

Saturday, August 16, 2008

The Tragedy of the Groundless Gospel, Pt. 7

The Corporeal Christ of the Glorious Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 (1 Cor. 15:5)

The content of the glorious Gospel declares the physical reality of Christ's body in contrast to Gnostic-type heresies of a false spirit-Christ. A dead *body* "was buried" (1 Cor. 15:4; cf. Jn. 19:31-42; Acts 2:2:27, 2:29-32, 13:33-37) and then a resurrected *body* "appeared" (1 Cor. 15:5; cf. Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:19-21:14; 1 Jn. 1:1-2). Both Christ's burial and appearances are important in highlighting the physical humanity of Christ's body. The second of these twin truths of the Gospel of salvation will now be considered in greater detail.

"and that He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve." (1 Cor. 15:5)

1. A Gospel Truth

As previously noted[1], Biblical theologians affirm that it is truly "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3) in matters of eternal salvation that the apostle Paul *includes* the phrase "and that He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve" (1 Cor. 15:5) in the Gospel Creed he recites in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. The Gospel truth that Christ *physically appeared* to His disciples is divinely disclosed to be "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3-5, cf. Lk. 24:36-49; Jn. 20:19-21:14). A number of theologians have elaborated on the significance of this glorious Gospel truth as follows. Price declares the importance of Christ's appearances in the Gospel of salvation:

"THE phrase 'in which terms we preached to you the gospel' in 1 Cor. 15:1 must be remembered in what follows. The list of appearances [in 1 Cor. 15:5] is not simply some interesting or important lore Paul passed down somewhere along the line during his association with the Corinthians. This is ostensibly the Pauline gospel itself, the Pauline preaching in Corinth. "Behind the word 'gospel' in St. Paul we cannot assume a [man-made] formula [cf. Gal. 1:11-12], but only the very preaching of salvation" (Dibelius)."[2]

F. F. Bruce declares the importance of Christ's appearances in the Gospel of salvation:

"Paul uses [*paralambanō*] and [*paradidōmi*] of himself according to the usual terminology of transmission – receiving (from predecessors) and delivering (to successors) . . . [in 1 Corinthians] 15:3 (with regard to the saving events of Christ's death, burial, resurrection and subsequent appearances)"[3]

"It is evident from 1 Cor. 15:3-[5 (and the additional list of witnesses in vv. 6-8)] that the primitive *kerygma* proclaimed not only the events of Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, but also (and emphatically) his appearance to eyewitnesses named and unnamed; Luke reproduces this emphasis faithfully (cf. Ac. 2:32; [3:15;] 5:32; 10:41)."[4]

"The things **of first importance** are four in number: (a) **Christ died**, (b) **he was buried**, (c) **he was raised**, (d) **he appeared** in resurrection to many. Whatever differences there might be in primitive Christian faith and preaching, there was evidently unanimity on these fundamental data."[5]

Sider declares the importance of Christ's appearances in the Gospel of salvation:

"There is no reason for limiting the traditional element to [1 Corinthians 15] vv. 3-4 as does HERING. Since the series of [*hoti*] clauses depending on [*paredōka*] continues through verse 5, vv. 3-5 would seem to be the minimum which can be designated with certainty as part of that which Paul had received. The *traditio*, then, included a citation of at least some of the eyewitnesses. . . . The verification of Jesus' resurrection by the citation of the carefully preserved tradition of eyewitnesses is, accordingly, a significant part of that Gospel which Paul considers of 'first importance'."[6]

Habermas declares the importance of Christ's appearances in the Gospel of salvation:

"Beyond his scholarly and eyewitness testimony, Paul contributes far more to a case for Jesus' resurrection appearances. Few conclusions in current study are more widely held by scholars than that, in 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul recorded a very ancient tradition that actually predates his book, probably by a couple of decades. It could very well predate even Paul's conversion to Christianity. After explaining that he received this from others, Paul succinctly reports the Gospel that was preached in early Christianity: Christ died for our sins and was buried. Afterwards, he was raised from the dead and appeared to many witnesses. . . . Paul was so careful to assure the truth of the gospel message that he returned to Jerusalem 14 years after this initial visit (see Gal. 2:1-10). Amazingly, his purpose was to be absolutely sure that what he preached was true (see Gal. 2:2)! For a

second time, Paul conducted his ancient research. Besides Peter and James, another major apostle, John, was also present. Could Paul possibly have consulted three more prominent Christian leaders? Crucially, these four witnesses were the most influential in the early church. And with a single voice, they testified at this early date to the resurrection appearances of Jesus.”[7]

