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# Paul's Argument for the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians

David P. Scaer

## Paul as Pharisaical Insider and the Doctrine of the General Resurrection

Paul finds an occasion to present his theology of Jesus' resurrection in response to the denial of the general resurrection by some members in the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor 15:12). They had not yet come to the point of denying the resurrection of Jesus, but this would be the logical and necessary conclusion of saying that there was no resurrection of the dead. By listing the witnesses of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:5–7), Paul places it as an event that could be observed. By any account, the resurrection of a dead person is miraculous, but the observation of the resurrection was not miraculous. It was as observable as other events are. Striking is that the Corinthian denial of resurrection is reported in terms similar to how the synoptic Gospels speak of the Sadducees' denial: "As the Sadducees . . . say there is no resurrection" (see Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27).

It is possible, or even probable, that Paul, being closely connected to the religious establishment in Jerusalem, was acquainted with the Sadducees' denial of the resurrection, and as an up-and-coming, academically educated Pharisee, he participated in the debate on issues that kept the two groups apart. How could he or anyone in the upper echelons of the Jerusalem religious leadership have ignored it? His previous commitment to the general resurrection allowed him years later, as an apostle, to side with the Pharisees against the Sadducees on this issue (Acts 22:5–8).

It cannot be discounted that Paul knew about and may have been involved with both the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the arrest and trial of Jesus. At least he knew about their displeasure with Jesus and their intent to silence him. Ananias, the high priest before whom Paul would appear, was himself a Sadducee (Acts 24:1). The Sadducees had confronted Jesus with a test case about a woman who had been married to seven brothers in succession. They had asked him whose wife she would be in the resurrection (Matt 22:23–31; Mark 12:18–25; Luke 20:27–38). This took place just days before the arrest of Jesus. As close-knit as Jewish leadership in Jerusalem was, it is highly likely that the Pharisees, the group to which Paul belonged, heard of this, as Jesus had provided support for their position on the resurrection. Thus, facing the denial of the resurrection among the Corinthians was

an issue with which Paul was probably familiar and for which he was equipped from his training as a Pharisee right up to the time he was converted.

The Sadducees and Pharisees had to find reasons on which they could agree to arrest him and take him off the scene (Matt 22:34). Jesus' debates in Jerusalem in the days leading up to his death were conducted in public. The Pharisees and the Sadducees came to agreement that Jesus had claimed he would destroy the temple as an act of political sedition—enough reason to call for his execution. However, their motives were different. Destruction of the temple would end the political dominance of the Sadducees who occupied the post of the high priests and were collaborators with the Roman occupiers. For the Pharisees, sacrifices required by the Book of Leviticus would no longer be possible. Placing a guard at the tomb is sufficient reason to conclude that both groups knew that Jesus, in speaking of the destruction and reconstruction of the temple, was metaphorically referring to the resurrection of his body.<sup>1</sup>

### **Paul's Reliance on Written Gospels**

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul begins his argument by referencing the gospel which he preached. He wrote that Christ died for sins, was buried, and rose on the third day (vv. 1–4). It is unlikely that the word for “gospel” is synonymous simply with the act of preaching. In that case, it would be rendered “the preaching, which I preached.” If this was the case, Paul should have simply said that he preached that Jesus died, was buried, and rose from the dead and avoided the words “according to my gospel.” By “gospel,” it is more likely that he is referring not to a preached word but something substantive, perhaps a written document, a book which the Corinthians had seen and heard read, as we shall argue. His preaching was based on the gospel as that term was already being applied to written accounts of the life of Jesus, as they were available at the time Paul had visited Corinth and written his first epistle to the church there.

In proposing that the word “gospel” here refers to a written document, we go counter to the nearly universal scholarly view that Paul wrote the epistles years before the canonical Gospels were written. Some scholars propose that Mark was

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:62–64: “The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise.” Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, “He has risen from the dead,” and the last fraud will be worse than the first.’” Here is a case where what is translated as “chief priests” would be better rendered as “high priests,” who would more likely have access to the Roman governor. All Scripture quotations are from the ESV<sup>®</sup> Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version<sup>®</sup>), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

the first Gospel, dating it just before AD 70, a few years after the martyrdom of Paul and Peter, and place the dates of the other Gospels between AD 80 and AD 100, though there is no agreement on the dates. They also are likely to hold that 1 Thessalonians and Galatians contain the first references to Jesus' resurrection, at least before the Gospels, and recognize 1 Corinthians as the first extensive discourse on the resurrection.

Yet Galatians, often seen as the earliest of Paul's epistles, mentions the resurrection of Jesus in the first verse. "Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (Gal 1:1). It also appears in 1 Thessalonians, for which there is also scholarly support for the theory that it was Paul's first epistle. Christians are to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead (1 Thess 1:10). This leads us to question the widely held hypothesis that Paul's epistles were written before the Gospels, a hypothesis that has dogmatic status in the world of New Testament scholarship.

When Paul said he preached about Jesus what is recorded, "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3–4), he was referencing a written document. In itself, this is a thoroughly rich theological confession.

If Paul did not have use of written documents, such as one of the four Gospels, he would have depended on his remembrance of the oral tradition, which would later be inscripturated into our Gospels. Now comes the question of how much of that oral tradition he could have committed to memory. Since he was not one of the twelve disciples who actually had heard Jesus preach and seen what he had done, what he knew of these things was secondhand.

At the time of Paul's trial before Felix and then high priest Ananias (Acts 22:30–23:10), Matthew's Gospel could already have been written and thus could have come into the hands of the church's Jewish opponents, which the evangelist himself at the time of his writing had anticipated. They were not the first ones to whom Matthew had directed his Gospel, but even without intuition he knew that copies of his Gospel would fall into their hands, especially if they intended to persecute the proponents of the religion Jesus preached. At least they had knowledge that such a document existed, and when it came to their attention, its contents would not have been completely new to them. They had heard this from Jesus himself.

In this same period, Luke had fulfilled a need for a Gospel more conciliatory to both the Jews and the Gentiles than Matthew had provided. Jesus was "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). Thus, it is likely that Luke wrote his Gospel in the early 50s, sometime after the Council of Jerusalem (AD 49) and before Paul's second missionary journey. In writing a Gospel whose targeted audience was the Gentiles in Paul's churches, Luke would not have

had Matthew's interest in pointing out the involvement of the Jerusalem religious authorities in covering up the evidences of Jesus' resurrection that was at the time widely known in that city (Matt 28:11–15; cf. 27:8).

The core and heart of the gospel Paul delivered to the Corinthians was that Christ died and was buried and raised (1 Cor 15:3–4), which was something they already knew. They were being reminded of what was common knowledge for them. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection were rehearsed to them and by them Sunday after Sunday. Paul's words may have been taken from an early form of the creed they confessed.

