

WHAT THE
BIBLE SAYS
About
THE GOSPEL

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What the Bible Says About the Gospel

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Systematically Teaching the Word

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For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared . . .

1 Corinthians 15:3-5a

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Confusion About the Gospel

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul gave us the simple and clear gospel message:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared . . .

Nothing else needs to be added to what Paul said. Yet, as simple as this message is, most reject it because of its simplicity. As Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

If few will find the narrow gate, then recent statistics indicate a puzzling trend in America. Comfortable with religion and seeing themselves as people of faith, a majority of Americans claim to be deeply spiritual. According to pollster George Barna, 88% of Americans feel accepted by God, with more than eight out of ten viewing themselves as Christians. In fact, 60% view themselves as committed Christians (*Barna Update* from August 14, 2006).

If Jesus said that the way is narrow and few will find it, how can more than 80% of Americans claim to be Christian? What are they believing in that would allow them to confidently claim a place in heaven? Clearly there must be confusion as to what it means to be a Christian and, thus, what the gospel is.

Why Is There Confusion?

Pressure is constant in the church to toy with the simplicity of the gospel and make it more appealing, look more scholarly, or to make it more acceptable. As a result, people think they are finding salvation, but their faith is in something other than the gospel of Christ.

Altering the Gospel

When Paul preached the gospel, he did not make any adjustments to it. In 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 18, we read, “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”

The word “foolishness” is translated from the same Greek word from which we get “moron.” It’s moronic, it’s stupidity, it’s dumb. “The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.”

Jewish people wanted to be impressed with man’s wisdom. Instead, Paul preached the simple message of Jesus Christ.

I determined to know nothing among you, except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power (1 Corinthians 2:2, 4).

Paul preached the simple gospel message only, so the Corinthians’ faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but rather on the power of God alone (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:5). When we alter this message or rely on popular methodology, people’s faith rests in the cleverness of men, not in the power of God. The result is a terrible tragedy—people have a faith that does not save, and they do not even know it!

A common way the gospel is altered is to downplay sin. With pressure for church growth, a reigning philosophy among church leaders is that people will not go to church to hear negative things, or to hear what is wrong with them. Surely, the thinking goes, they will not come to church to hear that they are lost and going to hell.

The problem with this philosophy is that people are encouraged to come to church to hear what men have to say, not what God has to say. The thinking goes that winsome methods must be used if people are to come, and especially if they are going

to accept the gospel.

If people do not come to church to hear what God has to say, then why go to church? If God has not spoken, or if what He has said is not useful, then what gospel message is worthy of my faith? The one that comes from the Bible, or one that stems from the cleverness of man?

Preference vs. Conviction

“Religion was once a conviction, now it is a taste” sums up Charles Krauthammer’s 1998 *Time* magazine article.¹

As Krauthammer checked into a hospital for tests, the attendant asked the usual questions: name, rank, serial number, insurance, ailment. Then she asked, “What is your religious preference?”

I was tempted to say, “I think Buddhism is the coolest of all, but I happen to be Jewish.” My second impulse was to repeat what Jonah said when asked by the shipmates of his foundering skiff to identify himself. “I am a Hebrew, ma’am, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” But that surely would have gotten me sent to psychiatry rather than x-ray, so I desisted.

In ancient times they asked, “Who is your god?” A generation ago they asked, “What is your religion?” Today your creed is a preference. Preference? “I take my coffee black, my wine red, my shirt lightly starched. And oh, yes, put me down for Islam.”

At a time when religion is a preference and piety a form of eccentricity, suggesting fanaticism, Chesterton needs revision. Tolerance is not just the virtue of people who do not believe in anything, tolerance extends only to people who don’t believe in anything.

Krauthammer’s article demonstrates how everything is acceptable, including religious beliefs and convictions—as long as they are just personal preferences. The mantra of our culture, even our churches, is, “I’ll take my religion and my pathway to spirituality just the way I want it—and no one can tell me otherwise.”²

When beliefs are based on preferences rather than convictions stemming from Scripture, is there any wonder why there is much

¹ *Time* Magazine, June 15, 1998 issue, “Will it be Coffee, Tea, or He?”

² *Ibid.*

confusion about the gospel?

Postmodernism—What Is Truth?

Postmodernism tenets hold that there is no such thing as objective truth. You can have your beliefs, and Catholics, Jews, and Protestants can have their beliefs. However, it is not acceptable to tell someone that his or her beliefs are wrong and yours are right.

