

May 8, 2011

The Myrrh-Bearing Women

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When Flavius Josephus misrepresented the faith of the Pharisees---claiming they believed in the transmigration of the soul, instead of the resurrection of the body---he did so to avoid ridicule from contemporary Greco-Roman pagans. Although the latter differed among themselves with respect to an after-life, none were disposed to take seriously a belief that the dead would really rise.

Even the most broadminded of pagans---those Athenians who "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing"---were unable to tolerate the notion that the dead would rise. It is true that they were prepared to sit and listen patiently while the Apostle Paul discoursed on every aspect of God and man, but "when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, 'We will hear you again about this'" (Acts 17:22-32). Paul had strayed well past the wide boundary of their tolerance.

>From Athens, Paul journeyed to Corinth, where his efforts met with apparently better results. He catechized the Christians there for eighteen months (18:11). Yet, five years or so after leaving them, Paul discovered that some of those Gentile Christians still did not truly believe in the resurrection! He questioned them, "Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?"

Paul went on to argue that this belief was absolutely essential to Christian faith: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty" (1 Corinthians 15:12-13).

At one time those Corinthian Christians had confessed the Resurrection of Jesus. Otherwise, they would not have been baptized. Paul had handed on to them, as a matter of highest importance, that Christ "was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:4). They *knew* this.

Yet, these same Christians still persisted in the pagan persuasion that resurrection from the dead was impossible! Elementary logic had not yet disclosed to them the massive inconsistency in their minds.

It was necessary, then, for Paul to take them through a simple series of hypothetical syllogisms: "If the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable" (15:16-19).

Had these Corinthians "spiritualized" the belief in Resurrection of Christ, regarding it as simply a metaphor for the immortality of the soul or some other form of spiritual survival? Perhaps. We do know that some members of that church regarded themselves as *pneumatikoi*, "spiritual people" (2: 14-16). Perhaps these were the ones whom Paul accused of denying the resurrection from the dead.

Whoever they were, Paul regarded these people as courting spiritual danger. Had their original belief been in vain? Paul recognized the possibility: "I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you---unless you believed in vain" (15: 1-2). "In vain" here means "empty words."

The merely verbal declaration of the Lordship of Jesus was insufficient for salvation without the doctrinal affirmation---inwardly seized and adhered to--- that God raised him from the dead: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10: 9). Belief "in the heart" means that the believer's mind grasps and adheres to the doctrinal content of the verbal affirmation. In this case, the heart knows and holds fast to the fact of Jesus' Resurrection.

This fact, Paul argued, was not simply a matter of history. It necessarily implied certain truths of metaphysics, psychology, and cosmology. Specifically, it denied, at a radical level, the widespread pagan persuasion that only the soul was ultimately important.

As a Pharisee, Paul had always believed in a resurrection from the dead. At Corinth, however, he discovered certain Christians who believed less than the Pharisees!

©2011 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php