In speaking of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, Paul was not offering an argument for the resurrection and why they should believe it. That would come later, especially in his listing of the witnesses. Instead, Paul was reminding the Corinthians of what they already knew and what they had learned from the Scriptures. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures [*κατὰ τὰς γραφάς*], that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures [*κατὰ τὰς γραφάς*]" (1 Cor 15:3–4). Paul uses the phrase "in accordance with the Scriptures" twice, when once would have been enough. In the Niceno-Constantinople Creed, it appears only once and without the definite article as it does in 1 Corinthians. J. N. D. Kelly recognizes this pericope as an early Christian creed that Paul took over into his epistle, a creed that Paul did not originate.<sup>2</sup>

In 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Paul inserts a similar creedal formula with the addition that the one who died and rose will return: "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep." So also, in Romans 4:24–25, "[We] believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." This pattern of death and resurrection can be found in the message the angel gave to the women who came to the tomb to prepare the body of Jesus for burial.<sup>3</sup> By asking the women to remember what Jesus said, the angel put the focus on Jesus when he spoke this formula about his death and resurrection on the third day (Luke 9:22). So was set in motion the oral tradition that was taken into the Scriptures and preserved in the creeds.

Unique to 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 and distinct from all the parallels in the New Testament is that Christ died, was buried, and on the third day rose again *according to the Scriptures*, a phrase that would eventually be taken into our Nicene Creed.

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<sup>2</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, 1960), 303.

<sup>3</sup> "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.' And they remembered his words" (Luke 24:6–8).

Most scholars, if not all, hold that Paul was referring to Old Testament passages that speak of Christ's death and resurrection. Paul can locate the christological content of the Old Testament in speaking of Christ as the Paschal lamb (1 Cor 5:7). He also understands that passing through the sea was a baptism for Israel (1 Cor 10:1–2). Christ was the rock from which Moses acquired water (1 Cor 10:4). However, Paul does not specify which Old Testament passages, if this was his intent, he had in mind in referring to Jesus' death and resurrection (1 Cor 15:3–4). Since it is the heart of the gospel that he preached, it seems odd that he does not provide specific Old Testament references for Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Some commentators, perhaps most, simply assume "according to the Scriptures" means that the Old Testament is christological. N. T. Wright takes it as a general reference to the entire Old Testament:

Paul is not proof-texting; he does not envisage one or two, or even half a dozen, isolated passages about a death for sinners. He is referring to the entire biblical narrative as the story which has reached its climax in the Messiah and has now given rise to the new phase of the same story, the phase in which the age to come has broken in, with its central characteristic being (seen from one point of view) rescue from sins, and (from another point of view) rescue from death, i.e., resurrection.<sup>4</sup>

Wright's insight is correct, that the christological content of the Old Testament should not be limited to direct, messianic prophecies or what he calls proof-texting by isolating some passages and ignoring others.<sup>5</sup> However, a general reference to the Scriptures without specification to an Old Testament book does not produce the specific evidences to advance the argument in demonstrating that the Old Testament shows that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. As necessary as acknowledging the christological content of the Old Testament is for belief,<sup>6</sup> this is not what Paul intends here. While affirming that the Old Testament is completely christological, Paul is asserting rather how the Corinthians came to know that Christ died, was buried, and rose from the dead. These were things they heard read from the Gospels when they came together.

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<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 320.

<sup>5</sup> David P. Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 136–143.

<sup>6</sup> A convincing argument that the Old Testament is thoroughly christological is offered by Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2017). Central to his argument is the account of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, "'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:26–27).

Instead of the phrase “according to the Scriptures” as an indication that the Old Testament in general is christological in its content, which it is, it is more likely that the Scriptures to which Paul refers are the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—copies of which Paul had brought with him to Corinth and which the Corinthians heard read out loud Sunday after Sunday.

What is determinative in this argument, that Paul is referring to a public reading of the Gospels, are the Greek words *κατὰ τὰς γραφάς*. The words “according to” translate the Greek word *κατά*, a word that has found a permanent place on the top of each page of the four Gospels in Greek New Testaments, e.g., KATA ΜΑΘΘΑΙΟΝ, KATA ΜΑΡΚΟΝ, KATA ΛΟΥΚΑΝ, KATA ΙΩΑΝΝΗΝ.

There is only one gospel presented in four different ways: according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, and according to John. Martin Hengel (1926–2009) held that, supposing one Gospel after another coming into existence after AD 60, each soon would have had to be distinguished from the other, and so the names of the authors, which the first recipients of each Gospel knew, had to be added to the manuscripts.<sup>7</sup> By AD 125, so it is supposed, the names of the evangelists were associated with particular Gospels, so that one could be distinguished from the others. Regardless of the veracity of Hengel’s dating of the Gospels, the point is well taken, that really there were not four Gospels, but there was a fourfold gospel with four writers.

If the Greek word *κατά* carries the force of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, as Wright proposes and most commentators hold, it would be the only place in the New Testament where the word has this meaning. In James 2:8, it carries the meaning of how something is known: “If you really fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.” Here the phrase “according to” indicates how something is known, and this meaning is carried over into the Sunday liturgy in which the pastor announces that the Gospel for the Sunday is according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

Understanding Matthew and Luke as “Scriptures” in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 is not without precedence in the apostolic age. Paul speaks of Matthew and Luke as “Scripture” in 1 Timothy 5:17–18. In advocating fair wages for preachers: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” Paul’s reference to not muzzling the ox is taken over from Deuteronomy 25:4, but his reference to the laborer deserving his wages is taken from Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7. When

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 84.

Paul wrote to Timothy, no more than ten years had lapsed after his writing to the Corinthians. In this time, Matthew and Luke were regarded as Scriptures on the same level as the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>8</sup>

Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 is that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are not incidental to his ministry, but these events constitute the content of what he preached and what the Corinthians believed. By denying the resurrection of the dead, the Corinthians had in effect denied the most important element of what he preached: that Christ died for sins, was buried, and rose from the dead. By translating the phrase *κατὰ τὰς γραφάς* "in accordance with the Scriptures," as the RSV and the ESV do, they provide a valuable and true understanding of the Old Testament as christological, even though this is not Paul's intent here. The divine necessity that Jesus Christ must die and be raised on the third day is found in all three synoptic Gospels and is contained in the Greek word *δεῖ* ("it is necessary"), that these things happened because of divine purpose (Matt 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22). Parallel to this requirement is that Jesus' death in John happens to fulfill the Scriptures, i.e., the Old Testament (John 19:36–37). In 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, Paul with this phrase is not addressing how Christ fulfills the Old Testament but how the Corinthians had come to know and believe it.

There is not the slightest indication that they doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead. First Paul establishes that Christ was raised from the dead and then concludes that all the dead will rise from the dead.<sup>9</sup> Paul does this by calling on the witnesses of the resurrection to testify, and he does this in a particular arrangement. In 1 Corinthians 15:5–8, Paul places his witnesses to the resurrection in two lists. One is headed by Peter and the other by James. This reflects the importance of these apostles whom the Corinthians recognized as authoritative in establishing the apostolic doctrine. As they were removed by distance and time from Jerusalem where the resurrection had occurred, the Corinthians could not establish the factuality of Jesus' resurrection by themselves. Plain and simple, they were not witnesses to the resurrection as were Peter, the "Twelve," and James (1 Cor 15:5, 7). As a congregation, they could not even handle internal matters like a man fornicating with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1), let alone come to a belief that the dead would be raised. What they believed about Jesus was more than a parochial issue involving just their congregation. Since it involved what other congregations also believed, matters about the resurrection were "catholic," in the sense they had to

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<sup>8</sup> John could refer to what he had written in his Gospel as Scripture (Jn 2:22; 20:9), so there is evidence a document recounting the life of Jesus could be called either a Gospel or Scripture.

