

## **FINDING COMMUNITY: WE WILL ALL BE CHANGED**

By Andrew Wilson  
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1 Corinthians 15: 50-58  
Philippians 3: 17-21

When I was a youth pastor serving in Kansas City I had a friend – another youth pastor – who got into trouble at the church where she served. Karen didn't like what she was hearing from the middle-aged man she had recruited to teach a class for high school students. She told him he needed to give up his teaching position, but he resisted. He said he enjoyed working with the students and wasn't going to be pushed around by a woman 20 years his junior who didn't like his theology. But my friend held her ground. She told him she'd find some other place for him to serve.

The man was well-respected throughout the church and he had the ear of the senior pastor. No one was surprised, therefore, when the man complained to the pastor about Karen and the pastor reinstated him to his teaching position.

Karen called me to get my take on the situation. "I probably sound like a hothead," she told me, "but if this guy is allowed to keep teaching our kids, I'm planning to quit."

"Sounds kind of extreme," I said. "I work with a few volunteers that I wonder about, but holy cow – is this really worth *quitting* over?"

"Andy," she said, "the man doesn't believe in the resurrection! He told the kids he didn't believe Jesus rose from the dead, and that you could still be a Christian even if you didn't believe the Easter story!"

"Wow," I said. "Your senior pastor understands that, and he's still defending this guy and telling you to let him teach?"

"Yes! He says he doesn't want to rock the boat by embarrassing one of our key leaders. So I need to stand down."

I was silent for a moment. Then I said, "Good for you. You're doing the right thing. I'd leave too."

In chapter 15 of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Paul addresses a similar controversy within the church. There are people within the body who are saying flatly, "Dead people don't come back to life." And like my audacious friend Karen, Paul isn't very diplomatic in confronting them. He's not very accommodating of their point of view. He says, "If you take that view, that means that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. And if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then he's not a living Savior. And, in that case, the whole Christian faith collapses in a great, big heap."

Most Christians agree with Paul's point. We understand that the resurrection is central to our faith, and that if we deny Christ's resurrection, we deny Christ's lordship. But what does the resurrection signify? What does it show us about God's plan and about our part in that plan? And what difference does Christ's resurrection make for us here and now?

Today we're going to look at how Paul addresses those questions for the new Christians in Corinth. If what Paul teaches is true, the Lord's resurrection isn't just an isolated event in history; rather, it's the key to understanding history. More than that, it's the key to understanding the entire Bible.

You can tell me later if you think Paul and I are exaggerating.

Let's recognize from the start that when we talk about resurrection we're talking about something that no one living on earth has ever experienced. That means that resurrection isn't a verifiable matter of fact. Rather, it's a matter that has to be taken on faith.

You might say, "But the Bible provides us with lots of evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. Hundreds of people saw him alive after he had been crucified. So there's factual evidence supporting his resurrection."

Yes, that's all true – and Paul is eager to point that out. The reports of the people who saw Jesus alive after his death are compelling, and they definitely help to undergird our faith.

But even those who saw the Risen Lord weren't sure just what had happened. Was the miracle one of resuscitation? Had Jesus been brought back from the dead like Lazarus? Or had Jesus' body been changed somehow?

In his new state Jesus certainly *seemed* different. For example, he didn't stay with his followers, as he had before his death, but instead Jesus had this bizarre way of appearing to them and then vanishing into thin air. He ate with them like an ordinary man, but the last time they saw him Jesus floated up to the sky and out of sight like a feather that's picked up by the wind.

What did it all mean? Would Jesus eventually grow old and die like other people? Or had Jesus undergone some kind of metamorphosis? Was he now maybe a spirit that only *appeared* to have a body?

The point is that the physical evidence gathered by the disciples was confusing. It didn't provide them with clear answers to their questions. The answers came when the disciples regained their faith. They began to see clearly when they remembered who Jesus was and what he had taught them.

Yes he was an ordinary man. But he was also God's beloved Son. That meant that he could never die.

Yes the Lord had suffered a humiliating death on a cross. But he promised to be with them always. That meant that, in some sense, he was still united with them *in the body*.

Yes, on the day Jesus died the forces of evil seemed triumphant. But over the days and weeks that the Risen Lord appeared to them, the disciples began to see a new reality. They saw that in raising Jesus from the tomb, God had signaled his victory over sin and death. They saw that what was true for Jesus was true for all of his followers: they would share in his resurrection. They saw new life coming to the old creation.

The skeptics in Corinth have heard all this many times before and they aren't buying it. Their argument is: "People don't come back from the dead – end of story." These cynics aren't the kind of people Paul would want teaching Sunday School in Corinth. But Paul doesn't condemn them or kick them out of the church. Instead, with the goal of awakening their faith, he writes the most clear-eyed exploration of resurrection found in the Bible. And he does it without employing a lot of philosophical jargon. He uses things that can be seen to explain things that are hidden from sight.

First Paul focuses on a seed. When you place a seed in the ground, over time it sprouts and grows into something very different. It's sown as one kind of body, but then it sprouts and rises from the ground as another kind of body. Paul's point is that there's a wondrous continuity between the seed and the plant. Though they're radically different in their function and appearance, the one is clearly derived from the other.

Seeds and plants can help us to understand our earthly life and the life that is to come for all of God's children. After we die our earthly bodies will dissolve like seeds in the ground. Later we'll rise up in bodies that are radically different. We'll receive a new kind of body fit for a new kind of life. Yet there will be a wondrous continuity between the old and the new.

