

Whatever Happened to the Resurrection?

Picture the scene: a close relative or loved one of yours has been in a horrible accident. You arrive on the scene, only to hear the paramedics say that there is nothing more they can do. Your loved one clasps your hands and begs you to share the gospel with him one more time. His life is draining out of them as he speaks. He is unsaved and have resisted attempts by you to win them to Christ many times. Now you have just about 60 seconds to share the gospel with his.

What would you say? How is your understanding of the life-giving truth of the gospel?

A typical 21st century gospel would go like this: OK , First, you're a sinner. Second, sin brings death and hell. Third, Jesus died on the cross for your sins. Fourth, you must accept Him now so you can go to heaven and not hell.

Sounds about average, doesn't it? Those four spiritual laws, or the five steps to salvation are almost universal on gospel tracts, gospel literature and even gospel messages. But they are often lacking on this point: whatever happened to the resurrection?

Ask any theologian for the Biblical definition of the gospel , and they will take you to 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Christ died for our sins, proved by His burial, and Christ rose from the dead, proved by the witnesses. These are the two pillars of the gospel. The one cannot be without the other. I suggest, though, that the large majority of Christians today cannot explain the relevance of the resurrection in the gospel. It's my belief that as we try and make the gospel 'bite-sized' and edit it into fitting into the attention span of today's MTV audiences, we have made a critical error: we have edited the resurrection from the gospel.

In today's gospel, the main point is that Christ died for us. That seems to be the verb in the gospel , the action, the main point. The fact that He rose just seems like a happy ending to the story. The fact that He rose doesn't seem to have much bearing on the main point of many modern-day gospel presentations; it's just an added feature that can be dispensed with, like the ascension, or the virgin birth.

Ask a Christian why Christ had to rise from the dead, and the reply will more than likely be, "So He could be alive to save us". True, but only part of the truth regarding the resurrection. Pick up the average tract, listen to gospel sermons and you will hear the resurrection strangely absent. Some pay lip service to it, some include it merely because they feel it orthodox to do so.

I believe the weak and compromised gospel being preached today is partly due to the omission of the resurrection from the gospel presentation. I'm not saying Christians are denying the *fact* of His resurrection, but I strongly believe that many are omitting it in their gospel presentation sometimes unwittingly, sometimes by choice. By omitting it when we share the gospel, we can end up watering down the true message of the gospel.

It wasn't always so. Take the book of Acts. Out of numerous sermons, testimonies and defences, just about all of them mention the resurrection directly when referring to the gospel. The description of the apostles given in Acts 4:33 "And with great power gave the apostle witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."

Acts 17 :2-3 “And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered and risen again from the dead and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.”

“Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel” (2 Tim 2:8)

Read the writings of Polycarp and other early Christians, and you will see the same thing. When the gospel is mentioned, the cross and the resurrection are presented as Siamese twins, inseparable for the purpose of presenting the truth of the gospel. Even the Reformers, Luther, Calvin, who weren't perfect theologically, but brought the gospel back to prominence, present the resurrection as essential in the gospel. Wesley, Moody, Spurgeon, all do more than pay lip service to the resurrection, they saw it as a vital ingredient in presenting salvation to the sinner.

Do you? It is only our Laodicean church today, that has descended into compromise and has said, ‘We are rich, and have need of nothing’, including Christ. We don't need the Risen Lord anymore, that's why He is outside the Laodicean church, knocking, because He is collateral to our modern gospel. We'll just take His death on the cross, thank you very much, a handy substitution, but as to Him, the Risen Lord, well, no thanks.

Consider from Scripture why the resurrection is crucial to an understanding of the gospel.

I. The Resurrection Explains the Purpose of Salvation

Romans 6 is used to teach Christian living, and that fits the context. But what many people don't grasp is that Paul is using the basics of the gospel to teach these things. He is describing the transaction that occurs when we are saved and then urging Christians to behave in an appropriate way in response to it. But notice how clear the death and resurrection are mentioned as complimentary parts of the gospel. V 4-10. Notice v7, 8,9,10.