<sup>9</sup> See Leroy Andrew Huizenga, "Resurrection Reconsidered: The Corinthian Denial and Paul's Response," in *A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven: Essays on Christology and Ethics in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. David M. Moffitt and Isaac Augustine Morales (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, Fortress Books, 2021), 109–130.



believe what other churches believed. As the Athanasian Creed says, “This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.” It was also “apostolic” in that the apostles had been entrusted with the preservation and proclamation of what Jesus did and taught. No congregation was allowed to go off with its own views on the resurrection, just as no congregation was allowed to go off on its own in having women preachers (1 Cor 14:33–34). When Paul placed himself as the last witness in the second list, this has a double meaning: he was the last one to whom Jesus appeared and, as he goes on to say, he was the least of all the apostles (1 Cor 15:8–10), which correlates with his self-understanding as being the foremost of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Not listed by Paul among the witnesses of the resurrection are the women who discover the empty tomb in the four Gospels, to whom Jesus first appeared. One explanation for this is that Paul listed only those people known to the Corinthians as preachers and guarantors of the apostolic message.

That being said, the women are the central part in the Gospels’ accounts of the crucifixion, the burial, and the discovery of the empty tomb, which Paul lists as the central elements of the Christian faith: that Christ died, was buried, and rose again. They are on the scene from the beginning to the end and on the intervening day between the crucifixion and resurrection in that on Saturday evening, they purchase anointments to complete the burial preparations begun before sunset on Friday (Mark 16:1). The ones who discover the empty tomb on Sunday are the same ones who witnessed the crucifixion and the placing of Jesus’ body in the tomb on Friday. Matthew says that they sat opposite the tomb as the stone was rolled in front of it (Matt 27:60–61), and they were close enough to the tomb that both Luke (23:55) and Mark (15:47) record that they observed how the body was placed.

The women who witness the burial of Jesus and his resurrection serve as the historical link to the creed, that the one who was raised from the dead was the same who was crucified and buried. Though they were necessary and unrepeatable in their roles as witnesses to the burial and resurrection of Jesus, after their encounter with Jesus they yield their place of prominence to the disciples, who are to preach that which was first witnessed by the women. In Matthew, the women are to inform the disciples to go to Galilee where they will see him (Matt 28:1–7), and in Mark they are to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going to Galilee (Mark 16:7). Luke describes Jesus’ engagements with the disciples in Jerusalem and two others on the road to Emmaus, events better described as theological convocations, not only to confirm that Jesus had actually risen from the dead, but to confirm its meaning. John places two of these meetings in Jerusalem (20:19–28) and a third one in Galilee (21:1–23). As essential as the women are in observing the death, burial, and empty

tomb, and in meeting the resurrected Jesus, they have no further role to play in the Gospels.

Agreeing, for the sake of argument, to the commonly held view that Mark was the first Gospel, written between AD 66–70, there would be a period of about thirty years between the events observed by the women and their being written down. During this intervening period, these things would have been passed down by word of mouth, that is, by the oral tradition. An assumed date for Luke (around AD 85) and a late date for Matthew (around AD 100) would mean that Luke incorporated in his Gospel oral traditions about what happened fifty years before, and Matthew, seventy years before.

Whatever scenario is chosen, we are faced with the question of how adequate an oral transmission could be in preserving the central content of the proclamation—that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again—without a written document of some kind.<sup>10</sup> Names of women who discovered the empty tomb of Jesus, to whom he appeared and with whom he spoke, were included in the rehearsal of the events themselves among those who remained in Jerusalem, and this might have happened until the church evacuated the city before it was besieged by the Romans beginning in AD 66. Even when a creedal statement had been put in place in the churches associated with Paul, what Paul confessed was standard belief (1 Cor 15:1–4), even though he had not originated it. This creedal formula of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, along with the narrative that would be included in the account later incorporated into the Gospels, was rehearsed every Sunday in gatherings of his followers—along with the names of the women, especially in Jerusalem, where they remained as members. Names of Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate, the political and religious leaders in Jerusalem involved in the death of Jesus, were still known at the time of the writing of the Gospels.

One or more of the evangelists, possibly all four, actually knew the women who had discovered the empty tomb, or they knew those with whom the women shared their encounters with Jesus. This is not an either/or matter. Members of the church in Jerusalem knew the women and those with whom the women had shared their experiences. The women knew where the disciples were staying and may have established temporary residence nearby (Luke 24:24). A post-AD 70 dating for Luke would mean that when he had finished his Gospel and was undertaking to write Acts, the Romans had already destroyed Jerusalem and that the Christians had already evacuated the city. Preserving the precise details of an oral tradition, in which the names of the women were remembered, would have been challenging.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Bauckham, "The Women and the Resurrection: The Credibility of Their Stories," in *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 257–310.

Even if Luke was written in those few years before the destruction of Jerusalem, an oral tradition with all of the details necessary for putting down in writing a fuller account of the resurrection of Jesus would have been difficult.

A better explanation for the detail in the resurrection narratives is that they were recorded close to the time when the events they report happened and not several generations afterwards. John does not list any other woman than Mary Magdalene. Even if his Gospel was written towards the end of the first century, her place in the tradition was firmly fixed as the first one to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared. Jesus' conversation with Mary Magdalene is not unlike the one he had with the woman at the well of Samaria, in that she does not at first recognize that the one with whom she is talking is Jesus (cf. John 4:1–42; 20:11–17).

One plausible reason for why Paul did not list any of the women is that he lists those with whom the Corinthians had come into contact and who were prominently known to them. Paul places Peter, whom he calls Cephas, as the first of the witnesses (1 Cor 15:5), probably in two senses. According to Luke and John, he is the first of the apostles to see the resurrected Jesus, though it is difficult to determine the precise time during that day when this happened. Another and equally probable reason was that his preeminent position among the disciples of Jesus before the resurrection was enhanced afterwards. In Mark 16:5–7, the young man seated in the tomb singles out Peter from the other disciples whom the women are to inform of Jesus' resurrection. John 21 reports a lengthy encounter of Peter with the resurrected Jesus, designating Peter not so much as a witness in the sense that Mary Magdalene, all the apostles, and then Thomas were, but as the one who would assume the role of Jesus in shepherding the church (21:15–17). His importance as a witness to the resurrection in the Gospels of Mark and John corresponds with Paul's listing him as the first witness to the resurrection.

Peter was the authenticator of what Jesus said and did during his ministry, and his word continued to carry weight not only in the churches that he founded but also in those Paul established (2 Pet 3:15). Whereas it might be expected that in his two epistles Peter might say that he was a witness to Christ's resurrection, he first presents himself as a witness of Christ's sufferings (1 Pet 5:1), and then in his second epistle lists himself as a witness of the transfiguration (2 Pet 1:16–18). By referring to himself as a witness of the sufferings of Christ, he calls the readers' attention to his own failure in denying Jesus.