Crouch declares the importance of Christ's appearances in the Gospel of salvation:

“[1 Corinthians 15 describes] the basics of the Gospel. And you can sum it up in four main words: *Christ died, he was buried, he was raised, and he appeared*. That is more than four words, but in the original language, each of these verbs, these four things Christ did, is one word. . . . we could call them 'The Four Things Jesus Did.' **These are teachings that you can't compromise – you can't change them, and you can't ignore them. If you remove these, you don't have the Christian faith anymore – you have something completely different. This is why in verse 3, Paul said that this is “of first importance.”**”[8]

As both Paul and prominent theologians have noted, the post-resurrection appearances of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:5 are essential in the Gospel of salvation. One “importance” (1 Cor. 15:3) of Christ's appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) in Paul's Gospel is to affirm the *physical reality* of Christ's resurrection, a truth on which many ancient and modern heresies stumble.

2. A Gnostic Denial

It is important to remember that like other pagan religions, Gnosticism has historically denied the *bodily resurrection* of Christ along with the *physical reality* of His post-resurrection appearances (cf. 1 Cor. 15:4-5). Geisler affirms: “*None of the pagan religions believed in a literal, physical, bodily resurrection like the New Testament teaches.*”[9] According to Gnosticism, the resurrection appearances of Christ were merely *apparitions*. This Gnostic denial is evidenced in the words of Konis:

“The post-resurrection appearances of Christ are a series of *apparitions* described in the four canonical Gospels and the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians.”[10]

According to Gnosticism, Jesus is merely “a spiritual being. His humanity is a ‘phantom,’ one of surface appearance only, not real human substance. . . . The Incarnation is really an *apparition*.”[11]

Unfortunately, the spirit of Gnosticism is arguably just as prevalent today as it was in the first few centuries of the church. The present popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is one evidence of this regrettable reality.[12] Concerning contemporary Gnosticism, Burkett states:

"Aspects of Gnostic teaching are reproduced in modern pantheistic philosophies, and in forms of religious doctrine *that deny an objective atonement*. It is easily seen how teaching of this sort strikes at the root of all religion and morality. The personality of God, the personality and free will of human beings, the existence of moral evil, the incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the redemption He accomplished for the world, His resurrection, the whole significance of His person and His work – all this is denied. This is the spirit of Gnosticism." [13]

As Burkett has noted, the Gnostic denial of Christ's *bodily* resurrection and *physical* reality strikes at the root of Christianity and the truth of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-5)!

There is general agreement among evangelical theologians that one importance of Christ's post-resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) in the Gospel of salvation (1 Cor. 15:3-5; cf. Jn. 20:29; 1 Pt. 1:8-12) is to highlight the Savior's *bodily* resurrection and *physical* reality in contrast to Gnostic-type heresies of a purely phantom resurrection. A. T. Robertson affirms:

"[1 Corinthians] 15:3 . . . Four items given by Paul in explaining 'the gospel' which Paul preached. . . . The four items are presented by four verbs (died, *apethanen*, was buried, *etaphē*, hath been raised, *egēgertai*, appeared, *ōphthē*). . . .

[1 Corinthians] 15:4 *And that he was buried (kai hoti etaphē)*. Note *hoti* repeated before each of the four verbs [in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5] as a separate item. Second aorist passive indicative of *thaptō*, old verb, to bury. This item is an important detail as the Gospels show. . . ."[14]

"[1 Corinthians] 15:5 *And that he appeared to Cephas (kai hoti ōphthē Kēpha)*. First aorist passive indicative of the defective verb *oraō*, to see. *Paul means not a mere 'vision,' but actual appearance*. . . . Paul had told all these four facts [in 1 Cor. 15:3-5] to the Corinthians in his preaching." [15]

Norman Geisler affirms that one importance of Christ's appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) in the Gospel of salvation (1 Cor. 15:3-5) is to highlight the Savior's *bodily* resurrection and *physical* reality in contrast to Gnostic-type heresies of a purely phantom resurrection.

