



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Resurrection—Our Reason for Celebration

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According to N. T. Wright in his book, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*,

The question of *Jesus’ resurrection lies at the heart of the Christian faith*. There is *no form of early Christianity known to us—though there are some that have been invented by ingenious scholars—that does not affirm at its heart that after Jesus’ shameful death God raised him to life again*. Already by the time of Paul, our earliest written witness, *the resurrection of Jesus is not just a single detached article of faith. It is woven into the very structure of Christian life and thought*, informing (among other things) baptism, justification, ethics and the future hope both for humans and the cosmos (Wright 1999, 126, emphasis mine).

Wright’s repetition of the importance of the resurrection in the origins and development of the Christian faith is not overstated. But also noteworthy is his passing comment that some forms of Christianity, “invented by ingenious scholars,” try to have the faith without resurrection. It can’t be done.

Looked at only from a historical perspective, several important things cannot be adequately explained apart from the conviction that Jesus was “reembodied” (Wright 1999, 134). The first Christians, all Jewish, believed that Jesus’s resurrection had ushered in God’s long-promised reign. This despite the fact that “Christianity was neither a nationalist Jewish movement nor an existential private experience” (Wright 1999, 133). Similarly, if Christian faith did not revolve around the resurrection, something must be produced that sufficiently explains why the first Christians, all Jews remember, made Sunday, not the Sabbath, their primary day of worship (Habermas 1987, 20). In the same vein, without a central focus on the resurrection, what is sufficient to explain why a Pharisaical rabbi like Saul/Paul, so intimately familiar with the teachings of Israel’s Scriptures, attributed to the man Jesus statements of praise that were originally reserved for Yahweh alone (Phil 2.10; Isa 45.23)? (Cf. Montgomery 1964, 50–51; Hurtado 2005, 83–107).

It’s also difficult to explain why second-century Christians said what they did about the faith. Ignatius, for example, referenced the Sabbath-to-Sunday shift, writing that those “who had lived according to ancient practices came to the newness of hope, no longer keeping the sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord’s day, on which our life also arose through him and his death (which some deny)” (Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 9.1). The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* explained that “we [Christians] spend the eighth day in celebration, the day on which Jesus both rose from the dead and, after appearing again, ascended into heaven” (*Barnabas* 15.9). In his *First*

Apology, Justin wrote, “But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.” (Justin, *Apology I*, 67). Everett Ferguson, who includes those quotations among others in the “Christian Assemblies” chapter in his *Early Christians Speak* collection, summarizes their significance as follows:

The resurrection of Christ and his meeting with the disciples on this day provided the basis for Christians to assemble on the first day of the week....

Since the Lord’s day was the day of the resurrection, Christian sources often identify it as a day of joy. This was a pervasive note in contrast to the Sabbath. The rabbis stressed joy in connection with the Sabbath, but the Jewish customs for the Sabbath seemed somber to outside observers (Ferguson 1981, 71–73).

I found Ferguson’s second comment notable in view of Christian gatherings I have attended where, at a crucial point in the service, someone stressed the somber tone he mentions. I have wondered how outsiders in those assemblies, unfamiliar with our faith and its theological nuances, hear that emphasis. And what might they be thinking when at the same crucial point, they hear someone equate celebration with *death*, absent any reference to resurrection?

As noted above, the first believers had a different focus. Without minimizing the reality and significance of Jesus’s death—on a Roman cross, no less—they celebrated his resurrection and delighted in the knowledge of his exaltation (Acts 2.23–24; Phil 2.8–9). When reminded of the events they commemorated when they ate the bread and drank the cup, they were told that, in doing so, they “proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*” (1 Cor 11.23–26). Because he died and lives again, they knew they were acquitted of their sins. They also knew that if he had not been reembodyed, their sins remained and their faith was empty (Rom 4.25; 1 Cor 15.17). Because he lives, they “were more than conquerors” over life’s greatest trials (Rom 8.33–39) and were empowered for great things (Eph 1.18–20; 3.20–21).

No wonder they “spent the eighth day in celebration” (*Barnabas* 15.9)!

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