In all three synoptic Gospels, Jesus' transfiguration takes place within the context of his predictions of his death and resurrection (Matt 17:1–9; Luke 9:28–36; Mark 9:2–10). Though the proposal by the more radical scholars that the transfiguration account originally belonged in the resurrection narratives is without any textual evidence, the substance of the proposal—that it has to do with what

would happen in the resurrection—is not without value. In both Matthew (17:9) and Mark (9:9–10), Peter, James, and John, who observed the transfiguration, are to tell no one about it until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. In the transfiguration, Jesus set aside the form or appearance of a servant and assumed the appearance of God, which belonged to him and which he would regain and again display after the resurrection.<sup>11</sup> Luke reports that Moses and Elijah, also appearing in glory, spoke with Jesus about the things that would happen to him in Jerusalem. In Luke 9:31, these things are called Jesus' "exodus," a word that in the Old Testament refers to the Israelites facing death in going into the sea and coming out alive. The exodus into, through, and out of the sea fits the pattern of death, burial, and resurrection. In the conversation with Moses and Elijah, Jesus is speaking about his death and resurrection.<sup>12</sup> In his first epistle, Peter speaks of Baptism in terms of the resurrection: "According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1:3).

While the place of Peter as Jesus' most prominent disciple is beyond dispute, striking is that James is given an equal standing by the way Paul places his name as the first one in the second list of witnesses to the resurrection (1 Cor 15:7). In hearing his name, Paul's readers would have recalled that at the time Paul wrote this epistle (ca. AD 53–55), this brother of Jesus was the bishop of the Jerusalem church (AD 35–62), which had authorized his first missionary journey. James had succeeded in putting together a consensus at the Council of Jerusalem (AD 49) on how Jewish and Gentile Christians were to interact, and so he had a well-earned stature in the church as a wise leader in bringing those together with opposing positions. He authored the letter sent by the council that was to be distributed among the Gentile churches, including those established by Paul (Acts 15:13–29). Paul was present when the letter was framed, and in anticipation of meeting up with the Judaizers who disrupted his first missionary journey, he probably brought a copy with him on his second visit to Corinth. James had recommended that, out of consideration for the Jews, the Gentiles should not eat meat that was strangled or offered to idols.

Now the problem had shifted to whether Christians, Jew or Gentile, would be guilty of participating in pagan worship if they ate the meat sacrificed to idols. If a fellow Christian thought this way, then they should refrain from doing so (1 Cor 8:1–10; Acts 15:29). So, circumcision was being required by some Jewish Christians, and eating meat offered to pagan idols was an issue for Gentile Christians. James

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<sup>11</sup> In Lutheran theology, this is called the state of exaltation, a state that displays the *genus maiestaticum*.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 305–308.

and Paul were addressing similar situations in what Christians were allowed to eat, and they came up with similar answers in that, at times, out of respect for the consciences of others, they should refrain from eating meat.

Unlike Paul, who would travel as far as Rome and perhaps Spain, James remained in Jerusalem until his martyrdom. However, he was known as a church leader in Corinth as he was in Galatia (Gal 1:19; 2:9). Remaining in Jerusalem after the persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1) with the disciples and others who followed Jesus, James had, after the resurrection, regular contact with the women and the original apostles who had discovered the empty tomb and were the first witnesses of the resurrection.

Paul lists James as a witness of the resurrection without providing details as to the place and time of when this happened (1 Cor 15:7). Events around the empty tomb and the appearances of the resurrected Jesus would have been everyday topics of conversation in the world in which James lived and were not topics reserved only to be recited in worship.

As the oldest of Jesus' four younger brothers, James grew up in the same household with the Lord, and they probably worked side by side in Joseph's carpentry business. He had an insight into the kind of person Jesus was. Since he was with Jesus at the wedding of Cana (John 2:12), an episode that follows Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist (John 1:32), it is not unlikely that James, like Jesus, had attached himself to the movement that gathered around John the Baptist, by whom he would have also been baptized.

James knew things about Jesus that the disciples did not know and could never know. Mark reports that when his family heard that the people in their hometown were saying that Jesus was out of his mind, they grabbed hold of him (Mark 3:21). What Jesus was doing and saying was an embarrassment to his family. This can only mean that Jesus was a topic of frequent conversation among his parents and siblings, who had not yet grasped who he really was. As a member of the family of Jesus, James provided a realistic element into understanding that the one who was declared to be the Son of God at his Baptism and then by Peter was also a real man who lived within the ordinary dimensions of human existence.

In the resurrection, Jesus was not transformed into a spirit or ghost, but the one who was resurrected was and remained the brother of James. James had a place with Jesus in the family of Joseph and Mary, which the apostles did not have. For a few years, Peter took the lead among the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, but the mantle soon slipped to James, who day by day passed by the places where Jesus was arrested, was put on trial, was executed, and was buried and raised from the dead. It would have been nearly impossible for James and the rest of the church that remained in Jerusalem not to have had a fascination with these places associated with the arrest,

trial, and death of Jesus, and the tomb where his body was placed and from where it rose. At the time when Matthew wrote his Gospel, the place where Judas was buried and the circumstances surrounding its purchase were widely known in Jerusalem (Matt 27:8). For the followers of Jesus, his tomb would have been a must-see place.

By the time our Gospels were written, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was also known as the mother of James, the one who stands afar at the crucifixion of her son (Matt 27:56). She with the other women purchase ointments for the anointing of his body on the evening of the following day (Mark 16:1) and visit the tomb to discover that her son's body is missing (Luke 24:10). James is also with her in the upper room in anticipation of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). Though he is not chosen as one of the twelve, James and other members of the family follow Jesus and hear his preaching and see his miracles (Matt 12:48–49; Mark 3:33–35; Luke 8:19–21; John 2:12).

Paul makes it clear that Jesus appeared to James, but he does not provide the circumstances. His name is mentioned along with his mother Mary's presence at the crucifixion (Matt 27:55–56), her purchasing of the burial ointments (Mark 16:1), and her discovery of the empty tomb (Luke 24:10). This indicates his prominent standing in the church at the time the Gospels were written. By including his name in the narrative, the evangelists may have intended to say that James also stood off at a distance from the crucifixion without being seen, or that he was closely involved. Since Mary is mentioned as the mother of James in the crucial episodes of Jesus' death, burial, and the events at the empty tomb, it raises the possibility that she was staying with him and the other brothers of Jesus along with the disciples in the days leading up to Pentecost (Acts 1:13, 14).

As the years passed, mother and son would have shared what they remembered happening during this time—how could it have been otherwise? In other words, oral tradition in that household was lively. After all, a man who was their son and brother had come back from the dead.

Matthew writes as if the Field of Blood, purchased with the thirty pieces of silver given by the Jewish authorities to Judas for his betrayal of Jesus, was still accessible to the inquisitive inquirer (Matt 27:8). This, like other places in Jerusalem, which was and remained the site of the mother church, was sacred to the followers of Jesus who visited the city (Rom 15:25–26). No other person would be more qualified as the custodian of these places than James. By remaining in Jerusalem, he more than anyone else provided the link with the past that was necessary for any meaningful doctrine not only of the resurrection but also of the incarnation. After all, his brother was Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory (Jas 2:1). God became man in Galilee, died, and rose from the dead in Jerusalem. By remaining in Jerusalem, James provided the continuity and stabilizing factor as the church expanded from there into Asia Minor,

then Greece and Italy. James gave the church a sense of permanence. With a diminishing membership due to persecution, the Jerusalem church had to rely increasingly on contributions from other churches (Rom 15:25–27), but the city held its place of honor, wherever the followers of Jesus were spread throughout the ancient world, as the place where God brought salvation to his people. We cannot rule out the possibility that members of Paul's churches, especially the wealthier members who had financial means, had traveled to Jerusalem to see the places made sacred by Jesus.

