

THE ADVANTAGES IN BEGINNING WITH JESUS' RESURRECTION IN TALKING TO NON-CHRISTIANS

Acts 8 shows that each Christian was a missionary. When persecution broke on the church after the apostle James was put to death, the rest of the apostles remained in Jerusalem, but the lay people scattered throughout Judea. They were like sparks from a fire in a high wind. Wherever they landed, the fires of the Gospel began to burn.

What likelihood is there that non-Christians will give us a hearing, and what is the best way to talk to them? The best witness is based on the credibility of Christians with people who have known them over a long period of time, and have learned to respect and trust them. They know from experience that they are reliable. However, being credible doesn't get Christian people far unless they have the message of the Gospel to tell.

What about the message? Acts often uses the word "witnesses." A witness is a person who tells what he or she knows. It is important to remember that, when Jesus said, "*You will be witnesses of Me*", He had just risen from the dead. In almost every other case in Acts where the word "witnesses" is used, it is more specific. It is "witnesses of Jesus' resurrection." You can tell what means most to a person if you listen closely to him when he is in a tight corner, or suddenly called on to give an account of himself.

For example, when Peter and John healed the lame man at the temple and a crowd gathered, Peter took up the opportunity. The core of his sermon was this: "*You killed the Author of life. But God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of that.*"

When persecution broke on the church in Jerusalem, the apostles don't seem to have been concerned for their own safety. Luke summarises: "*And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*"

In Acts 5 the apostles were in a tight corner. The Jewish authorities had told them not to teach any more in Jesus' name. Though they had been put in the public prison, the angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and told them to keep telling the people about the life in Christ. When they were brought before the High Priest again, their first words are very significant: "*We must obey God rather than men. You hanged Jesus on a cross and murdered Him. But the God of our fathers raised Him and took Him up to His right hand as Leader and Saviour in order to give the people repentance and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, we and the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.*"

In further sermons in Acts, in Peter's sermon in the Gentile, Cornelius' house, and in Paul's sermon at Antioch in Pisidia, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and the role of the apostles as witnesses of this are focal points again.

So shouldn't we follow this lead today? Each of us received the gift of the Spirit in baptism from our risen and ascended Lord. We were joined by baptism to our Lord's death, burial, and resurrection, even though we haven't personally seen the risen Lord. There each of us was made a witness of Christ's resurrection. But there are great advantages in making Jesus' resurrection the centre of our message.

First, Jesus' resurrection is one of the core doctrines of our faith, and directly connected with the doctrines of conversion, baptism, justification, and our own resurrection. The new life we live as Christians we also live as those who have risen with Christ.

Secondly, if we begin with Jesus' resurrection, we don't so easily get side-tracked, like questions about the differences between denominations, and questions about liturgy and organisation, or talking about other Christians and their faults, pettiness, harsh criticism, and cliquishness. We are talking about the Gospel, through which the Spirit works faith.

Thirdly, beginning with Jesus' resurrection leads straight into the Scriptures. If people want evidence, we point them to what historians might call the primary sources, the last chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and the last two chapters of John, to begin with. Remember that the Spirit works through the Word.

Fourthly, we keep our focus on what the Christian faith is and isn't. It isn't a mix of rules for living and philosophical speculation to have interesting discussions about. It is the proclamation of salvation for those who believe, and the warning of judgment and damnation for those who reject it. It is full of certainty. Salvation for believers is as sure as Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Fifthly, our age is a very humanistic one, as the schools and universities of today make clear. There everything is relative, and human beings have made themselves the measure of things. The Christian Gospel, which has no room for compromise, and claims salvation through no one else but Jesus, is regarded with considerable doubt. We can take a leaf out of Paul's book in the university-city of Athens in his day. When he

said things they were fairly comfortable with, with their Stoic and Platonist philosophies, they were prepared to give him a hearing at least. However, when he began to speak about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the chips began to fall. That enabled Paul to lead his hearers to a point, and his hearers knew that he expected results.

Sixthly, beginning with the resurrection is a wonderful way to begin our witness, because it is much harder to shrug off the implications. Either Jesus' resurrection is true, or it is a pipe dream of deluded people. We have to admit that if Jesus didn't rise, the apostles were false witnesses, the Gospel is a lie, the dead won't be raised, and we are the most miserable of all people. Faith would be useless, and hope would be gone. We would be better off closing our churches and spending the rest of what remains of life getting the most enjoyment out of it while we still can. But if He did rise, He is alive today, our helper, and also the judge of every unbeliever. If you ask, "What do you think of John Howard?" some people may well shrug their shoulders. But if you ask, "What do you make of the claim that Jesus came back from the dead?" people can't shrug their shoulders so easily, because the claim is so much greater, and will affect everyone directly.

Lastly, our Christian hope is tied to Jesus' resurrection. The risen Lord promised that He would come again. That gives the Gospel its point and its sense of urgency.

Let us sum it up this way. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit works through this message, as He did in the early church. This message has the power to fill witnesses to it with the certainty and courage that they need. May the Lord continue to bless your witness!