christ has been raised out from the dead, first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." This clear idea of the resurrection of Christ as guarantee for the believers, is found also at the initial stage of the apostolic and post-apostolic age especially in the writings of Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch. This incorporation into the Risen Christ will manifest the supreme victory of Christ over death.

Irenaeus of Lyon in *Adversus Haereses*, views the image of Christ as first fruits of the resurrection of man, for the assumption of human nature by Christ who is the head of the body makes possible the resurrection of every human found to be part of his body (cf. *Adversus Haereses*, III 19,3; III 22,4; III 23,7-8). Hippolytus who lived around the first half of the third century, in his work *De resurrectione ad Mammaeam* when explaining this term in relation to the incarnation and resurrection, states that Christ took the same flesh, raised it from the dead, and made it the first fruits for the righteous so that all who believe in the risen One may also have the resurrection.

Salvific Effects of Christ's Resurrection

Pauline soteriology, having its foundation in christology, serves as a bridge which connects his anthropology and eschatology: "Just as then in Adam all die, in the same way also in Christ all will be given life. But each in its own proper order, the first fruits Christ then those of Christ in his coming" (1 Cor 15: 22-23).

Paul conceives salvation from the semitic point of view, that is, as involving the redemption of the body. For Paul salvation is opposed to destruction, and often alludes to Isa 49: 8: "in a day of salvation I have helped you...". Christ's resurrection had overthrown death. In him, the believer is both justified and reconciled. Therefore one can speak clearly of a christological soteriology, salvation through the Risen Lord in Paul. The second Adam saves mankind fallen in sin.

The essence of the gospel is given in the emphasis on the salvific effects of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The dominion of Christ, as the *Kyrios* and head of the universe, is given to him to make clear his exalted role in the history of man's salvation. But once the divine plan has reached that stage of the reconciliation of men to God, then will be the end. Christ will "turn over the kingdom to God his Father, bringing to an end all other government, authority and power; he must retain the government until he puts all his enemies under his feet.... When then all is subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to the One who subjected all to him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15: 24-25. 28).

If the *eschaton* has been inaugurated, yet from another viewpoint, the "end" has not yet come. Christ, the *kosmokrator*, does not yet reign supreme; he has not yet handed the kingdom over to the Father. All of this is related to the 'parousia of the Lord'. It is scarcely to be denied that Paul expected it in the near future. On the

other hand, one finds him at times in his letters gradually reconciling himself to an imminent death and to an intermediate phase between his death and his appearance before the tribunal of Christ (cf. Phil 1: 23 and 2 Cor 5: 1-10). In either case, however, there is a future phase in his salvation history, whether its term be near or far off, and Paul's one hope is "to make his home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5: 8).

The undeniable elements of his futurist eschatology are the parousia, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment, and the glory of the justified believer. But along with this future aspect, there is also the present aspect, according to which the *eschaton* has already begun and men are already, in a sense, saved: "Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6: 2). The 'first fruits' and the 'pledge' of this salvation are already the possession of christian believers. Christ has already transferred us to the heavenly realm. Paul therefore speaks at times as if christians were already saved (1 Cor 15: 2 and 2 Cor 2: 15), yet at other times he intimates that they are still to be saved (1 Cor 5: 5; 10, 33 and Rom 5: 9-10).

Difference between Resurrection and Salvation.

Now we turn to the controversial soteriological issue related to this study. Is there a belief in a universal salvation of all human beings, since in 1 Cor 15: 22b one reads that all will be made alive? Indeed this 'all' in v.22 is specified in v.23 as being those who belong to Christ, who will be raised to glory. H. Conzelmann observes that chapter 15 is concerned with the fate of christians. Surely Paul held some sort of punishment for the wicked. In his theology, the resurrection entails sharing in Christ's glory, but it is the resurrection of those who belong to him. For him the resurrection of Christ was his glorification and for the individual it means to share in this glory, as one can see clearly in 2 Cor 4: 17; Rom 8: 17; Phil 3: 20 and 2 Thess 1: 19. To be cut off from this glorification means destruction and death itself. Therefore the resurrection of all does not necessarily mean the salvation of all. Therefore one speaks here also of a particular salvation and not an universal one.

Christ's victory and resurrection stand in relation to those who will be made alive, in the incorporation into Christ, *en tô Cristô*, as contrasted with *en tô Adam* (v. 22). The old Adam or humanity will have to be vivified by Christ, the new Adam. Salvation consists in the restoration of man to the image in which he has been created and to the glory which he now lacks as a result of Adam's sin.

Salvation of the Just

It is a clear fact that in Jewish apocalyptic literature, 'salvation' was meant to be a prerogative of the just only, that is of those who are on God's side. Again, one sees that most of the later Christian literature taught that the wicked would be punished or would perish. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), in his work, *In illud: tunc et ipse filius*, states that salvation consists both of freedom from sin and death, and of passing completely into non-being. Every evil force and power in us will be destroyed. Submission to God will be complete separation from evil. Therefore for him it is this complete abolition of evil which then defines the time when God will be all in all. If there is something opposed to God, he cannot be all in all, since God cannot be in evil. Therefore 'subjection' in the First Letter to the Corinthians means then 'salvation' as it means, on the other hand 'reconciliation' in the Letter to the Romans: "When then all is subjected to him, the Son himself will be subjected to the One who subjected all to him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15: 28).

Therefore it seems fairly clear that although Paul hoped that all would be saved, some would not, since although salvation is extended and offered to all, it is only by accepting this in the form of faith in Christ that one is granted the pardon and grace promised by God. Therefore 'incorporation' in the Risen Christ is essential for resurrection to salvation.

Bibliography

ALETTI, J-N., "L'Argumentation de Paul et la Position des Corinthiens: 1 Cor 15:12-34", in *Résurrection du Christ et des Chrétiens (1 Cor 15)*, L. DE LORENZI (ed.), Monografie di 'Benedictina', Rome 1985, 63-81.

BARBAGLIO, G., *La Prima Lettera ai Corinzi*, Bologna 1995.

DE BOER, M.C., "Paul's use of a Resurrection Tradition in 1 Cor 15, 20-28. Corinthian correspondence", in *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 125 (1996) 639-651.

BORING, M.E., "The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul", in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986) 269-292.

CONZELMANN, H., *1 Corinthians. A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Philadelphia (PA) 1975.

Dizionario di Paolo e delle sue lettere, G.F. HAWTHORNE – R.P. MARTIN – D.G. REID (eds.), Torino 2000.

FEE, G.D., *The Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids (MI) 1987.

HAYS, R.B., *First Corinthians, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville (KY) 1997.

IRENAEUS OF LYON, *Adversus Haereses*, English trans: J. DILLON, Westminster 1992.

JOHANNES CHRYSOSTOMUS, *Homilie XLIV in epist. prim. ad Cor.*, in *PG* 61, 9-32.

QUASTEN, J., *Patrologia*, 1-V, Casale 1967, 1969, 1978, and Genoa 1996, 2000.

SEGAL, A.F., "Paul's Thinking about Resurrection in its Jewish context", in *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998) 400-419.

SENF, C., *La première Épitre de saint Paul aux Corinthiens*, Geneva 1990.

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, G. KITTEL – G. FRIEDRICH (eds.), English trans: G.W. BROMLEY, in *C.D. ROM*, 2000.

**Fr Charles Buttigieg,
"Buttigieg House",
Dalelands Street,
Qala, Gozo.**