In the fourth century, St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, visited Jerusalem to locate the places in Jerusalem that Jesus had made sacred during the last days of his life. It is left up to the archaeologists to confirm the probability of her choices. However accurate her findings were, pilgrimages to the land of Jesus and the city where he was crucified and raised from the dead began in earnest not only for the spiritual benefit of the pilgrims, but to confirm for them that the events from the life of Jesus had really happened. In support of New Testament books as historical documents affirming that Jesus really existed, locating the places where Jesus conducted his ministry would affirm their authentic character. If the places mentioned in the Gospel were shown not to exist, then they would have been regarded as figments of creative imaginations and the entire Christian enterprise would have fallen flat on its face.

In a strange reference, John notes that Jesus came to Cana, where he had turned the water into wine (John 4:46). Already during Jesus' ministry, and so when John wrote his Gospel, Cana had become such a place of importance that the evangelist had to mention it. Since what happened there could not be forgotten, the changing of the water to wine pointed to the pouring out of the water and the blood from the side of the crucified Jesus (John 19:34), and so Cana had sacramental importance in displaying water and wine as the elements in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Already during the lifetime of Jesus and shortly after the resurrection, Cana and the sites in Jerusalem were on the way to becoming places of pilgrimage destination. Galilee would not have suffered the devastation that Jerusalem did in its destruction by the Romans in AD 70, and so Cana may have remained intact until the end of the first century, the traditional dating of John's Gospel. Christian pilgrims passing through Cana were thus alerted to what Jesus had done there. Cana was only a stone's throw away from Nazareth, where both Jesus and James were brought up.

Jerusalem would have been a city of greater fascination for Christians. Places of historical commemoration were not unknown to the Jews. For example, twelve stones had been placed by the Jordan River as a remembrance of where the Israelites had come into Canaan (Josh 4:20–23).

After presenting Peter as a witness of the resurrection, Paul groups the original disciples under the general category of “the Twelve” (1 Cor 15:5). Without naming them, they were recognized as a collective authority in determining what Jesus taught and what the church was to believe. After the ascension, the followers of Jesus continued in the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42), who were the authenticators of what Jesus had taught.

In speaking of the Twelve, without listing their names, Paul stresses the corporate authority of the apostles as a group. They were entrusted by Jesus with his teachings and were appointed as witnesses of what he had done, in particular of his resurrection: “And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). So it is not without reason that the first confession of the church that Jesus had risen from the dead evolved into what is now known as the Apostles’ Creed. Mention of the Twelve without giving their names, except in the case of Peter, who had a special standing in the church, indicates that the Corinthians knew who the Twelve were. Since Paul participated in the Council of Jerusalem, he would have known who the apostles were. It is also possible, if not likely, that the names that Paul supplied were corroborated by written Gospels that he had taken with him to Corinth.

As already argued, “according to the Scriptures” refers most likely to Matthew and Luke, Gospels in which the names of the apostles were recorded (Matt 10:2–4; Luke 6:14–15).<sup>13</sup> Mark was still to be written at the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians, so it is hardly possible that he was referring to this Gospel. In his resurrection narrative, Mark includes the young man’s promise that Jesus’ disciples will see him in Galilee, but the actual appearance in Galilee is reported only in the longer ending (Mark 16:14). It is not found in the uncontested last chapter of Mark (16:1–8). In the predictions of Jesus’ death, Mark speaks of Jesus being raised in three days and avoids the liturgical formula, already then established, that it would happen on the third day (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; cf. 14:58; 15:29). Matthew uses the “third day” formula (Matt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19), and in another reference in connection with the resurrection narrative mentions that the Jews also knew it (Matt 27:64).

Luke also has two references and one allusion to the resurrection prior to the death of Jesus (Luke 9:22; 13:32; 18:33) and three references in the resurrection

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<sup>13</sup> We can only hypothesize as to why John can speak of the Twelve but, unlike the other three evangelists, does not follow up by listing their names (John 6:67, 70–71; 20:24). John may have assumed that his readers knew of their names from oral tradition or from another Gospel. He may have had a still undetected theological motive, for example, that he was the only one of the original disciples who remained. Absence of a listing of the disciples’ names as they are found in the other Gospels led to speculation of who Nathanael was (John 1:45–51). It is not unlikely that John’s Nathanael appears as Matthew in the synoptic Gospels, since both names mean “the gift of God.”



account itself (Luke 24:7, 21, 46). This further suggests that Paul, by saying that Christ rose on the third day according to the Scriptures, has Matthew and Luke in his sights rather than Mark, where the formula is not used. When Jesus said that he would finish his course on the third day (see Luke 13:32), the phrase by itself became synonymous with the resurrection, an understanding that John may have incorporated in his account of the wedding at Cana. “On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee” (John 2:1). In hearing the phrase “on the third day,” those who heard this passage read could not help but focus on the resurrection of Jesus.

Oddly, none of the resurrection accounts in the Gospels say that Jesus appeared to the Twelve, a phrase unique to Paul. Matthew says that “the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them” (Matt 28:16), and Luke reports that the women told the eleven what they had witnessed at the tomb (Luke 24:9). Use of the number “eleven” in place of “twelve” was a reminder of the treachery of Judas in betraying Jesus. It was also a reminder that others, including Paul, were called apostles, even though they did not qualify as the original witnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus had also appeared to these other apostles. Matthew is the only evangelist that speaks of the original twelve as both the twelve disciples and the twelve apostles (Matt 10:1–2).

Identifying the five hundred brothers who saw the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor 15:6) remains a riddle. Since Paul says that some had fallen asleep, that is, they had died, this can only mean that a majority of them were still living and known to the Corinthians—some individually, but in any case all of them as a group (1 Cor 15:6). Inaccessible witnesses would have hardly advanced Paul’s argument in defense of the resurrection.<sup>14</sup> Paul was presenting a legal-like defense to the Corinthians, who sat almost as a jury who were to be convinced. Saying that some have fallen asleep only has value in an argument if the Corinthians already had come into contact with those who had seen the resurrected Jesus or who had heard their testimony from others. Here Paul’s saying that some of the five hundred had fallen asleep may seem to have little value in his argument for the resurrection of the dead. However, if there was no resurrection of the dead, as some of the Corinthians had claimed, they would have no further contact with those who had fallen asleep, that is, who had died. This raises the claim from possibility to probability that the Corinthians had known some of them and had thought highly of them for the preaching of the gospel.

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:5–8: “He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

Since the number twelve already has taken on a symbolical significance referring only to the eleven chosen by Jesus as his original disciples, the number five hundred might be understood as referring to a large number of people without specification as to how many there really were. Though Paul does not name who the five hundred were, some of them may have been those who are named in the Gospels, since it specifically says that the appearance of Jesus to them was of the same kind as the appearances to Peter and the Twelve. They did not appear out of nowhere to witness the resurrected Jesus. Peter J. Kearney makes a good argument that the five hundred were the first believers in Jerusalem to whom Jesus appeared, and so it is not unlikely that these are persons whom Jesus encountered during his ministry.<sup>15</sup> Among them could have been the seventy sent out by Jesus and entrusted with the Gentile mission (Luke 10:1–17), to whom early church fathers assigned names. Also undeterminable is a group called “all the apostles” (1 Cor 15:7), which by implication includes James and Paul, who identifies himself as the least of the apostles (1 Cor 15:9). “All the apostles” may be the missionaries who like Barnabas were commissioned by particular congregations like Antioch for particular missions (Acts 13:2).

