

# SBJT Forum

**SBJT: When one thinks of crucial and important chapters on the resurrection in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 15 immediately comes to mind. Briefly describe the significant contribution this chapter makes to our thinking about the theme of the resurrection.**

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**Stephen J. Wellum** is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author of *Kingdom through Covenant* (Crossway, 2012) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015).

**Stephen J. Wellum:** It is certainly the case that 1 Corinthians 15 is of singular importance in our understanding of the resurrection. Ironically, this wonderful chapter was written by the apostle Paul in response to some of the sad theological errors present in the Corinthian church. In responding to these errors, Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, writes this chapter and details for us some very important truths regarding the resurrection. It is crucial to remember that the Corinthians did *not* deny the reality of Christ's bodily resurrection as central in securing for believers salvation from sin and hope for the future. Instead, what they denied was their future resurrection. Unfortunately they did not "see" the organic connection between Christ's resurrection and ours and thus began to deny the reality of a future bodily resurrection for believers as part of our redemption in Christ. In other words, they did not grasp the biblical relationship between what Christ did in his death and resurrection and its implications for us.

Was this an insignificant error, something which Christians can differ on yet still be Christians? Paul did not think so. He responds to their false thinking in the strongest of terms. In fact, he argues that a denial of a future bodily resurrection for believers, in reality, is a denial of the gospel! Why?

Because what is true of Christ as our covenant head and Redeemer must also be true of those who are in faith union with him. Denying our bodily resurrection is tantamount to denying Christ's resurrection, but since Christ is raised from the dead, we, as his people, *must* also be raised otherwise Christ's work has failed and our salvation is incomplete.

The significant contributions this chapter makes to our understanding of the resurrection are manifold. First and foremost, the chapter is a great reminder of the centrality and utter significance of Christ's resurrection to God's redemptive purposes. Christ Jesus who died is truly raised from the dead, not merely as another resurrection or better, resuscitations alongside other ones in Scripture (since we assume that those who came back from life died again awaiting the final resurrection at the end of time), but as *the* resurrection of all resurrections, the firstfruits of the final consummated state to come. Paul reminds us that Jesus' cross and resurrection are the events that restore what was lost in Adam and which have ushered in the dawning of the new creation. Christ's work is of singular importance and whatever happens to us in the future is completely due to what he has done and the application of his work to his people. Paul reminds us that Christ's work, in fact, has sent in motion an inevitable chain of events that will only be completed when all of God's enemies are destroyed, including death itself. That is why Christ's resurrection demands our resurrection: if we are not raised bodily from the grave, death is never truly defeated and God can never be "all in all." Ultimately, unless death is destroyed and we are raised, God's place as sovereign Lord of the creation, history, and redemption is in question.

In addition, another important contribution this chapter makes to our understanding of the resurrection is Paul's discussion of the nature of our resurrection bodies and the future state of the believer. There are not many places in the New Testament where this discussion takes place. We see in the Gospels something of what a resurrection body looks like as we witness Christ's resurrection appearances, and in 2 Corinthians 5 Paul discusses something about our resurrection bodies. Yet it is 1 Corinthians 15 which gives us the most detailed discussion and it is this contribution which I would like to highlight.

Starting a new section in v. 34, Paul anticipates a skeptical objection: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" (v. 35). Paul is clear that our future resurrection is a physical resurrection in a transformed

body, patterned after Christ, and perfectly suited for our final state. Due to the organic relationship between Christ and his people, since Christ was raised bodily, there must of necessity be a bodily resurrection for believers. However, our resurrection body is not merely a resuscitation of a dead body, rather it is a body adapted to the new conditions of the future. There is, then, both continuity and discontinuity between our present bodies and those of the resurrection. Our present bodies are earthly, natural (*psychikon*), subject to decay, but the raised body is heavenly, spiritual (*pneumatikon*), and incorruptible. The final result is a glorious resurrection transformation of both the dead and the living wherein the final enemy, death, is swallowed up in victory.

In this section, there are three interlocking and ascending steps that Paul makes to ground what he has said: (1) An appeal to the natural order that God has made to argue for the reasonableness of the resurrection body (vv. 36-44). (2) An appeal to the nature of Christ's resurrection body to argue for the certainty of the resurrection body (vv. 45-49). (3) An appeal for the absolute necessity of the resurrection in order for believers to enter our heavenly existence and for God's plan of redemption to be complete (vv. 50-57). Let us briefly comment on each of these steps.