This is not really anything new. People in Paul's day tolerated and encouraged a variety of religious beliefs. When the Romans absorbed a new country into their empire, they were happy to absorb their religion as well, which led to a plethora of religious beliefs.

For example, while in Athens, Paul passed an altar to the unknown god (cf. Acts 17:23). This altar existed because the Athenians did not want to offend any overlooked or unknown gods. Paul boldly told them about the God they did not know, and how He could only be worshiped in one way.

The offense of Christianity in Paul's day was not that it was different, but that it claimed to be the only true religion. This sounds similar to today's postmodernism, doesn't it?

People don't mind if you go to church, or if you have your own religious beliefs, as long as they can have their's too. What people do mind, however, is when you tell them that their beliefs are wrong, or worse, unacceptable to the living God. Having laid claim to objective truth, you have become intolerant.

Thus, not wanting to be seen as intolerant, churches in this postmodern day think they have to adjust the gospel if people are going to attend. In turn, churches then adapt their message to not offend these newcomers. The end result is confusion about "what must I believe to be saved?" (cf Acts 16:31).

The Emerging Church's Role

Roger Oakland's *Faith Undone*,³ a book that I highly recommended, will acquaint you with the emerging church movement. In his chapter entitled "A Slaughterhouse Religion" (chapter 11, pages 192-200), he quotes from various leaders of this movement,

³ *Faith Undone* (Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007) by Roger Oakland

showing how the devil is still intent on destroying the work of God.

First, Oakland quotes from Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick died in 1969, but for 20 years he was pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, a very influential church pastored by a very liberal man. Regarding the death of Christ, Fosdick said:

Too many theories of the atonement assume that by one high priestly act of self-sacrifice, Christ saved the world. No. These legalistic theories of the atonement are in my judgment a theological disgrace.⁴

Did you catch that? Fosdick said that Jesus Christ, by His one high priestly sacrifice—the sacrifice of Himself—paid the penalty for sin, and that it is a theological disgrace to teach such a thing. Regarding the atonement of Christ, Fosdick said:

Were you to talk to that fundamentalist preacher, he doubtless would insist that you must believe in the substitutionary theory of atonement, namely that Christ suffered as a substitute for us, the punishment due us for our sins. But can you imagine a modern courtroom in a civilized country where an innocent man would be deliberately punished for another man's crime? Substitutionary atonement is a pre-civilized barbarity.⁵

Fosdick's church continues to hold a convocation every year to honor his memory and ministry. Two of the speakers at the 2006 convocation are key leaders in the emerging church movement. Why would Brian McLaren and Tony Compollo speak at a convocation honoring a man who thought the teaching that Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin is a theological disgrace and pre-civilized barbarity? It's because they hold the same view.

At this convocation, McLaren said:

The traditional understanding says that God asks of us something that God is incapable of Himself. God asks us to forgive people, but God is incapable of forgiving. God can't forgive unless he punishes someone in place of the person He was going to forgive. God doesn't say things to you like forgive

⁴ *Faith Undone*, pp.194-195. This quote was originally made in Fosdick's book, *Mr. Brown* (Harper & Row, 1961), p.136.

⁵ *Ibid.*

your wife, and then go kick the dog to vent your anger. God asks you to actually forgive. And there is a certain sense that a common understanding of the atonement presents a God who is incapable of forgiving, unless He kicks someone else.⁶

In McLaren's view, true forgiveness means that you don't require a payment. Therefore, if God requires that someone pay your sin penalty, then He isn't forgiving. What he is really saying is that substitutionary atonement—the death of Christ to pay the penalty for our sin—doesn't make any sense.

If Christ's death on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin no longer makes any sense to these church *leaders*, it is easy to see how confusion regarding the gospel has made its way into the hearts and minds of church *attendees*.

Oakland quotes Alan Jones, another man involved in the emerging church movement:

The church's fixation on the death of Jesus as the universal saving act must end. And the place of the cross must be reimagined in Christian faith. Why? Because of the call to suffering and the vindictive God behind it. The other threat of just criticism addresses the suggestion, implicit in the cross, that Jesus' sacrifice was to appease an angry God. Penal substitution—Christ taking our penalty, coming under the judgment of God for our sin—is the name of this vile doctrine."⁷

In contrast, what did the Apostle Paul say? "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received. Christ died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3a). Jones says fixation on the death of Jesus, as the universal saving act, must end. Who is right? This man who is having a great influence in the church today, or Paul?