Whoever the five hundred were, it indicates that the number of followers of Jesus at the time of his resurrection was considerable. We cannot discount the five thousand and four thousand whom Jesus fed miraculously with bread and fish, or the three thousand who were baptized on Pentecost (Acts 2:41), or the five thousand men who were converted shortly thereafter. Before Jesus' resurrection, they may have seen and heard him in any number of situations, including the Palm Sunday entrance. Whoever the five hundred were, they were a group large enough that while most were living, some had died. Those who had died were still counted among the witnesses to the resurrection, and so their witness to Jesus' resurrection was considered authentic.

In listing Peter (Cephas) and James, the Lord's brother, Paul puts aside any differences he may have had with them (Gal 2:11–12). By specifically naming and placing Peter and James first in their respective columns of witnesses, Paul recognizes the importance of their witness as leaders of the church to the resurrection.<sup>16</sup> Josephus reports that during the absence of Roman authorities in

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<sup>15</sup> Peter J. Kearney, “He Appeared to 500 Brothers,” *Novum Testamentum* 22, no. 3 (July 1980): 264 n. 84.

<sup>16</sup> It can only be speculated why Paul does not mention John, who with James and Peter was reputed to be a pillar of the church (Gal 2:9), as a witness to the resurrection. It would have been appropriate. This omission could have been for literary reasons, as he had only two columns for the two classes of witnesses. In listing John, Paul would have had to place him after Peter, and that would not have fitted the protocol for the disciple who, on a personal basis, was closest to Jesus. He also did not fit in the second column with those who believed in Jesus after the resurrection.

Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders dropped James to his death from a tower. His martyrdom, shortly before the destruction of the temple,<sup>17</sup> was a prelude to the complete destruction of the city in AD 70 and was one reason among others for the city's devastation, all of which Jesus had predicted (Matt 24:1–2; Mark 13:1–2). At the time Paul was writing to the Corinthians, James was still living. He was a man of standing, according to Josephus, not only in the church, but also among the other inhabitants in Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> James was also as close as anyone else to Jesus, and against the rise of Gnosticism that “spiritualized” the existence of a real flesh-and-blood Jesus into a ghostlike existence, he was important in the proclamation that Jesus had really risen from the dead.

After Paul's first visit to Corinth, it is likely that Peter also visited the church and with his rugged and charismatic personality stayed long enough to develop a following (1 Cor 1:12). It is unlikely that James ever visited this church. In the approximate thirty-year span between Jesus' resurrection (ca. AD 30–33) and James's own martyrdom, James remained in Jerusalem as the bishop of a declining congregation. Under his episcopate, he assembled into his church not only those who were witnesses of the resurrection, but others who had called for Jesus' crucifixion and so like Peter himself had witnessed the event (Act 2:23; 1 Pet 5:1). Residing in Jerusalem, James had daily contact with those who had witnessed the resurrection, and these witnesses shared their experiences with one another. Jesus' resurrection had to be the topic of every sermon preached in that church. How could it be otherwise?

James had made a reputation for himself in sparing the fledgling Christian movement from disintegration by providing a way for Gentile Christians to be full members of the church without first becoming Jews (Acts 15:13–21). He was known first in Galatia (Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12) and then in Corinth and probably in all the churches that Paul and Peter had established. As he had with Peter, Paul had discussed with James the best possible ways to handle having Gentiles in the church, which until that time was predominantly Jewish. On his second missionary journey, Paul had shared the results of these conversations with the churches that he had already established, such as those in Galatia and Corinth (Acts 21:18). With the Gospel of Matthew in hand, he had probably spoken of James as one of the four brothers of Jesus (Matt 13:55) and equally important now as the lead figure in Jerusalem. Paul could also speak of James's role in the Council of Jerusalem in providing a solution that did not require the Gentiles to be circumcised for inclusion

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<sup>17</sup> Florence Morgan Dillman, “James, Brother of Jesus,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* III.621.

<sup>18</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1.200 in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston, new updated ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 538, 815.

in the church and in turn asking the Gentiles to refrain from adultery and eating strangled meat (Acts 15:20).

Paul faced both problems in Corinth, and in resolving the problem there it is likely that he referred to James, who provided the solution that would keep together a church on the verge of being splintered. Unless James was known for his prominent role in the church, it is hard to explain why Paul named him as a witness of the resurrection.

In being spared the Jewish regulations, the Corinthians and Gentiles in all the churches that Paul and Peter had established were in debt to James. Even if the Corinthians did not directly know James, they certainly knew of him and his contribution to church life. As the brother of Jesus, he had stature in the church as one who first came to know Jesus not during his ministry but even before it began.<sup>19</sup> Because James did not believe that his brother Jesus was the Christ before the crucifixion, his testimony to the resurrection was made all the more valuable in that the one raised from the dead had actually lived an ordinary life in Nazareth (John 7:5). James belonged to Jesus' family. He heard others say that he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21) and to save themselves embarrassment tried to take him out of public view. Juridically speaking, James, who with the rest of his siblings was ashamed of Jesus, could be described in terms of current legal practice as a hostile witness. He was the constant factor in the history that began with the family of Mary and Joseph, in which he was the first of the younger brothers of Jesus, and ended with his martyrdom in Jerusalem a few years before the Jewish wars broke out.

Paul's list of the witnesses of the resurrection reflects how the church understood itself as spread across ethnic borders and how it understood who its recognized leaders were. The Corinthians did not exist as a separate gathering of believers isolated from the other followers of Jesus, but already in the AD 50s, the church was in a real sense catholic: the congregations established by the apostles were in communication with one another and together they shared a common set of beliefs. This is evident from how he begins his testimony about the resurrection, saying that what he said about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus did not originate with him or the Corinthians themselves but from eyewitnesses (1 Cor 15:3-4).

Form criticism offers another perspective, in that different accounts and understandings of who Jesus was emerged from congregations separated from one another both in distance and in what each believed. Then, as this theory goes, differences later merged into a nearly unified belief in who Jesus was. This is thought

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<sup>19</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 19-32.

to be a process which continued as late as into the councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381), when it is alleged by some scholars that the church finally came to a full understanding of the deity of Jesus. Form criticism holds that some of these disparities among the various congregations were taken over into the Gospels, especially in their accounts of the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul's epistles offer a different scenario. As far removed as his churches were geographically from one another, all these congregations constituted one church with one faith and one Baptism (Eph 4:4-6) and one understanding of the resurrection. Paul's task in writing to the Corinthians was to convince them that they constituted one fellowship with the church in Jerusalem, whose bishop was James, and thus with this church they had to believe in the resurrection.

Paul's witness of the resurrected Jesus is of a different kind than the witness by the eleven in Jerusalem and Galilee, by James, and by a group called "all the apostles." Unlike these appearances, the appearance of Jesus to Paul did not happen in the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension. Strikingly different, the resurrected Jesus appeared in a light that shone brighter than the sun, and he spoke in Hebrew (Acts 26:14). This experience is reminiscent of the transfiguration, in which Jesus' appearance is compared to that of the sun (Matt 17:2).