Geisler points out that “*Jesus’ Appearance to Peter (1 Corinthians 15:5; cf. John 20:3-9)*”[16] is “**Direct Evidence for the Physical Resurrection of Christ**”.[17] Geisler asserts that these truths are indeed part of the Gospel of salvation. He writes:

"The *physical* resurrection of Christ's body is just as much a part of the gospel as His death (1 Cor 15:1–5). . . . [T]here are soteriological problems with denying the *material* resurrection of Christ. As noted earlier, the New Testament teaches that belief in the *bodily* resurrection of Christ is essential for salvation (Rom 10:9–10). **It is part of the gospel (1 Cor 15:1–5).**"[18]

R. J. Sider affirms that one importance of Christ's appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) in the Gospel of salvation (1 Cor. 15:3-5) is to highlight the Savior's *bodily* resurrection and *physical* reality in contrast to Gnostic-type heresies of a purely phantom resurrection. Sider states:

"Does the word *ōphthē* [in 1 Cor. 15:5] provide any further information about Paul's conception of Jesus' resurrection? . . . There is some evidence that Paul would have assumed that the word *ōphthē* in the traditional formula [of 1 Cor. 15:3-5] connoted appearances in which ocular perception occurred. . . . Further, it is surely significant that Paul, who insisted strongly in [1 Cor. 15] vv. 35ff. on a bodily resurrection, based his belief in the resurrection of the body on the appearances (on the *ōphthē*) of Jesus. . . . How then did Paul conceive of Jesus' resurrection? It is almost certain that he assumed that the risen Jesus appeared to the eyewitnesses he cited in a visually perceptible, bodily form. . . . In order to establish his fundamental belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection he cited the eyewitnesses of the appearances."[19]

Resurrection expert William Lane Craig affirms that one importance of Christ's appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) in the Gospel of salvation (1 Cor. 15:3-5) is to highlight the Savior's *bodily* resurrection and *physical* reality in contrast to Gnostic-type heresies of a purely phantom resurrection. Commenting on Christ's resurrection appearances to Peter and the Twelve cited in 1 Corinthians 15:5, Craig writes:

"The purpose of the *physical demonstrations* is to show two things: first, that Jesus was raised *physically* and second, that he was the same Jesus who had been crucified. *Thus, they served to demonstrate both corporeality and continuity of the resurrection body.* There can be little doubt that such an appearance occurred, for it is attested in the formula [in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5], vouched for by Paul, who had personal contact with the Twelve, and described by both Luke [(Lk. 24:36-49)] and John [(Jn. 20:19-21:14)].

We can try to explain these appearances away as hallucinations if we wish, but we cannot deny they occurred. Paul's information makes it certain that on separate occasions various individuals and groups saw Jesus alive from the dead. According to Norman Perrin, the late NT critic of the University of Chicago: 'The more we study the tradition with regard to the appearances, the firmer the rock begins to appear upon which they are based.' This conclusion is virtually indisputable." [20]

Anthony Thiselton affirms that one importance of Christ's appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) in the Gospel of salvation (1 Cor. 15:3-5) is to highlight the Savior's *bodily* resurrection and *physical* reality in contrast to Gnostic-type heresies of a purely phantom resurrection. Thiselton explains:

"Our understanding of the fourth line, **'He appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve'** (v. 5), cannot be isolated from all of these major considerations set forth already on the basis of vv. 3b and 4. . . . the continuity with earthly history clearly belongs to Paul's frame of thought in 1 Cor 15:3-5 . . . Paul understands Jesus' appearance **to Peter and to the Twelve** as having its basis in events in the public domain . . . Tradition, as Irenaeus stressed over against, e.g., Clement of Alexandria and the Gnostics, above all concerns events which take place in the public domain. . . . The context gives [the meaning of *ōphthē* in 1 Cor 15:5], therefore, a sharper, more 'public' meaning than Marxsen's notion of a mere dawning of individual faith in some private manner, like that of a mental or spiritual perception. . . . Wilckens rightly discusses the issue as one of *foundation*: 'It was the appearances . . . which inspired belief . . . and led to the founding of the primitive community.' . . . it is *God's action in and on the world* in Christ's resurrection [i.e. in His physical resurrection appearances] that serves 'to ground its salvation'." [21]