Marcus Borg, a man acknowledged and appreciated by emerging church leaders, is quoted by Oakland as saying:

I let go of the notion that the Bible is a divine product. I learned that it is a human cultural product. As such, it con-

⁶ *Faith Undone* (Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007) by Roger Oakland, page 193. This quote is from Brian McLaren, as interviewed by Leif Hansen in The Bleeding Purple Podcast on January 8, 2006.

⁷ *Ibid.* This quote is from Alan Jones, as originally written in his book, *Reimagining Christianity* (Wiley and Sons, 2005), p.132.

tains their understandings and affirmations, not statements coming directly or somewhat directly from God.⁸

Borg also said:

Jesus was certainly not born of a virgin, didn't think of Himself as the Son of God, didn't see His purpose as dying for the sins of the world. To think that the central meaning of Easter and the resurrection depends upon something spectacular happening to Jesus' corpse misses the point of the Easter message and risks trivializing the story. To link Easter primarily to our hope for an afterlife, as if our post death existence depends upon God having transformed the corpse of Jesus is to reduce the story to a politically domesticated yearning for our survival beyond death.⁹

If this is true, divine revelation and the inspiration of the Bible must no longer mean that the Bible is a divine product with divine authority. Are we not left, then, with nothing more than the thinking of men? The gospel no longer has any authority. Jesus' death no longer has any meaning. We are free to believe whatever we want since the Scriptures cannot be trusted. No wonder there is great confusion!

I tell you about the emerging church movement because sometimes we think that because we read the same Bible and attend similar churches that we all believe the same things about the gospel. The truth of God's Word is being attacked from within, from those who lead "evangelical" churches. They are attacking the very foundation of the gospel by denying His death as a payment for sin. In their view, Jesus' death was simply to show us how, by suffering, we can come to know God better.

This is not the gospel according to the Scriptures. This has nothing to do with payment for sin. Confusion about the gospel will continue to abound as long as the church continues to succumb to the pressure to make its message appealing to the masses.

Paul's Warning

⁸ *Faith Undone*, p.196. This quote is from Marcus Borg, originally made in his article "The God We Never Knew".

⁹ *Faith Undone*, p.197. This quote is from Marcus Borg, originally made in his article "Easter About Life, Not Death" in his Washington Post/Newsweek "On Faith" column, April 7, 2004 (<http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith>).

Paul talked about the gospel in all of his epistles. In Galatians, he stated that there can be no alterations, changes, additions, or subtractions to the gospel message. If you do so, you're cursed to hell—the Greek word is *anathema*. “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed” (Galatians 1:8).

Paul told us how he can make this warning:

“For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11).

Paul received the gospel, but he didn't receive it from men. A man didn't teach it to him—he received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul was passionate about how he received the gospel message.

Likewise, Paul warned Timothy there would come a day when people would no longer put up with sound, healthy teaching from the Word of God. “Wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth” (2 Timothy 4:3-4a).

Therefore, when Paul talked about the gospel message, we can be confident that he spoke the truth, because it came directly from the Lord. If we are off target here in this most basic and essential message of our faith, then we are no longer God's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20). The end result is that the church—without its central message and without its central mission in the world—is rendered worthless and useless, full of confusion and contradictions.

With this warning in mind, Paul sought to bring clarity to the most beautiful and central message of the Bible—the gospel. Let's look together at 1 Corinthians 15 and end this confusion about the gospel.

PART ONE

The Foundation: Four Basic Facts of the Gospel We Believe (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

1 Corinthians 15 is a wonderful, glorious chapter on the resurrection of the dead. Paul wrote in verse 12, “Some among you are saying there is no resurrection of the dead.” We need to understand that a denial of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can’t split and parcel this out and say, “I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, but I do not believe in the bodily resurrection of anyone else.” Paul said that if we deny bodily resurrection, we deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. And if we deny the bodily resurrection of Christ, we have denied the gospel.

Paul saw this as a crucial doctrine and began this chapter by reminding the Corinthians of the content of the gospel that he preached to them. He showed them how a denial of the resurrection is part and parcel to a denial of the gospel.

The denial of bodily resurrection was a common belief in New Testament times among some religious groups. As recorded in Acts 23, Paul was put on trial before the Sanhedrin, the governing body in Israel. It was comprised both of Sadducees and Pharisees. Paul, in his defense, split the group by declaring that he was being put on trial for believing in the resurrection of the body. While the Pharisees supported the resurrection of the body, the Sadducees did not. “There occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say

that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit. But the Pharisees acknowledged them all” (Acts 23:7).