Luke may have deliberately intended that, in hearing of Jesus' appearance to Paul, the readers would recall a similar dazzling moment when the angel announced Jesus' birth and the glory of the Lord encompassed the shepherds (Luke 2:9-10). Those accompanying Paul heard the sound of the voice and saw the light, but only Paul heard and understood the words Jesus spoke (Acts 22:9). Having ascended to God's right hand (Phil 2:9-11), Jesus spoke from God's glory to commission Paul to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 26:16-18).

Paul had to be aware that the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to him was so unique and different from the other appearances of Jesus that there would be grounds for questioning its authenticity. In response to these still unasked questions, Paul bolsters the argument for his apostleship by claiming that he worked more than the others for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 15:10). He gives details for this argument in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. By the AD 50s when he was writing to the Corinthians, Paul's suffering for Christ had already become a kind of gospel in its own right that had been known in "all the churches." An argument for Jesus' resurrection based upon Paul's ministry and his suffering for Christ cannot be dismissed as having little value in comparison to the hard evidence of having actually seen the resurrected Christ prior to his ascension.

Although Paul's witness of the resurrected Jesus was of a different kind than what Peter and the other apostles experienced during the forty days between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension, his apostleship on that account was not

inferior to theirs. Jesus' appearance to Paul comes with the commission to be an apostle to the Gentiles. This was an appearance with vocational purpose.

Witness to the resurrection and the call to the apostleship came to Paul in one event. Compare his call to that of the original disciples, who were chosen by Jesus before his crucifixion and confirmed later in the apostolic commission (Matt 28:16–20; Luke 24:45–49; John 20:19–28).<sup>20</sup> For Paul, his witness to the resurrection, his call into apostleship, and a transfiguration-like experience were all wrapped up into one moment.

Along with his witness to the resurrected Christ, Paul's trump card was that what he had suffered for the sake of the gospel was well known, especially in those churches he had established. He wrote to the Galatians that his body bore the marks of the suffering of Christ (Gal 6:17), and from what he wrote in the second letter to the Corinthians, they saw the evidences of what he had endured. His conviction that he was determined to know nothing but Christ and him crucified was matched by what the Corinthians could see as he preached. The content of his sermons was confirmed simply by looking at him.

Though Paul enumerates what he had endured, substantiating his apostleship in his second letter to the Corinthians, they probably knew about these things shortly after he began his ministry among them. He was not telling them anything about himself that they did not already know.

Here Paul's argument could be historically verifiable, not that the same persons had witnessed what he had endured, but that the events that threatened his life by others could be verified, for example, his imprisonment and his being lashed by the Jews. In other cases, his companions were aware of what had happened to him and could have shared what they saw happen to him with the congregations that they established and visited. On this account, Paul's argument is historical in that, like witnesses of the resurrection, others had seen it and shared what they knew with others.

As Paul continues to make his case for the resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15, he moves from those that are historically verifiable to a more theologically structured argument that is not based on the witnesses to the resurrection nor on his own sufferings. Paul sets forth his basic premise in the negative: if the dead are not raised, then Jesus has not been raised.<sup>21</sup> Paul could not

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<sup>20</sup> The commission of the apostles may be less obvious in Mark but is contained in the account of the young man at the tomb telling the women that the disciples and Peter are to meet Jesus in Galilee (16:7). If Mark's readers knew Matthew, as I believe they did, meeting Jesus in Galilee would have been an occasion to confirm both that Jesus had risen from the dead and that the disciples were to take up the task Jesus had given them as fishers of men (Mark 1:17).

<sup>21</sup> "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised" (1 Cor 15:13).

reverse the argument by asserting a general resurrection of the dead, since some Corinthians flatly denied it (1 Cor 15:12). Rather than beginning with the controverted doctrine of a general resurrection of the dead, whose denial prompted the writing of this epistle, he turns this around and starts with the resurrection of Jesus so that it becomes the greater truth or premise, which all the Corinthians believed, making the general resurrection the lesser or the derived truth. The argument that there was no resurrection of the dead, as proposed by Paul's opponents, would be compromised if Jesus had not been raised from the dead. Paul tackles this head-on by asserting what the Corinthians already believe: that Jesus rose from dead (1 Cor 15:3–4).<sup>22</sup> By doing this, he returns to his first argument, in which he presented the witnesses of the resurrection as the evidences.<sup>23</sup> Paul has made his argument for the general resurrection of the dead and could have ended there: that denying the resurrection of the dead nullifies the resurrection of Jesus on which faith is dependent. But he does not end there.<sup>24</sup>

Now that Paul has established the resurrection of Jesus as the basis for the general resurrection with historical and theological arguments, he addresses the question of why all have to die. On this issue there is no disagreement: everyone has to die. Paul introduces Adam as the cause of universal death. This lays the groundwork for his argument that Christ is the cause of a universal resurrection from the dead.<sup>25</sup> Paul could not have pursued this argument unless he assumed that the Corinthians knew in some detail the Genesis accounts of creation and the fall, especially Genesis 3. The Corinthians were not hearing about Adam for the first time. Elsewhere Paul was able to refer back to the first chapters of Genesis in his explanation of the relationship between man and woman (1 Tim 2:13–15). Paul does not have to prove that death pertains to human existence. As diverse as one person

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<sup>22</sup> “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:20–22).

<sup>23</sup> This is in contrast with Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014), who saw the general resurrection of the dead as evidence of Christ's resurrection, which will be demonstrated as true in the future. An argument that makes a resurrection of the dead lying in the future does not provide the kind of evidence around which a historian or anyone else can wrap his hands. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 331.

<sup>24</sup> Leroy Andrew Huizenga takes issue with the commonly held view that the Corinthians rejected the general resurrection and proposes that this was not included in what Paul originally proclaimed. It was not that they denied the general resurrection, but that they interpreted it in non-corporeal terms. Huizenga, “Resurrection Reconsidered,” 108–129, esp. 121. Since even belief in some type of non-corporeal personal existence after death was not uncommon in the ancient world, Paul's reference to a “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44) should be taken as the Holy Spirit who has raised the mortal body to its full glory.

<sup>25</sup> “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor 15:21–22).

is from another or as one people is from another, humanity is joined by a common existence punctuated by death.

God, who is life in himself, in overcoming death follows the pattern he set down in Genesis. The curse that came on all through the one man Adam now will be reversed by giving life to all through the one man Jesus Christ. God created the human race in one man, through whom sin and death entered the world. So also God has reestablished life in the world through one man. In this aspect of his presentation of the general resurrection of the dead, Paul weaves together into one fabric the doctrines of creation, the fall into sin, and the restoration of creation that will take place because God raised Jesus from the dead. Here Paul builds his argument on death as the most universal of all experienced truths, a truth thus accepted by all without proofs. From the commonly held premise that all people die, Paul argues back from the effect to the cause, the one man by whom all were consigned to death. In doing so Paul sets forth God as the cause of all life. The one who created one man's life can take that life away (Eccl 12:7) and then reinstate that life in the resurrection of the dead, in which God will show himself as the creator (1 Cor 15:22).

