



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Resurrection: It's Based on Testimony

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Introduction

1. Howard Snyder once listed and discussed seven similarities between today's Western culture and the first century culture in which Christianity was first preached. One was that both cultures experienced "widespread religious and philosophical unrest; the mixture and relativization of worldviews; the rise of new religions; a practical atheism and disbelief in the gods, along with a focus on personal existence and mysticism" (Snyder, 27-33).
2. Snyder wrote 45 years ago, but that comparison may be more apt now. And Paul's preaching in Athens illustrates it in the first-century setting. See especially Acts 17.21.
3. *How* did Paul meet the skeptical Athenians?
 - a. He saw their skepticism as an opportunity and the place to begin to reason (διαλέγομαι; *dialogomai*) with them in the marketplace (ἀγορά; *agora*) of ideas (17.17).
 - b. But although he got there differently, his essential message was the same in Athens as in the synagogues in Jerusalem, Pisidian Antioch, and Thessalonica (Acts 2.22ff.; 13.16ff. 17.2-4).
4. Jesus' resurrection was at the heart of New Testament preaching (cf. Acts 17.18, 31, 32). As N. T. Wright observed, "There is no form of early Christianity known to us . . . that does not affirm at its heart that after Jesus' shameful death God raised him to life again" (Wright, 126).
5. We need to follow their plan. Furthermore, like Paul, we need to begin with questions our culture is asking, not questions our hearers are not yet ready to consider. To begin that process, we'll briefly talk about what they preached, how they persuaded, and what that shows us.

Body

- I. What They Preached (1 Corinthians 15).
 - A. Paul designated the "first-importance-things" (my translation) in their preaching (15.3-8).
 1. "First-importance-things" (v. 3) is one word (πρῶτος, *prōtos*) that is *plural* in number.
 2. In other words, *all* of the events mentioned in vv. 3-8 are together "of first importance."
 3. There are *four* parts, delineated by the conjunction "that" (ὅτι, *hoti*), which functions like a colon in English—death, burial, resurrection, and appearances¹ (all are featured in the sermons and defenses in Acts with the resurrection mentioned or implied in all of them).

¹ The NKJV's "seen by" more accurately translates the aorist passive of ὁράω; *horaō* than "appeared" (ESV, et. al.).

- a) The evidence for the resurrection was part of the message; they were not merely affirming, they were *persuading* people about Jesus (cf. Acts 17.4, 17; et. al.).
- b) It is perhaps incidental, but more space is devoted to the witnesses (evidence) (vv. 5-8) than to the death, burial, and resurrection combined (vv. 3-4).

B. Before and after the first-importance things, Paul said his message was the one preached from the beginning.

1. He “delivered” (παράδιδωμι; *paradidōmi*) what he “received” (παραλαμβάνω; *paralambanō*), the language of passed on tradition (vv. 1, 3).
2. His preaching was what the apostles had preached from the first (vv. 9, 11).²

II. How They Persuaded: Testimony About Historical Events.

A. New Testament preachers affirmed that the resurrection had *really occurred*, witnesses had seen Jesus, and therefore their message was based on events that could be verified.

B. Beginning with Peter’s first sermon (Acts 2.22-36), which focused on the resurrection (vv. 24-35), they made two points.

1. The tomb in which Jesus was buried was found empty three days later (Acts 2.29-31).
2. Multiple people claimed to be witnesses who had talked with, touched, heard, and even eaten with Jesus after he had died and was buried (Acts 2.32; cf. 10.40-41).

C. As illustrated in Paul’s defense speech in Acts 26.21-26, when met with skepticism, they responded with an appeal to history.

1. Explaining why the Jews tried to kill him, Paul said it was because he had said their expected Messiah had suffered and become “the first to rise from the dead” (v. 23).
2. Festus (ruled AD 59-61) thought Paul’s claim showed he was crazy (v. 24).
3. Paul replied that the events could be verified by people who lived in the region, like Agrippa who had no doubt noticed since they had “not been done in a corner” (v. 26).