3. A Glaring Inconsistency

Throughout history the Gospel truth of Christ's resurrection appearances has powerfully declared the corporeal Christ (1 Cor. 15:5). The objective fact of Christ's appearances highlights the physical reality of His body and effectively refutes Gnostic-type heresies of a spirit-Jesus. Thus, when Stegall *omits* the appearances of Christ cited in 1 Corinthians 15:5 from the content of the Gospel of salvation and implies that they are "not absolutely essential for someone to know about . . . and believe . . . in order to go to heaven," [22] **he is eroding the very truths of the Gospel which he claims to uphold**, namely: "the essential, defining elements of the Gospel which must be believed

for one to receive eternal salvation . . . [such] as . . . Jesus Christ is human . . . [and] Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead”[23]! It is exactly the truth of Christ’s appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) which anchors the Gospel in substance and prohibits the Savior from being *redefined* by heresies which deny the physical reality of His resurrection body.[24] It is ironic that although Stegall condemns “belief in . . . a spirit-Jesus,”[25] he is nonetheless eroding the Gospel truth of Christ’s physical reality and bodily resurrection by *omitting* the fact of Christ’s corporeal appearances (1 Cor. 15:5) from the content of the glorious Gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-5; cf. 1 Cor. 1:17, 21).[26]

The next article in the series will discuss the chronology of the glorious Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15, particularly in reference to the third day (1 Cor. 15:4).

ENDNOTES:

[1] Jonathan Perreault, “The Tragedy of the Groundless Gospel, Pt. 4, The Content of the Glorious Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15,”

<http://freegracefreespeech.blogspot.com/2008/06/tragedy-of-groundless-gospel-pt-4.html> (accessed August 15, 2008).

[2] Robert M. Price, “Apocryphal Apparitions: 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 as a Post-Pauline Interpolation,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 2 (Fall 1995): 66-99.

[3] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 88.

[4] F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990).

[5] F. F. Bruce, *1 And 2 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1976), 138.

[6] R. J. Sider, “St. Paul’s Understanding of the Nature and Significance of the Resurrection in I Corinthians XV 1-19,” *Novum Testamentum* 19 (April 1977): 132-134.

[7] Gary R. Habermas, “The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus,”

http://www.4truth.net/site/c.hiKXLbPNLrF/b.2903691/k.A7F4/The_Resurrection_Appearances_of_Jesus.htm (accessed July 14, 2008). Elsewhere Habermas has stated: “1 Corinthians 15:3ff. recounts the gospel facts of the death, burial, resurrection and appearances of Jesus Christ”. (Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* [Joplin: College Press, 1996], 117.)

[8] Steve Crouch, "Things that can never be compromised," <http://www.one-eternal-day.com/2007/03/things-that-can-never-be-compromised.html> (accessed August 6, 2008), bold added.

[9] Norman Geisler, "The Geisler – Till Debate," http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/farrell_till/geisler-till/geisler2.html (accessed August 14, 2008).

[10] Polyvios Konis, "The Post-Resurrection Appearances of Christ," http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_01/Konis.htm#_ftnref1 (accessed August 6, 2008), italics added.

[11] Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 78. Bock emphasizes that the Gnostic Jesus "is a different Jesus from the One to whom Mary Magdalene clung (John 20). That Jesus could be embraced. It is a different Jesus from the One who appeared to Thomas to show him the nail prints on His hands (John 20)." (Ibid., 78-79.)

[12] Bock writes: "One of the more interesting claims in *The Da Vinci Code* appears on page 231. It comes from Teabing, a character who is full of opinions about Christianity that are critical of the church and that possess conspiratorial implications. Here he claims that there were 'more than eighty gospels' considered for the New Testament, but that only four were chosen. *This may be the most misleading statement of 'fact' in the entire novel. . . . The allusion here in part is to what has been called the Gnostic materials.*" (Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004], 61-62, italics added.)

[13] F. C. Burkitt, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 Vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 2:490, italics added.

[14] A. T. Robertson, *Robertson's Word Pictures of the New Testament*, online edition, note on 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4, <http://studylight.org/com/rwp/view.cgi?book=1co&chapter=015&verse=003> (accessed May 18, 2008), italics added.