The gospel is a death and resurrection. All of us know that sin's punishment is death (Romans 6:23). How often do we realise that sin's cure is also death? Picture a doctor telling you that you have a terminal disease. When you ask if there is a cure, he nods and says, “Death”. He is right, the death of your body will be the thing that kills the disease as well. It lives on your life. The same is true of sin. The gospel is that our sin is an evil causing death within us. Ironically the only way to be free from sin is through death. But our own death will not suffice. But the death of Christ is accepted on our behalf. We are co-crucified with Him. Our hostile self-life is killed on the cross once for all. But that by itself will only be half a solution. Therefore we are raised with Christ, His new life residing in us. 2 Corinthians 5:14-17: “For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: ¹⁵And *that* he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. ¹⁶Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we *him* no more. ¹⁷Therefore if any man *be* in Christ, *he is* a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” The gospel has a negative and a positive- the cross is the negative, the death we die to be rid of sin, the resurrection is the positive, the life we gain in its place. It

is a removal of the “I Will” life of self and a replacement with the “Thy will be Done” life of Christ. (Gal 2:20.) The gospel is as Dave Hunt put it, accepting the death of Christ as my own death, and receiving His resurrection life as my new life.

Now let’s take the resurrection out of the gospel and see if we can still present the gospel this way, as the end of my sinful life, and the start of His new righteous one? Can you present the gospel as just the death of Christ and accurately convey these truths? You can’t. The gospel becomes merely: sin brings death/ But Jesus died for you, so you don’t have to die/Accept Him so you can go to heaven.

The point of the gospel shifts from my sin, my rebellion to God, its cure, His new life in me, to **the consequences of my sin** and how to get rid of them. It’s well illustrated by the use of two characters who were there on the day of Christ’s crucifixion. The one was Barabbas, the other was the thief on the cross. Jesus truly was Barabbas’ substitute. He took Barabbas’s place and Barabbas presumably went on to live a life selfishly for himself. Some people think that substitution is like that, that that is the gospel. Jesus takes my place, and I’m off the hook. But that is not the gospel. It is better illustrated by the thief on the cross who truly repented, and figuratively, was crucified **with** Christ. When we accept Jesus as our substitute, we are accepting His perfect death as our own, since only His death will be accepted by God as atonement for sins, and then we are accepting His perfect life as our own as only His perfect righteousness will be accepted by God. It is a co-crucifixion with Christ, and a co-resurrection with Christ: that’s the gospel.

God’s purpose in saving us is primarily to allow the life of His Son to dwell in us, that we might become more like Him (Romans 8:29). God wants a family resemblance to His Son. This is the primary purpose. And gospel presentations that only focus on the threat of Hell and the pleasure of Heaven are unbalanced. You might be interested to note that not a single sermon in the book of Acts uses the threat of Hell as an incentive to believe in Jesus. I’m not saying we mustn’t preach on Hell , we must; I’m not saying that we mustn’t warn sinners of judgement or even entice them with heaven , we should. But ultimately, we must keep Jesus Christ and man’s relation to Him central to the gospel. Sin is in essence rebellion to Him, therefore salvation is the death of the rebellion and the beginning of new submission and a life lived unto Him Romans 14:8-10: “For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living. ¹⁰But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”

But today’s gospel is increasingly like everything else in our world, a consumer product. I need it, I want it, I’ll use it. I need Heaven, I want it, I’ll use God. No bowing before God, no asking God for forgiveness, no repenting of grieving Him , just ‘accepting’ His gift. Modern day gospel presentations are fond of saying, accept Jesus for eternal life, but they make it clear that they have never studied what eternal life is in the Scriptures. Eternal life is not only heaven. When eternal life is used in the N.T , frequently it refers to a life we presently possess, not something in the future. I John 5:13: “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”

Study the New Testament and you will find that eternal life is nothing less than the resurrection life of Christ. It is the life of God within the believer; that is what makes it eternal. John 17:3 “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” It begins from the moment you are saved, the day you die to sin, and are risen with Him to newness of life. That is what water baptism is supposed to represent: absolute identification with Christ at the point of salvation: dying, buried and risen with Him. Christ said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He does not deliver the life, He is not the messenger of life, He *is* the life. Accepting the gift of eternal life is accepting the resurrection life of Christ to be your own life. This is God’s plan in saving, to have humans with the life of God in them to represent Him and glorify Him forever.

We need to keep the resurrection view to balance our presentation of the gospel. Jesus is not a handy substitute to avoid hell. God is not mocked. You cannot make the gospel out to be a handy product that consumers can use or throw away at their disposal. True salvation is an absolute crisis point.

II. The Resurrection Explains the Person of Salvation

Paul uses very striking words in 2 Corinthians 11: 4: “For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or *if* ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with *him*.”

