

STAND FIRM IN THE RESURRECTION HOPE (5)

PMW 2025-037 by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.

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Introduction

I am now presenting my fifth in a series of studies on the nature of the resurrection body as found in 1 Corinthians 15. I am declaring, along with historic Christianity, that our physical bodies die in history but that those very bodies arise at the end of history in the resurrection of the dead. This is far from the proto-Gnostic views of ancient heretics, modern liberals, and contemporary hyper-preterists, including Paul's opponents at Corinth. [1]

So, now let us move on to reflect on:

The language of “change” in Paul's argument

Having briefly considered the rhetorical structure of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15:36–54, we should now note how Paul speaks of the resurrection body in terms of “change” (allasso). After charging his opponents with being “fools” (v. 36) regarding their resurrection-body error, he answers their foolishness in the immediately following verses. Then in verses 51–52 he speaks of the “change” that defines the resurrection:

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

As noted in previous articles, Paul chooses his resurrection language carefully in emphasizing the nature of the resurrection body. Thus, here he employs the word allasso (“change”) in referring to the result of the resurrection. This word demands continuity through a transition (the body is resurrected) over against destruction or replacement (the body is replaced with a new and different body), as per Gnostic expectations. The body that dies does not cease to exist; it is not annihilated, it is not dissipated; it is the deceased body that is transformed by becoming—more glorious. That is, the very body that died changes by becoming imperishable (rather than remaining perishable) and immortal (rather than remaining mortal) (vv. 53–54). Ware points out that this involves “*continuity accompanied by change*.”

Resurrection does not involve a new body coming into existence that never previously existed. Rather, it involves a qualitative change (a getting better) rather than a substantive (a substitution) change. The physical body is not replaced with an ethereal or spiritual body.

The structural emphasis revisited

As has been argued in preceding articles in this series, the structure of Paul's argument in vv. 36–54 is important. It fits well with the concept of transformation of the body over against the destruction and replacement of the body.

We need to recall the verbal pairs in Paul's presentation, noticing that the subject of Paul's discussion remains the same: the body in which we live time and on earth. The contrasts he presents are not matters of the substance of the body but of the qualities brought about in the body. That is, Paul speaks of a change of qualities or conditions: from perishable to imperishable (v. 42), from dishonor to glory (v. 43a), and from weakness to power (v. 43b). But it is the physical body of our human existence that dies and enjoys these qualitative changes, these marvelous enhancements. As Ware expresses it, "*Paul's series of oppositions does not describe two different bodies, distinct in substance, but two contrasting modes of existence of the same body, one before and the other after the resurrection.*"

And we must remember that Paul's structuring of his argument (note v. 42 as set over against vv. 53–54) emphasizes the transformational character of the resurrected body. It does so by drawing out the specific, essential contrasts between the resurrected and the non-resurrected bodies: "perishable / imperishable" (v. 42) introduces the section, while "perishable / imperishable" concludes the section (vv. 53–54). The material body is not destroyed and done away with. Rather, that very body itself is transformed by new and glorious qualities.

I will continue on this important theme in my next posting. There I will take up the issue of the pneumatikon body (v. 44). It is not what the untrained eye suspects!

Notes

1. I am building on the meticulous exegetical argument of James Ware from the University of Evansville, Indiana: "Paul's Understanding of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:36–54," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133:4 (2014): 809–35. I highly recommend also his powerful, sizeable (413 pages!) commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, a must-read for serious evangelical Christians who are concerned by defections from the historic Christian faith on eschatology and soteriology: *The Final Triumph of God: Jesus, the Eyewitnesses, and the Resurrection of the Body in 1 Corinthians 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025).