First, in vv. 36-44, Paul appeals to what God has made in the natural order, to seeds and kinds of bodies (*sōma*)—an appeal not only from the known to the unknown, but also an appeal to analogy. In such an appeal, Paul links together the way God has ordered the natural world to the reasonableness of the resurrection body. Paul first appeals to how God has designed a seed. One ought to notice from nature that it is only when the seed is sown and dies that “life” comes (v. 36). Death then is a kind of precondition for life, not in the sense that Paul thinks death is an inevitable fact of the universe, but in the sense that God has so ordered nature, particularly the seed that it “demonstrates that out of death a new expression of life springs forth.” Even in death, God's purposes are not thwarted. Why then should the Corinthians find it incredible that in the case of their death, the resurrection body comes as a new expression of life? “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable” (v. 42). Paul then goes one step further: not only does the seed in the natural realm demonstrate that life arises out of death, it also displays that the life that comes forth does so in a transformed body (vv. 37-38). In other words, the end product of the seed planted in the

ground does not look like the original seed, even though there is obviously some kind of continuity. By analogy, if God has so arranged and ordered the natural realm in this way, then why is it hard to imagine that God is not able to transform our present bodies, which will die and be buried, into that of a transformed, resurrection body? Paul concludes: “It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power” (v. 43). Lastly, Paul also observes the fact from the natural realm that God gives to each seed its own kind of body adapted to its own kind of existence (vv. 38-41). By analogy, if God has so ordered the natural realm this way, then why is it hard to imagine God doing this in the case of the resurrection body? Just as God creates every seed or thing with its own kind of body adapted to its own kind of existence, so God makes our resurrection bodies adapted to a future resurrection existence. Paul concludes: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body (*sōma pneumatikon*)” (v. 44), i.e., a body adapted for our final consummated state dominated by the Spirit of God, living in a new creation.

Second, in vv. 45-49, Paul does not want to leave his argument merely at the reasonable level; instead he wants to argue for the *certainty* of our resurrection body due to our union with Christ. He once again develops the Adam-Christ typological relation but this time to demonstrate that the kind of body we will have as believers is patterned after Christ’s resurrection body. Paul quotes from Genesis 2:7 (v. 45). Paul’s main point is that Adam was given a certain kind of body at creation—a natural (*psychē*) body; a body of the earth; a body, which as a result of sin, is subject to death and decay, and “in Adam” we bear his likeness. But Christ is different; he is a life-giving spirit (*pneuma zōopoioun*) since his life is the life of heaven itself, and as the head of his people, his resurrection body, thankfully, becomes the pattern for us—a certain pattern. But Paul reminds the Corinthians, the reality of our resurrection, patterned after Christ’s resurrection, is still future. Just as we have worn the image of Adam, so we shall wear the “image of the man of heaven” (see v. 49). Even though the new order that Christ has inaugurated has already broken in, we must still await the future when our lowly bodies will be transformed, fitted for the condition of the consummated state. This is what the Corinthians have failed to understand.

Third, in vv. 50-57, Paul finishes this glorious chapter but raising his argument a notch. He is not merely content to argue for the reasonableness or

even the certainty of our resurrection body; instead he insists for *the absolute necessity of it*. Our perishable and mortal body *must* (*dei*) be clothed with that which is imperishable and immortal (v. 53). Believers, whether dead or alive, must be transformed in order to enter the kingdom of God in its fullness (see vv. 50, 53-54). This was something the Corinthians forgot. They were influenced by false beliefs which ultimately undermined the significance of the physical order, but Paul does not agree. The triune God of redemption is also the God of creation, and given that sin has marred God's good order, redemption is not complete until sin and death are destroyed. But for death to be destroyed completely there must of necessity be the resurrection of the dead. Biblically, one cannot think of the final state of believers without resurrected, transformed bodies. Built on creation-fall structures, if God is truly to redeem his people and transform this world, Christ must not only be raised but we must be raised with him. Without Christ's resurrection; without our resurrection in him, there is no biblical salvation. That is why all those who die in Christ and those of us who are alive when Christ returns will, and *must*, be raised and transformed. God's plan of salvation is only complete when it is so.

When will this take place? At the end; in an instant; when the trumpet sounds. Those who are alive when Christ returns will be transformed (v. 51). Those who are dead will come out of their graves—transformed (v. 52). And it must be so. Our bodies, whether dead or alive, in their present “natural” form must be transformed into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious resurrection body. For it is only then that what Christ inaugurated in his first coming will be consummated in his second. The long chain of decay and death inaugurated by the first Adam will finally be irrevocably broken by the last Adam. Death itself, the last enemy, finally and definitively, will be destroyed.