III. What They Show Us.

A. Their emphasis on history means that as we defend the faith we must remember two things.

1. *Everything about the faith stands or falls on the historical authenticity of its claims.* “It cannot be stated too strongly that Christianity is an historical religion, and that it is so intimately tied to history that if the historical credibility of its sources were to be proven false, it would at once collapse as a possible claimant for our loyalty” (Anderson, 55).
2. *We verify Christian historical claims the same way we verify any historical claims.* “. . . I have to confess my conviction that as a Christian I have no business operating with double standards. Because my faith is tied to history I have to use the best historical tools available for studying history. The rules of the game do not allow me to relax the standards when it comes to matters of faith” (Brown, 14-15).

B. In our skeptical culture we must prepare to show testimony is a legitimate basis for belief, understanding we have biblical guidance to do so; Festus was not the only skeptic they met.

1. Paul wrote 1 Cor 15 because some did not believe resurrection could happen (v. 12).
2. He invited his readers to check with those who had seen Jesus (notably the 500-v. 6).
3. He answered some who objected because their view of reality was limited (v. 35).

² 1 Corinthians was written AD 53-55, just 20-25 years after the crucifixion. Paul was saying that the teaching went back to the beginning, to the earliest preaching, a conclusion with which many critical scholars agree (see Habermas, 127-133).

- C. A similar worldview challenge is evident now when people express skepticism about what they have not personally experienced, calling the legitimacy of testimony into question.
 - 1. In response, we can make common sense arguments that expose problems with such thinking and help people understand the legitimacy of testimony for knowledge.
 - a) We know about places we have not visited by testimony (even if seeing them on film).
 - b) We know about George Washington from testimony.
 - 2. Biblically speaking, faith is based on testimony about historical events (Rom 10.17).
- D. But we must also be prepared to respond to one who asks whether the amazing things in the Bible are believable in the first place.
 - 1. After all, as Tommy South has observed, "The first thought of many when confronted with the idea of Jesus' resurrection is 'That's impossible!' Usually that ends their thinking on the subject, since modern science knows of no such possibility" (South, 117).
 - 2. In effect, many are convinced miracles cannot happen, therefore they did not happen.
 - 3. So, doesn't the claim that someone witnessed a miraculous event by definition mean that their testimony is not credible? Especially since we cannot hear them, only read them?
- E. Due to the limits of time, I will share only one response that argues that testimony that a miracle occurred must be considered the same way testimony about any alleged event, from history or the present, must be evaluated (Ramm; see Addendum below for full quotation).
 - 1. If miracles can be experienced with the senses, they can be matters of testimony.
 - 2. This fits with accepted procedure in both the courts and "scientific historiography."
 - 3. "For purposes of evidence the courts treat the testimony of a man who saw a crime as if the court itself saw it, if they have no reason to doubt the integrity of the witness."
 - a) The passing of time may make finding the evidence harder, but does not of itself render the testimony incredible.
 - b) Testimony recorded in document form remains reliable over time (e.g., an affidavit).
 - 4. So, for example, if John really saw Lazarus raised from the dead (John 11) and recorded the event faithfully while of sound mind and memory, then for purposes of evidence it is as if we were there and saw it.

Conclusion

- 1. Paul concluded his discussion of the resurrection by showing why it matters.
 - a. He cited Hosea 13.14 to ask, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"
 - b. He answered, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15.55-57).
- 2. He built on that to say what it should mean for the way we live: "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15.58).
- 3. "The word of the Lord" includes letting people know about the resurrection and inviting them to participate in the blessings it provides.

ADDENDUM

"If miracles are capable of sensory perception, they can be made matters of testimony. If they are adequately testified to, then the recorded testimony has the same validity for evidence as the experience of beholding the event. No matter what Hume said at this point, *legal procedure in thousands of courts of the world, as well as scientific historiography*, is conducted on the grounds of

reliable testimony by word of mouth or by written document. For purposes of *evidence* the courts treat the testimony of a man who saw a crime as if the court itself saw it, if they have no reason to doubt the integrity of the witness. Furthermore, the mere passage of time does make them increasingly difficult of examination. But once an event is recorded reliably in document form, the reliability of the document is not at all changed by the mere passage of time. If the raising of Lazarus was actually witnessed by John and recorded faithfully by him when still in soundness of faculties and memory, *for purposes of evidence*, it is the same as if we were there and saw it" (Ramm, 140-141).

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February 16, 2016
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