

April 20, 2014

Pascha

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Paul and the Resurrection

Discussing the earliest theology of the Resurrection, we are restricted mainly to the sermons and discourses in the Acts of the Apostles. The theological horizon is broadened considerably, however, when we turn to the Church's first literary theologian, St. Paul. His epistles, composed over a dozen or so years and addressed to a variety of pastoral circumstances, demonstrate how the power and purpose of the Resurrection took theological shape in Paul's mind. As we move through these epistles in their chronological order, it is proper to speak of a "development" in his understanding of the Resurrection.

It appears that three chief factors served as impulses for this development:

First, there was Paul's continued scrutiny of the Hebrew Scriptures through a Christological lens. In this respect, the evolution of Pauline theology should be regarded as continuing the interpretive patterns in the apostolic preaching (e.g., Acts 2:14-36).

Second, the development of Paul's theology of the Resurrection was stimulated by the need to address the sustained opposition this doctrine provoked among those to whom he preached it. According to St. Luke, Paul encountered this opposition near both the beginning and the end of his ministry to pagans (cf. Acts 17:18-32; 26:23-24).

Third, Paul's theology of the Resurrection took shape as an aspect of his ongoing experience of its effective power in his own life and in the lives of those he instructed (cf. Ephesians 1:19-20).

We suspect that this third impulse was rarely separated from the other two. That is to say, it seems likely that Paul's experience of the Resurrection's transforming power was integral to the other components of his ministry: the study of Holy Scripture and the defense of sound doctrine.

In 1 Corinthians 15 we perceive a concrete example of how these three impulses were joined: In the spring of A.D. 55 (1 Corinthians 15:8), two groups of emissaries from Corinth (1:11; 16:17) arrived at Ephesus, bearing reports of sundry problems that had arisen during Paul's absence. Among those problems was a denial of the bodily resurrection by some

members of the Corinthian church (15:12-17). In the course of answering this denial, Paul provided for all Christians the fruit of his Spirit-filled thinking on this subject.

He began by reminding the Corinthians of the catechesis they had received from his mouth during the eighteen months he had been with them several years earlier: “I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures’ (15:3-4).

This message—the significance of the death and Resurrection of Christ—was nothing less than “the Gospel which I preached to you”—to *evaggelion ho evaggelisamen hymin* (15:1). That was the task that had brought Paul to Corinth in the first place.

He insisted that he had handed down only what he had received: the foundational proclamation common to all Christian believers. In short, Paul was giving the Corinthians a message they had already heard and—presumably—believed. By mentioning this fact, he had in mind to preclude any misunderstanding: A denial of the coming resurrection was a repudiation of the Gospel and the process of salvation (15:2).

In this brief notice at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15, we observe that the Gospel was proclaimed as a narrative of the Lord’s death, burial, and Resurrection, the same sequential account later included in the four written gospels.

That narrative about Jesus, however, was integrated into a longer history and larger corpus of literature: the Hebrew Scriptures. All that happened to Jesus, Paul wrote, happened *kata tas graphas*, “according to the Scriptures.” That is to say, the very proclamation of the Gospel included a Christological understanding of salvation history and the Old Testament. This larger narrative was part of the Gospel itself. For this reason, the Gospel mandate was given immediately after the Lord “opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

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