

## **THE CHRISTIAN BASICS: 1 COR 15.3-5**

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**"For I handed on to you as of first importance what in turn I had received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve"**

This creed appears in 1 Corinthians, one of Paul's earlier letters. It is generally agreed that 1 Corinthians was written sometime in AD 54, i.e. around some 20-25 years after the death of Jesus.

The creed itself is even earlier. Note the way in which Paul introduces it: "I handed on to you... what in turn I had received" (REB: "I handed on to you the tradition I had received). Paul is here using technical language to describe the official transmission and reception of what is termed "oral tradition". We find the same kind of language in 1 Cor 11.23, where Paul introduces his account of the Last Supper with the words: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed, took bread...."

Bear in mind that textbooks are a relatively recent modern phenomenon in the world of education. Today, when children go to school, the first day of each school year is often spent in handing out text-books; but in days before the invention of the printing-press, teachers made pupils learn information by heart. This was certainly true of the Jews: they had to learn off by heart not just the Torah but also the "traditions of the elders" (see Mark 7.1-13). It was also true of the first Christians: would-be disciples learnt by rote the stories of Jesus. I.e. the stories were handed down to them.

This is the context in which Paul states: "I handed on to you... what I also had received". In stating that "Christ died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised on the third day, he appeared to Cephas and then to the 12", Paul was not formulating anything new. He was just passing on what he had received. Indeed, scholars who have poured over these verses, tell us that what we have in 1 Cor 15.3-5 is obviously a Greek translation of an Aramaic original. This, for instance, accounts for the fact that Paul here speaks of Jesus appearing to "Cephas"; for Cephas was the Aramaic form of Peter. I.e. what we have here is a creed which goes back to the time when the earliest Christian community was still Jewish.

When was Paul taught these basic facts? Probably at his conversion. Probably these verses form part of Ananias' basic baptismal instruction. Now Paul was converted no more than three or four years after the death of Jesus. I.e. this tradition comes from the first year or so of the Christian era. Here we have the earliest evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus. These verses are to be treated with respect. here we have the earliest Christian creed.

At first sight there appear to be four propositions to this early creed: On closer examination, however, these four affirmations can be reduced to two propositions: Christ died and Christ was raised - the "being buried" and "appearing to the disciples" simply strengthen the two basic propositions.

## **Proposition 1: CHRIST DIED**

### a) **"for our sins"**

Note, Paul does not say "Christ died on a cross". The uniqueness of the death of Jesus does not lie in the manner of his death. Two thieves died on crosses with him. 1000s had been crucified before Jesus, just as 1000s would be crucified after him. When Emperor Titus subdued a Jewish revolt, Josephus tells us that "there was no space left for crosses, and insufficient crosses for all the bodies".

No, the uniqueness of Jesus' death doesn't lie in its manner. In one sense, it wouldn't have mattered if Jesus had died at the stake, by the axe, on the gallows, or in the gas chamber. The uniqueness lay in its purpose: "Christ died for our sins". See 1 Pet 2.24: & John 1.29

We die because of our sins. As Paul later wrote: "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6.23), but Jesus died "for our sins". I.e. the death of Jesus was no act of heroic or exemplary love. Something actually happened when Jesus died. To use the jargon, Jesus died to make an "atonement" for our sins - he died to make us "at-one" with God. As such the cross is the only hope for sinful men and women.

### b) **"in accordance with the Scriptures"**

What Scriptures did the early Christians have in mind? If the preaching of the early church is anything to go by, they had in mind above all the prophecies of Isaiah relating to the Servant of the Lord. Surely even the most sceptical of persons reading such a passage as Isaiah 53.5-6 cannot fail to be struck by the resemblance the words have to the death of Jesus.

I.e. the death of Jesus was no accident of history - it was not a matter of chance - it was part of God's plan and purpose (see Acts 2.23). At the time it may have seemed that Jesus was in the hands of his enemies - but in fact his enemies were in the hands of God. Above every tin-pot throne of our own making, there stands the throne of God (Rev 4-5).

From one perspective it must have seemed that Jesus was crucified and killed by sinful men. But from another perspective, it was all part of "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2.23). So Paul could say: "At the right time - i.e. the time of God's choosing - Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5.6)

### c) **"he was buried"**

I.e. Christ really died! Occasionally there is some doubt as to when a person is really dead. Not so long ago I read of a man, who was thought to be dead, but who began to wriggle his toes when his kidney was being transplanted. Only recently there was the story of a woman lying in the mortuary when all of a sudden she was found to be breathing. But when a person is "buried", they are well and truly dead. There is no turning back. There may at times be doubt as to whether somebody is really dead, but not once they are buried. A headstone well and truly confirms a doctor's certificate!