Even among the Greeks, denying bodily resurrection was common as evidenced by Paul when he came to the city of Athens, Greece, and preached the gospel of Christ on Mars Hill.

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a man He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead. Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this” (Acts 17:30-32).

As you can see, the initial reaction of most of these Greeks to Paul speaking about the resurrection was one of ridicule. This is because the Greek philosophers taught that there was no bodily resurrection. The soul was immortal, but there would be no resurrection of the body.

With the resurrection as a backdrop in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul first reminded them of four basic facts about the gospel in verses 1-2, and then gave four basic elements about the gospel in verses 3-5. First we’ll look at the four basic facts of the gospel we believe, beginning with fact number one—the **gospel preached to you**.

The Four Basic Facts of the Gospel:

- 1. The Gospel Preached to You*** (1 Corinthians 15:1a)
- 2. The Gospel You Received*** (1 Corinthians 15:1b)
- 3. The Gospel on Which You Stand*** (1 Corinthians 15:1c)
- 4. The Gospel by Which You Are Saved*** (1 Corinthians 15:2)

CHAPTER ONE

The Gospel Preached to You (1 Corinthians 15:1a)

I Make Known to You

Paul began 1 Corinthians 15 by writing: “Now **I make known to you**, brethren, the gospel.” He used this expression—“I make known to you”—when he said something the Corinthians already knew but were acting like they had forgotten (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3).

They already knew the gospel—Paul preached it to them and they received it. One of the Corinthians could have said: “Paul, I already know it.” “But I have to make it known to you,” Paul would have replied: “because you are conducting yourself like you have forgotten what the gospel means.”

Brethren

Paul called them *brethren*, which is a term of warmth. He was going to say some harsh things, so he wanted them to know that he was speaking out of a family relationship—they were his brothers and sisters in Christ. He used this expression 27 times throughout this letter because he often had to correct them.

The Gospel

Paul said he was making known to them “**the gospel**.” *Yuongelian* is the Greek word he uses here. It is a compound word, meaning “the good message, the good news.” What is the gospel? It is the good news that Christ died, was buried, was raised, and

that He appeared (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). This is the message that Paul preached to the Corinthians.

The gospel is a key theme of Paul's writings in the New Testament. The word "gospel" is used 76 times in the New Testament, and 60 of those 76 times it's used by the Apostle Paul. His life's purpose was centered in the gospel.

Galatians is one epistle in which the word "gospel" frequently occurs. In this letter, Paul was concerned that the people in the churches in the region of Galatia were deserting the truth of the gospel. He first reminded them of the true gospel: "Christ gave himself for our sins, that he might rescue us from this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4).

He then expressed concern for them: "I'm amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel, which is really not another" (Galatians 1:6). He used a play on words by using two different Greek words for the word "gospel." You're going to a different gospel, one that actually is not another gospel; it's not even a variation of the true gospel.

Paul said there is only one gospel; there can be no variations. Even if an angel from heaven would make a change to this gospel (cf. Galatians 1:8), do not believe it. This is a serious matter.

Paul received the gospel directly from Christ. "I would have you know, brethren, the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it. I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11). Paul's point: "I don't preach this gospel because Peter taught it to me, James taught it to me or others taught it to me. No, I preach this gospel because Christ taught it to me." The gospel is unchangeable.

I Also Preached to You

Next, Paul wrote: "I make known to you the gospel which I **also preached to you**" (1 Corinthians 15:1). "Which I preached" is just the verb form of the word "gospel." It's the same word.

First he said, "I make known to you the *gospel*," which is a noun. Then he said, "which I *also preached* to you," which is a verb. *Yuongelian* is the noun, and *yongalidzo* is the verb. Literally, "So I make known to you the *good-news* which I *good-newsed* to you." That

isn't a great English sentence, but "I make known to you the gospel which I also preached to you" is. That's the message Paul brought to the Corinthians. As recorded in Acts 18, when Paul first came to the city of Corinth, he preached the gospel to them, and that is the message they believed.

CHAPTER TWO

The Gospel You Received (1 Corinthians 15:1b)

The first thing Paul said about the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 was that it is the message he preached to the Corinthians. This was not a new message. Next, he said, it's this gospel "which you also received." They received the gospel; they responded in faith to this message that Paul preached.

Thessalonica was another city where Paul preached the gospel. Look at what and how he preached to them: "For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with joy and the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:5-6).

The result was:

You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from wrath to come. . . . But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. . . . For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is—the Word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 2:4, 13).

