

Resurrection of Our Lord – Epistle

SIGNS ALONG THE WAY

I Corinthians 15:1-11

Resurrection of Our Lord

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

I Corinthians 15:1 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. 3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

DIAGNOSIS: The Way to Oblivion

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *The Man in the Moon*

We look up to the heavens, to the moon above, and see “The Man in the Moon”: the face of a person, not unlike ourselves. Of course, in our scientific wisdom we know that the “man” up there is merely a pile of rubble, the lifeless leftovers from the formation of our own Earth. But it comforts us to suppose that the face on the moon is somehow a godly sign of permanence, or of endurance or continuity, in the midst of historical change, or death. Searching for godly signs, always in the plural, is irresistible. Signs are also ambiguous. Religious signs in particular are uncertain, especially if we ourselves selected them. The signs that the Corinthians had found or selected, to establish the truth of their newfound wisdom, were “spiritual gifts” (1:7, 14:12), chief among which was “knowledge” (8:1) the evidence in which they “boast” (5:6). Nowadays, other signs can be just as seductive: the Shroud of Turin, the Titulus Crucis (my latest crush), stigmata, certain antiquarian writings, personality, rhetoric, faith healing, success in ministry, bread and wine, even the “sign of the cross.” The list is very long; add your own.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Wishing Upon a Star*

The question is, of course, From whence do we receive such signs, and to whom or to what do they point – Paul, Apollos, Cephas, your favorite pastor – or Christ (1:12, 3:4, 22)? Whom do they glorify? What “wisdom” (1:5, 17ff) had the Corinthians come to believe? Or, going by the outward appearance of lawlessness among them (chapters 6-8), is it a “vain” or “futile” wisdom (15:2, 14-19)? Perhaps the signs are pointing nowhere? Maybe so, for wisdom that rests upon a lie is vanity, and wishing upon a star is useless. Alas, there are many

countless “so-called gods” (8:4-6) among us, and every one of them is showing seductive, but useless, signs in our face. Are these signs along “The Way” (of Christ) or along some other way (that is, away from Christ)? What wisdom or spirit is there to discern, along the way, the one true sign and thus the one true God?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Dead Ends

Following the wrong god or many wrong gods (on the strength of their signs) will only lead us astray and finally to dead ends. Paul came to Corinth in “weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (2:3). If Paul brought a sign with him (and he did), the Corinthians surely missed it or forgot it (15:1). Poor Corinthians! They saw their newfound “knowledge” as a decisive spiritual sign ensuring their salvation (incipient Gnosticism). Little did they know how “unspiritual” (2:14) they had become, being “divided” (1:10, 13) among themselves, lacking in “love” (8:1-3), and soon to “perish” (15:18) among the dead. Their knowledge was misplaced, for even the most remarkable spiritual gifts are not proof of God’s favor. They were at a spiritual dead end. Paul therefore demotes and corrects their knowledge, assuring how “in every way you have been enriched in him (Christ), in speech and knowledge of every kind . . . you are not lacking in any spiritual gift” (1:5, 7; see 4:8). What’s more, the popular axiom, believed by many (to this today), that “there is no resurrection of the dead” (15:12, 19!), only increased their peril! By following the wrong signs, and the wrong god(s), the Corinthians were coming to a literal dead end.

PROGNOSIS: The Way of Love

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Proclaiming the Sign

For Paul, true wisdom and knowledge of God consists in proclaiming “the cross of Christ” (1:17-19). Not the actual

wooden beam, nor even the objective fact of Jesus' crucifixion, but the "saving effect of believing in Christ" (a paraphrase for "gospel" or "message" or "word") – that is, the one who died "for our sins" (15:13) and was raised "so that we will be made alive" (15:22). This Christ only (not Paul or Apollos or Cephas, nor the dead Jesus, nor any knowledge, nor any spiritual gift) is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1:24). Jesus, who died in weakness (the Son's glory) and was raised from the dead (the Father's glory), is the only Sign and Promise of our salvation which Paul had "handed on to you as of first importance" (15:3).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Believing the Sign*

We believe, teach and confess Christ. The Christ-sign is not a list of propositions to which one must agree in order to be saved, but rather a person who will do what he has promised; not the list in 15:3-8 but the "Christ" in 15:3-8. To "believe" in the cross and the resurrection, is thus to believe in the "Christ" who died and was raised for you, and thus who can promise that you will also be raised from the dead in him (15:35-49; see 8:6). In the same way, when we eat and drink the Lord's supper, it is not the eating and drinking that saves us, but believing in the Lord whose body and blood it is (11:26-27).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Bearing the Sign*

The one Sign, crucified and risen, is manifest to us, for us, through many signs "in the one Spirit" (12:13; see 2:12-16). All true signs point to Christ. The observable character of these signs, like the one Sign, is both humility and imperishability, held together in selfless love. In contrast to the Corinthian seduction to knowledge, which focuses on the self (even if to God), Paul urged them to focus on "building up the church . . . the body of Christ" (14:12; 12:27) through love. "Love never ends . . . as for knowledge, it will come to an end" (13:8).

Paul came to Corinth bearing the confessional signs of Christ (15:3-4), the signs of his crucifixion and promise: "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling . . . proclaiming the mystery of God (Christ and him crucified) . . . so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (2:1-5). Thus can Paul boldly say, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (11:1), and "Whether it was I or they (Apollos, Cephas), so we proclaim and so you have come to believe" (15:11). To imitate Christ is to bear his signs and proclaim his promise, for the benefit and faith of others. This is "the Way of Christ."