[15] A. T. Robertson, *Robertson's Word Pictures of the New Testament*, online edition, note on 1 Corinthians 15:5, <http://www.studylight.org/com/rwp/view.cgi?book=1co&chapter=015&verse=005> (accessed July 31, 2008), italics added. Murphy-O'Connor concurs: "[T]he fact that the

creed [in 1 Cor. 15:3-5] says 'he appeared to', rather than 'he was seen by' (Gen. 2:7), betrays the conviction of the first Christians that something objective came into their experience." (Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians* [Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc.], 139.)

[16] Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 Vols. [Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2003], 2:615, 617, italics added. Geisler clarifies that "Peter, of course, saw the empty tomb and the graveclothes just before this appearance (John 20:6-7)." (Ibid., 617.)

[17] Ibid.

[18] Norman Geisler, "The Significance of Christ's Physical Resurrection," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (April 1989):148, 169, bold and italics added. Zeller acknowledges: "*Many so-called 'Christians' claim to believe in the resurrection of Christ*, but they deny that the actual body of Christ was raised from the dead. They might say that 'His spirit lives on' or 'His influence lives on' or 'His memory lives on' but they do not believe that Jesus lives today in a glorified, resurrected body." (George Zeller, "The Resurrection of Christ," <http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/lifeochr/lifeoc15.htm> [accessed August 16, 2008], italics added.)

[19] R. J. Sider, "St. Paul's Understanding of the Nature and Significance of the Resurrection in I Corinthians XV 1-19," *Novum Testamentum* 19 (April 1977): 139-140.

[20] William Lane Craig, "Contemporary Scholarship and the Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ," <http://www.faithfacts.org/search-for-truth/contemporary-scholarship> (accessed July 14, 2008), italics added. Similarly, Engwer notes that "even from 1 Corinthians alone, especially chapter 15, a document that both liberals and conservatives accept as early and as written by Paul, we can dismiss many popular arguments *against* the traditional Christian view of Jesus' resurrection. The claim that the resurrection belief came from unhistorical legends that gradually developed over time is refuted by the earliness of 1 Corinthians and the creed of 1 Corinthians 15[:3-5]. The theory that the witnesses of the risen Christ were hallucinating is contradicted by the realism and carefulness of Paul's testimony and the fact that Jesus sometimes appeared to multiple people at once. Other skeptical theories likewise can't survive the scrutiny of this one passage, much less the combined scrutiny of all of the evidence." (Jason Engwer, "The Three D's and 1 Corinthians 15," <http://ntrminblog.blogspot.com/2005/09/three-ds-and-1-corinthians-15.html> [accessed August 14, 2008], italics added.)

[21] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 1197-1202, bold and italics his. Thiselton draws attention to the fact that Bultmann could *not* spiritualize the public events and objective language of 1 Corinthians 15:5. Apart from 1 Cor. 15:5, Bultmann understood Paul's resurrection language in chapter 15 to be spiritual, not physical. But Bultmann could not reconcile 1 Cor. 15:5 with his spiritual understanding of the passage because this verse clearly affirms that the same One who died, buried, and rose, then appeared again in the public domain! Thus, Bultmann was forced to conclude that in 1 Cor. 15:5 "*Paul is betrayed by his apologetic into contradicting himself*"! (Ibid., 1202.) It is significant that even R. Bultmann understood the importance of 1 Cor. 15:5 in establishing the physical reality and bodily resurrection of Christ.

[22] Tom Stegall, Word of Grace Bible Church handout proposing a change to the Word of Grace Bible Church Doctrinal Statement, "SOLE CONDITION FOR SALVATION"; cf. Stegall, "The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel, Pt. 1," *The Grace Family Journal* (Spring 2007): 9.

[23] Stegall, "The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel, Pt. 1," *The Grace Family Journal* (Spring 2007): 9.

[24] Christ's burial serves this function as well (Isa. 26:17-19; Jn. 16:16-22, 20:6-9; Acts 2:29-31, 13:29, 1 Cor. 15:4).

[25] Stegall, "The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel, Pt. 4," *The Grace Family Journal* (Special Edition 2007): 3.

[26] Stegall, "The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel, Pt. 1," *The Grace Family Journal* (Spring 2007): 9.

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