## **Proposition 2: CHRIST WAS RAISED**

"Christ was raised" (NRSV). The REB & GNB translate, "he was raised to life". But none of these translations quite gets to the heart of the matter. For the Greek implies not simply that Christ was raised to life, but that he is still alive.

To appreciate the nuance present, you have to understand that in Greek there are two kinds of past tenses: the aorist and the perfect. The Greek aorist is a simple past tense and refers to a one-off event, while the Greek perfect expresses a past action which has consequences for the present. E.g. you may say that Fred married Ada: if a Greek aorist was used, then it could simply mean that at a particular time in the past Fred married Ada, but this doesn't mean to say that they are still married - Ada may have gone off with Bertie. But if the Greek perfect tense is used, then the implication is that Fred is still married to Ada.

Now in this creed, three of the verbs are in the aorist and one is in the perfect: "Christ died, he was buried, he appeared to Cephas" - they are all aorists. But "he was raised to life" is in the perfect tense. The implications are still with us. Whereas Lazarus was raised to life, but later died, Christ was raised to life and lives for evermore.

I.e. the resurrection of Jesus is no mere past event. Jesus is still alive. If the body of Jesus were to be found tomorrow, then we would have to shut up shop the same day. But Christ is alive.

### **(a) "He was raised on the third day"**

This is a simple fact of history. Jesus was crucified on a Friday. Yet when the women went to the tomb early on the morning of the first day of the week (Sunday) he had risen.

This phrase also underlines the reality of Christ's death; his body lay in a tomb for more than two days. I.e. his body was given the chance to decompose - indeed, it probably did begin to decompose. This fact offers hope to us. For as one day we shall really die, so did Christ really die; just as our bodies will decompose, so too did his. But he rose - and so shall we. As truly as God transformed his body, so truly will God transform ours - no matter whether we are buried or cremated.

### **(b) "in accordance with the Scriptures"**

Which Scripture does the creed have in mind? Peter at Pentecost quoted Psalm 16.10: "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption" (Acts 2.31). Isaiah 53 doesn't specifically mention resurrection, but the thought of vindication is certainly present: "He shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper" (Is 53.10). Jesus himself used the story of Jonah and the whale as a picture of death and resurrection (Matt 12.40).

Whatever the Scripture, almost certainly the main thrust of the phrase is this: the resurrection wasn't just an after-thought. It didn't just happen at the last minute. It was all part and parcel

of the divine plan.

(c) **"He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve".**

Just as the phrase "he was buried" underlines the reality of Christ's death, so this corresponding phrase underlines the reality of his resurrection.

Has it ever occurred to you that there was no need for Christ to have appeared? He could have risen and gone straight to God - the resurrection would have been no less real. Indeed, from a theological point of view, the resurrection and ascension are similar in meaning - so much so that in the epistles they are scarcely distinguished.

In some ways the resurrection appearances are very strange. They seem to contradict some of the NT teaching about the life to come. E.g. Paul says that when we are raised, we will be given a new & different body. There will be a link with the old - in the same way as a caterpillar and a butterfly are linked - but nevertheless we shall be quite different - here we live in a physical body, then we shall live in a spiritual body (1 Cor 15. 42-44). Yet when Christ appears, his resurrection body has physical characteristics. E.g. he tells Thomas to feel with his fingers the scars of the nails in his hands, and to put his hand in his side (John 20.27). On another occasion he says to his disciples: "Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Lk 24.39), and to convince them that he was not a ghost, he ate a piece of cooked fish. Yet his body was not quite normal: he was able to walk through locked doors!

In some ways, Christ's appearances are quite mystifying. But the moment we realise that they simply underlie the reality of the resurrection, they cease to be quite as puzzling. As Prof JND Anderson put it: "A body, which would normally be neither visible, nor tangible, temporally re-assumes the solid frame and former appearance, and marks of the wounds, for evidential and instructive purposes".

But to return to where we began: Christ died and Christ was raised. This is the good news we have to proclaim - here is good news to be received. In the words of Paul: "Now I would remind you brothers and sisters, of the good news I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which you also stand, through which you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message" (1 Cor 15.1-1).

If we are to experience salvation - i.e. if we are to know God's forgiveness & to share in the life to come - then says Paul, these are the Gospel basics that we need to receive and believe. We need to believe that Christ died for us, that Christ rose for us. This is the Saviour we need to receive.