Even though Paul's discussion of our resurrection bodies is short, it is still of vital importance. In this chapter we learn that our future state as believers is one in which we are bodily raised, transformed, and glorified. Forever and ever we will dwell in God's presence, living in a renewed universe, carry out our tasks as image-bearers for his glory. In such a state, as Paul wonderfully states, our resurrection bodies will be imperishable (*phtharton*) and immortal (*athanasian*), that is, sustained by God's power and grace forever. Like Christ's resurrection body, our resurrection bodies will be fitted for

the new creation. They will not be susceptible to disease or death. They will be physical bodies raised in “glory,” “power,” and “dominated and directed by Holy Spirit” (*pneumatikos*) with some kind of continuity with our present bodies but gloriously transformed. May Paul’s wonderful teaching on the resurrection give us comfort and hope in this world as we long for the appearing of our Lord and the our final resurrection state.

### **SBJT: How should a pastor preach the resurrection of Christ?**

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**Robert Vogel** is the Carl E. Bates Professor of Christian Preaching and Associate Vice President for Institutional Advancement at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Prior to this role he served as Professor of Homiletics for twenty years at Western Seminary, where he also served as an Associate Dean and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program.

**Robert Vogel:** The resurrection of Jesus Christ is commonly acknowledged to be the central doctrine of Christian theology and faith. The doctrine and its significance are prominently featured in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament. That the doctrine is notably presented in the preaching of Peter and Paul (e.g., Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 13:30, 34; 17:31; 1 Cor 15) suggests that it ought to be featured prominently in the preaching of the contemporary Christian preacher as well.

Accordingly, a faithful Christian preacher could not, and certainly should not, expect to neglect the proclamation of this great truth. Indeed, an expository preacher, especially when preaching in the New Testament, would have to work to avoid this doctrine. While hints of the doctrine exist in the Old Testament, it explicitly pervades the New Testament. And preaching resurrection texts, the pastor will discover that resurrection truth is at once theological and practical.

So if this teaching is so prominent and pervasive in the Scriptures and in Christian theology, how should a faithful pastor preach the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ? What follows are a few suggestions.

1. *Preach the centrality of the resurrection to the Gospel.* The resurrection of Christ is central to the good news that a gracious God sees fit to redeem fallen sinners. While the Gospel may be seen as a broad and comprehensive manifestation of divine grace, the heart of the Gospel, summed up by the apostle Paul, features the death of Christ for our sins (confirmed by his burial) and his resurrection on the third day (confirmed by his post-resurrection

appearances). Both his death and resurrection were “according to the Scriptures,” indicating the anticipation of this Gospel truth in the Old Testament (1 Cor 15:3-4).

2. *Preach the resurrection of Christ in evangelistic appeals.* Because Christ’s resurrection is at the heart of the Gospel, it is foundational to the Gospel’s application in the salvation of sinners. Paul said as much: “I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved (1 Cor 15:1-2). Thus, a rightly-informed evangelistic appeal should call sinners to believe and confess Christ’s resurrection: “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom 10:9, 10).

3. *Preach the necessity of the resurrection to validate the believer’s faith.* Paul contends that if Christ is not raised, our faith is vain (empty) and worthless, and we are yet in our sins (1 Cor 15:14, 17). The gracious promises of God attendant to salvation are a cruel deception, if Christ is not raised from the dead. But Christ *is* risen, and the faith of believers is validated (1 Cor 15:20). The resurrection is God’s stamp of divine approval on the redemptive work of the cross, and the basis of our confidence that we have been justified (Rom 4:23-25).

Peter also establishes the connection of the resurrection to our confident hope of eternal salvation: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3-5).

4. *Preach the resurrection of Christ as the pattern for our own future bodily resurrection.* Salvation extends not only to the believer’s soul, but also to the body. As death separates soul and body, resurrection reunites the two. Having established the centrality of the resurrection in the Gospel and in our faith, Paul contends that Christ, in his resurrection, is the first fruits of “those who are asleep” (1 Cor 15:20). His resurrection (the first) is the promise of like kind to those to follow. That is, believers will likewise be raised with glorified bodies, not those mortal and perishable, but rather one that is imperishable (1 Cor 15:35-49).

This message is a practical truth of great hope and comfort to believers. When grieving the death of a loved one, or facing the reality of our own mortality, we need an authoritative word concerning a future beyond our

present experience. The preaching of the resurrection of Christ and its practical significance for our eternal future satisfies that life question (see John 11:25; 1 Thess 4:14).