Another Jesus. I wonder how many people there are today worshipping *another Jesus*. The awful thing about our gospel today is that it is an all out sprint to get a person to repeat a sinner’s prayer after you. I’ve seen it happen especially in youth and children’s programmes. We lead people on a nice, easily digestible gospel: “you’re in trouble -- Hell. But God wants you to go to Heaven, so chant these words and you can go to Heaven”. But this misses the point entirely, the point of the gospel is reconciliation with a **Person**. It is about a broken relationship that is being restored, not just eternal destiny. And when gospel presentations hardly spend anytime clarifying who it is that you’re to be accepting, you have a real problem. *Another Jesus.* The identity of Jesus is being whitewashed. Tragic as it may seem, mistaken identity is not going to be an excuse at the Great White Throne Judgement. Those who accepted another Jesus will hear the terrifying words, “I never knew you” We are taking it for granted that people know who He is.

Do you know cultists are quite happy to say the words, “accept Jesus as your personal Saviour”, “believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins”, because that by itself still lends itself to their warped teaching about Jesus? But say to a cultist, do you believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead, proving that He is Lord and God? The answer will be no. Truth and lies square up at the resurrection. It’s the devil’s best-kept secret, the truth he hates most, the scene of his defeat. The resurrection is the greatest proof of Christ’s deity, that Jesus is God. Only God cannot be killed. He must give up and take up His own life (John 10:17. Romans 1:4; John 20:28; Hebrews 1:5-8 Acts 2:36). The Father raised the Son, the Son raised the Son, the Spirit raised the Son. Only a perfectly sinless One, one who had perfectly fulfilled the Law, which Jesus did, and only God could, would be vindicated by the Spirit, by being raised from the dead. Read the New Testament, you’ll see that the writers always use the resurrection to explain the identity of Jesus.

See, we have a real problem today with *indirect conviction*, gospel presentations that convict people indirectly. They are not warned about the fact that they have wounded God, only that there are consequences for their sin, hell. They are not told how to get back into fellowship with Him, only how to enjoy the greatest retirement benefit ever. God is almost inconsequential to this kind of gospel. He is the agent of salvation, the deliverer of salvation, but seemingly never the main point of salvation. The resurrection underlines the fact that God died for us, but He rose for us too, so that we could share His life again, and be re-united to Him.

False repentance comes from indirect conviction. Like Balaam, Pharoah, Judas, Saul. They all said , ‘I have sinned’, but went on to disobey God. They were saying, I’m sorry I got caught, I’m sorry there are consequences.

But real repentance says like David said to Nathan ‘I have sinned against the Lord’. My sin is against a Person; I see my sin as a personal wound to Him: rebellion to the true authority. Unless we keep the resurrection in view, the personal confrontation that salvation is can be watered down. The gospel should be nothing less than a personal confrontation between the sinner and God.

The resurrection says, Jesus didn’t merely do something for you, like a great martyr or sacrifice. No, He is alive now, awaiting your decision. He stands before you right now offering you reconciliation. Reject Him now and you will face Him as your Judge.

Often the gospel is presented as a gift, and so it is. But that gift is not Heaven, care of Jesus. The gift is Jesus Himself, your new life! Salvation is intensely personal. We must use the resurrection in the gospel as the means of highlighting who Jesus is, God & Lord. We must use the resurrection in the gospel to make salvation a personal encounter between the lost sinner and the Lord Jesus.

Should we then share the virgin birth and the ascension and every other gospel-related doctrine every time we share the gospel? We should share whatever doctrines vitally affect the meaning of the gospel. In the case of the resurrection that is almost every time we share it.

Is this just semantics, arguing over words? When we say, ‘the cross’, don’t we mean the whole atonement, including the resurrection? Perhaps, but do our listeners understand that? I think years of assuming that to be true has created the impersonal, indirect, compromised gospel of today.

What if someone is worried, with thoughts like “But I didn’t remember the resurrection when I asked Jesus to save me. Am I not saved?” That would be wrong. God doesn’t save you because you have the right formula of words in your prayer. He saves because of genuine repentant faith in His Son as your salvation. People express their faith in many different forms of prayers. The thief on the cross said simply, “Remember me”. Often there is implicit in our faith much of the truth we do not explicitly think on in that moment. After all, anyone praying to Jesus is assuming He is alive and risen from the dead.

What I want us to do is to understand why the resurrection is crucial to the gospel and how it explains it to an unbeliever. I want us to be aware of how our summarised

gospel is cheapening it today. I want us to be aware that it is Biblical to explain the resurrection as part of the gospel. It is biblical to use the resurrection to explain the person of Christ. It is biblical to refer to eternal life as the resurrection life of Christ.