Paul offers the faith of the readers of his epistle as still another argument for the resurrection (1 Cor 15:17).<sup>26</sup> From what we know from his other epistles, none of Paul's other congregations had as many theological and moral problems as did the one in Corinth. Nevertheless he sees them as believers. "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11), that is, they were baptized in the trinitarian name and had been justified and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Here the argument is striking in that it assumes that the Corinthians held to a recognizable body of doctrinal truths to which Paul could refer in advancing his argument. They evidently believed that at the end time there would be a resurrection of the dead, what would appear in the creed as the *resurrectio mortuorum*. It was a given for Paul and the Corinthians "that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures"

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<sup>26</sup> This argument may anticipate (though unintentionally) Schleiermacher's approach, who derived dogmatics or theology not from the Old and New Testaments but from what Christians believe, which he called Christian consciousness. Hence, the title for his dogmatics, *The Christian Faith*, is well-chosen for the theological program he proposes. In this case, the theologian does not argue from what he can biblically demonstrate, but from what the people believe. Schleiermacher had little use for the Old Testament and gave greater credence to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism than to the New Testament. Paul, on the other hand, gave great credence to the Old Testament as the Word of God, but then also uses the faith of the congregation as a secondary argument. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and James S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 94ff.



(1 Cor 15:3–4), and in support of this faith he lists the witnesses to the resurrection and relays his own experiences.

Paul now considers justification as the effect of what the Corinthians believe (1 Cor 15:17). Unless Jesus has been raised from the dead, the Corinthians would still be in their sins and there would be no hope for them or for those who had died. At this time, the Corinthians had not come as far as the Galatians in saying that works of the law were a factor in justification (Gal 2:16–17), but the denial of the resurrection had the same effect—they were still in their sins.

Among those at Corinth who denied the resurrection of the dead were probably those who followed the more moderating views of Plato in believing that the soul survived death and not the more widely held view among the Greeks—that the dead have no existence at all (1 Cor 15:11–18). Paul assumes that the Corinthians believed in an afterlife of some kind in which the dead continued to exist.

Asking the Corinthians to recall their deceased members (1 Cor 15:18) indicates that the church at Corinth had been established long enough to have members who believed, were baptized, and had died, and then after death they continued to be involved in the affairs of the living. Eating food that had been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8, 10) may refer to the custom of visiting the graves of deceased family members on the anniversaries of their deaths to share meals in which the dead were thought to participate. Cults of the dead were common in the ancient world and still are in some cultures (cf. 1 Cor 10:19–20). In some sense, the Corinthians held that the dead had some kind of existence and so could be involved in the lives of the surviving family members. These graveside meals may have been part of their high respect for the dead that led some members of the church to be baptized on their behalf (1 Cor 15:29).<sup>27</sup>

Irrespective of what these practices were and whether they were tolerated without being approved, those who remembered the dead in these practices, such as being baptized on their behalf, had everything to lose if Christ was not raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:29).<sup>28</sup> This passage may have been and can be used as allowing for a kind of universalism, that after death those who died without faith might be given an opportunity to believe.<sup>29</sup> Paul does not clarify what he has in mind, but a universalism that allows conversion after death stands at odds with his regrets for Israel, who for its unbelief is doomed (Rom 11:19–22) and for whom Paul is willing to offer himself as a substitute sacrifice.

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<sup>27</sup> For other scholarly views concerning what “baptism for the dead” means here, see Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 572–578.

<sup>28</sup> David P. Scaer, *Baptism*, ed. John R. Stephenson, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 11 (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 1999), 56–58.

<sup>29</sup> For a full discussion on the baptism of the dead, see Scaer, *Baptism*, 54–59.

It is not saying too much to say that Christianity from the beginning has had its focus on the afterlife and not this life, a thought that can be gleaned in a negative way from Ecclesiastes that everything in this life passes away. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated this in a positive way by saying that only the treasures laid up in heaven are not subject to corruption (Matt 6:20). Without the promise of an afterlife, Christianity offers hardly more than a philosophical system built on the teachings of a man called Jesus for how life should be lived in this world. Without the resurrection of the dead or some kind of a self-conscious survival of the person after death, Christianity is not a belief worth dying for (1 Cor 15:13–18).

As he comes to the conclusion in his arguments for the resurrection, Paul puts his own reputation and his career as a preacher of the gospel on the line. “We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised” (1 Cor 15:15). It can be concluded from this kind of statement that Paul was well-liked by the Corinthians, who considered him a convincing preacher and had come to see him as their father in Christ (1 Cor 4:15). They had some reason to trust him—and trust him they did.

Through his very first sermons, they had been brought to the conviction that Christ had been raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:3–4). Now if Christ had not been raised from dead, Paul would have proven himself a liar and would have convinced his hearers to believe in things he knew to be totally false. Now, if he could not be trusted to tell the truth on the pivotal doctrine of Christianity—that Christ had been raised from the dead—whatever else he said about this faith was also not likely to be true. Here the choice given by Paul to the Corinthians is that they believe in the resurrection or come to the conclusion that he was a charlatan and that he fabricated other things or perhaps everything else he had said. At stake was not only Paul's reputation, but any affection the Corinthians had for him—and this would have been considerable. All past efforts in establishing and maintaining any friendship with him would have proven to be meaningless. Should this prove to be the case, the Corinthians would have relegated themselves to a pathetic situation of having no hope for the future. “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:14)—a double whammy: his preaching was a sham as was their faith in what he said.

In laying out his argument for the resurrection, Paul assumes that the Corinthians are an orthodox congregation that already believes in the resurrection of Jesus. They are people who await the revelation of the day of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:8), a belief that presupposes that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He who returns as judge is living through the resurrection. As the epistle moves to its conclusion, it is more and more evident that the congregation has serious doctrinal

and ethical problems so that their faith might not have matched Paul's accolades. Paul seems to have been pointing to real underlying problems when he states his desire that they would be of the same mind (1 Cor 1:10).

In the midst of their confusion of what they collectively or individually believed, they were still assembling weekly to hear about and also to confess Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17–20). They heard about the resurrection of Jesus Sunday after Sunday not only in what was preached to them but in a nascent form of what would become our Apostles' Creed. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, he is arguably making a verbal play on a "creed" the Corinthians knew.<sup>30</sup> He probably had already done this in his confession that creation came from the Father through the Son in 1 Corinthians 8:6, "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." This is Paul's trinitarian expansion of Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Paul had a way of expanding creedal formulas into sermons. From these primitive creedal formulas, which developed first into the Romanum and Nicene Creed, there would come the saying that all things were made "by him," that is, the Son. For justification or the forgiveness of sins to have any meaning, Jesus would have had to be raised from the dead. Without the factuality of Jesus' resurrection, what they heard read in their Scriptures and in their liturgies would be vacuous.

Though a majority of scholars hold that 1 Corinthians is the first theologically extended account of the resurrection, there is good reason to hold that Matthew and Luke had been written by the time Paul arrived in Corinth. At least with Matthew in hand and maybe Luke also, the Corinthians knew the narrative of the resurrection with the discovery of the empty tomb. The burial of Jesus belongs to the confession that Paul received and to the message he proclaimed (1 Cor 15:3–4), and essential to this message was that the tomb of Jesus was discovered as empty. Recognition that the tomb of Jesus was empty does not constitute the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, but without the conviction that the tomb was empty, there is no resurrection faith.

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<sup>30</sup> "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3).