5. *Preach the resurrection's necessity for Christ's present priestly work.* Among several aspects of the infinite superiority of Christ, the book of Hebrews presents the resurrected and exalted Lord Jesus (Heb 1:3; see also Eph 1:19-22) in his ongoing priestly work. Indeed, the superiority of his priesthood over that of the old covenant is, in part, because while Aaron and his descendants died, Jesus continues forever, holding his priesthood permanently (Heb 7:23-25). As our Savior and great high priest, Jesus intercedes for us before the Father, a ministry directly tied to his resurrection (Rom 8:34).

6. *Preach the apologetic significance of the resurrection of Christ.* The resurrection of Jesus is a common topic treated in Christian apologetics due to the centrality of the doctrine in the Christian faith, and because its historical factuality is often denied and the bodily nature of the resurrection is widely debated. A faithful pastor should teach and preach the doctrine with emphasis on the apologetic arguments in its defense. Ample textual evidence exists, particularly in the Gospels, to establish the historical, bodily resurrection of Christ (accounts of ten post-resurrection appearances are found in the Gospels), and the epistolary explication of the event further confirms this understanding (see e.g., 1 Cor 15). Faithful exposition of these texts, coupled with familiar apologetic arguments, will equip congregations of believers with a right understanding of and basis for belief in this crucial doctrine.

Moreover, the resurrection of Jesus has apologetic importance related to the reliability of Christ's claims. For example, Paul asserts that Jesus was declared (shown) to be the Son of God by his resurrection (Rom 1:4); that is, claims of his deity were verified by his resurrection. Also, during his earthly ministry, Jesus asserted that his resurrection would validate (as a sign) his authority (John 2:18-22).

Faithful Christian preaching is multi-faceted, for it expounds the breadth and depth of biblical teaching on a wide range of themes. But the common, central core of Christian preaching is the Gospel, and at the heart of the Gospel is Christ's resurrection. We serve a risen Savior, and proclaiming this truth lifts preaching to a high plain of celebration, worship, and edification.



**SBJT: It has been argued by eminent historians like David Bebbington that one of the distinguishing marks of evangelical Christianity is “crucicentrism.” And yet, in the examples of preaching given in the New Testament, the Book of Acts, for example, the preaching of the resurrection is a major component of apostolic proclamation. Does this mean that our Evangelical forebears have not been fully biblical at this point?**

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**Michael A. G. Haykin** is Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is also Adjunct Professor of Church History and Spirituality at Toronto Baptist Seminary in Ontario, Canada. Dr. Haykin is the author of many books, including “*At the Pure Fountain of Thy Word: Andrew Fuller As an Apologist* (Paternoster Press, 2004), *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival* (Evangelical Press, 2005), and *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality* (Evangelical Press, 2007), and *Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church* (Crossway, 2011).

**Michael A. G. Haykin:** There is no doubt that Professor Bebbington is right when he identifies crucicentrism as a key mark of Evangelical Christianity. Yet, this does not mean that Evangelicals in days gone by did not acknowledge the importance of the resurrection of Christ. Take, Andrew Fuller (1754–1815), for example. This eighteenth-century Evangelical Baptist pastor-theologian focused much of this preaching on the cross. Yet, he equally affirmed that “a belief in the resurrection of Christ is allowed, on all hands, to be essential to salvation, as it is an event upon which the truth of Christianity rests” and he cited 1 Corinthians 15:14–15 and Romans 10:9 as proof. For him, 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, which mentions the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, is a key definition of the gospel. As he stated of this definition: “Here also we see what is the gospel, and what that is on which the present standing and final salvation of Christians depends.”

In another place, arguing from Revelation 1:18’s statement of the risen Jesus, “I am he that liveth and was dead,” Fuller pointed out that if our salvation was accomplished by the death of Christ alone without the resurrection, what joy would there have been in that? In his words:

What would the feast be, if the Lord of the feast were not there? Though, in enduring the death of the cross, he had ‘spoiled principalities and powers,’ and

‘made a show of them openly’; yet if he had not lived to enjoy his triumphs, what would they have been to the redeemed, and even to the angelic world? If the King’s Son had been lost, the victory of that day would have been turned into mourning. If it had been possible for him to be holden of death, the loss to the moral empire of God must have exceeded the gain, and the saved themselves must have been ashamed to appear in heaven at the expense of the general good!

But, Fuller went on: “But we are not called to so painful a trial. Our salvation, expensive as it was, was not at this expense. He was dead, but he liveth! “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!”” Thus, for Fuller, the resurrection of Christ was not only essential to the salvation of the people of God, but also to their “felicity in heaven.”

Our Evangelical forebears as evidenced by Fuller knew that it was the cross *and* the resurrection which was both required for our glorious salvation in Christ. Today, may we never separate what God has joined together and may we preach Christ crucified and risen from the dead as central to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.