Next Paul focuses on the incredible variety of bodies found throughout creation. He's not thinking of humans who are short and tall, and skinny and fat. He's thinking of every kind of body, even inanimate ones like rocks and lakes. He points out that everything in creation has a purpose, and everything has a body that's adapted to that purpose. Because that's true, Paul declares, it's reasonable to expect that God will give his children bodies that will be adapted to life in his eternal kingdom.

This is the kind of reasoning that drives atheists up the wall. Paul is reflecting a theocentric worldview that some would sneeringly call "pre-scientific." He's saying that the objects in the universe take the form they do because God created them to serve his purposes. The scientific worldview that permeates our culture takes a very different approach. It assumes that objects in the universe take the form they do because of the random interactions of mass and energy in space-time over the history of the universe.

These two worldviews – the one that puts God at the center and the one that put science at the center – are radically different. But it's important to see that they're not incompatible. They're two ways of

seeking to understand the same reality. You employ theology when you're thinking about life's purpose and meaning. And you employ science when you're trying to figure out how to get to build a rocket, or how to kill cancer cells. The approach you take depends on what you're trying to accomplish. The main point is that, contrary to what you hear from atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, you don't have to choose one over the other. You can embrace them both.

Paul is reminding us in Corinthians 15 that there's nothing random about the organization and structure of the universe. Everything has a purpose even if we don't understand what it is. Every living creature and every inanimate object plays a part in God's great plan. Our purpose, as disciples who bear Christ's image, is to grow in Christ's likeness and bear fruit for God's kingdom. So it stands to reason that God would give us bodies like the one the Lord received when he was glorified.

Paul goes on to describe what life is going to be like in our new bodies. Again, though, Paul doesn't speculate wildly about things that are hidden from us. Instead, he explains resurrection life by contrasting it with our current state of existence.

He says, first, that while the body we now occupy is corruptible, our resurrection body is going to be incorruptible.

How many of you have had this nasty little cold that I caught last week? If you'd like to give it a try, just take a stroll through the church grounds anytime during CFC hours.

I'm just grateful I didn't get the flu that's putting so many people in the hospital. Stealing a line from Johnny Carson, I'd rather have my mouth duct taped to the tail pipe of a Greyhound bus and be dragged naked through the Mojave Desert.

Colds and the flu remind us that the tiniest things can bring us down. They remind us that our bodies are vulnerable, that they're slowly wearing out, and that one day they're going to fail us.

The body we're going to get after we die is never going to get sick. It's never going to grow old. It's never going to expire. It will allow us to enjoy God's blessings to the full without being spoiled or corrupted by them. Our new body will be adapted to life in God's kingdom in ways that will allow us to be abundantly productive even as we're growing in character and strength.

I love the way William Barclay makes the point. He says that "in the life to come there will be a permanence in which the lovely things will never cease to be lovely and beauty will never lose its sheen."

Paul's second point about our resurrection bodies is that they aren't going to be weak and constantly in need of rest. Instead they're going to be tireless.

I heard a story recently about a 97-year-old man who was lying upstairs at home on his deathbed. Smelling the aroma of cookies baking in the oven, he decided he'd like to have one last cookie before he

died. Slowly, agonizingly, he crawled out of bed, onto the floor, down the stairs, and into the kitchen where his wife was busy baking. With his last remaining strength he crawled to the table and lifted his withered hand to the cookie sheet. Just as he grasped the warm, moist chocolate chip cookie – his favorite kind – his wife suddenly whacked his hand with a spatula.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, gasping for breath.

"Those are for the funeral!"

Life can wear us down. The world is filled with joys and pleasures, but our capacity to enjoy them is limited. That's what makes death seem so unnatural and so unfair. God has hardwired into us a longing for his goodness and his life. The author of Ecclesiastes declares that God "has set eternity in the human heart" (3:11). The Psalmist writes, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (42:2).

Paul is more explicit about our heart-felt desires. As people who know Jesus and have been given the Holy Spirit, Paul says, we're haunted by the sense that our life is incomplete, that we haven't yet reached our goal. We yearn for a life that is more and more productive and that never grows stale. In Paul's words, we "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies."

In our new bodies, Paul says, we'll be tireless.

Finally, Paul says that life in our resurrection bodies will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

God has given us the Spirit in this life, yet we're constantly resisting him. Sin prevents us from welcoming the Spirit and cooperating with him. So we never realize our full potential as servants of God. We always fall short.

In the life to come, Paul declares, we will have spiritual bodies that will be ready and willing to receive God's richest blessing. The Spirit will be able to fill us in ways that are impossible in this life. And with that full measure of the Spirit, God's vision for our life will be fulfilled. We'll be able to worship, to serve and to love the Lord with pure hearts.

We've covered a lot of ground. What are the most important things we learn from the Bible about heaven, and God's plans for the planet? Here are three truths to hang onto:

First, we need to understand that God leaves it to us to decide between eternal life and eternal death. He doesn't impose his will on us; he allows us to choose between eternal life with him, or eternal separation from him. Will we listen to all the smart people who say there's no God and no life beyond the grave? Or will we listen to the voice of creation testifying to its Creator?

Second, we should remember that this life is a warm-up, a practice-round, a staging ground for our life in eternity. Our main focus in this life should be to prepare for the life to come. In the words of Matthew Henry, “It ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our final day.” We do that not by retreating from the world, but by investing ourselves completely in the things that will help to bring God’s kingdom to earth.

Finally, we should realize that the trials and tribulations we endure on earth are temporary, and are being used by God for our good. We experience pain in this life because our world is lost in sin, and is in the process of being liberated and transformed. That process is messy and at times even agonizing. But know it’s all going to end well. The sun will rise, the darkness will be dispelled, and God’s new world will be born – in his time and his way.