When His Word is proclaimed and people respond and believe it, evidence abounds that God is at work. We are not called to make the Word more appealing by dressing it up. We are instead called to preach the simple message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, allow the Spirit of God to take that message and drive it home to the heart of the hearer, and then by the power of God, see people receive it and get saved.

Concerning Jesus Christ, John wrote: “He came to His own and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become the sons of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12). Those who received Him are those who believed in Him.

In a similar vein Paul wrote: “I came with the gospel, I preached this gospel to you, and then you received the gospel—you welcomed it, you believed it.” This is the second basic fact of the gospel.

CHAPTER THREE

The Gospel on Which You Stand (1 Corinthians 15:1c)

It's the gospel, thirdly, "on which also you stand." In the first two clauses in 1 Corinthians 15:1 that modify the gospel—*the gospel which I preached to you*, and *the gospel which you received*—Paul used the aorist tense, a Greek tense that is often used to refer to past events. "The gospel I preached to you"—he did that several years earlier when he came to Corinth. "The gospel you received"—they did that several years earlier when he preached the gospel to them.

However, Paul changed to the perfect tense in the next phrase, "in which also you stand." This tense refers to something that happened in the past, but the results continue in the present. The Corinthians took a stand in the gospel when they received it, and they were continuing to stand in the gospel when Paul wrote this letter.

His point is that if they are denying bodily resurrection, they are, in turn, abandoning their stand in the gospel. As such, when you have truly received the gospel, you will continue to stand in the gospel.

A tragic teaching in the church today holds to a belief that when you make a decision for Christ, no matter what else you do, you are saved. Every error or heresy has an element of truth. The element of truth here is that when you truly believe in Christ, you are saved for time and eternity. What is often misunderstood, however, is that when you have truly received the gospel, the power of God produces such a dramatic life-change that you continue to stand in

that gospel. You never abandon it.

The Corinthian church had a lot of problems, but they did stand firm in the gospel. “Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy. For in your faith you are standing firm” (2 Corinthians 1:24). The evidence that they truly had received the gospel is that they were standing firm in their faith.

“Stand firm” literally should be, “continue to stand firm,” as Paul again used the perfect tense, denoting a permanent condition. It happened in the past but it continues to be true. You took your stand in the gospel the moment you believed in Christ, and you will continue to stand firm in your faith.

Paul gave a summary of the gospel at the end of Romans chapter 4. He stated that the righteousness of Christ is credited to those “who believe in Him who raised Jesus, our Lord, from the dead, He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (verses 24-25). Then Paul said, “Therefore having been justified—declared righteous—by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Romans 5:1-2).

The gospel is not something you believed at some point in the past—maybe when you were a child or when you went to a special meeting—and then you went on with your life. The gospel is something you believe in, take your stand in, and will continue to stand in. Paul would even go so far as to say that those who are not standing in the gospel never truly received the gospel or were saved. Thus, the third basic fact of the gospel is that you continue to stand firm in this message.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Gospel by Which You Are Saved (1 Corinthians 15:2)

As recorded in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul reminded the Corinthians of the gospel. It's the gospel which he preached to them, it's the gospel which they received, it's the gospel in which they have been standing, and it's the gospel by which they are saved.

“You Are Being Saved”

We have another change of tense here. The first two verbs—“which I **preached** to you” and “which you **received**,” are aorist, or past tense. The next verb, “the gospel in which you **stand**,” is perfect tense, denoting that they have been and continue to stand.

In the fourth phrase, Paul used the present tense. Literally, Paul said, “it's the gospel by which you are **being saved**.” In addition to the present tense, he used the passive voice. This voice is used when something is being done to you.

Putting it all together then, the emphasis is on the work of God in the life of the one who has heard, received, and taken his stand in the gospel. You are **being saved**; God's work is ongoing. You say, “I'm glad I was saved completely and fully when I believed in Christ.” Yes you were, but His work is not done yet. He is preparing you for the glory of His presence. Paul also wrote, “I am confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will continue to bring it to perfection until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

How tragic for people to think of salvation as just a point in

time in their past. They think to themselves, *My life may be a life of sin, but that's all right; I trusted Christ back then.*

Parents can be guilty of this. Wanting to be assured of their child's salvation, they put all hope in a decision made in the past. "When they were in sixth grade, I know they prayed to receive Christ. I know they're saved despite how they are acting now."

This is not the salvation Paul talked about. He talked about a salvation where God enters into a life with His power, totally makes that person new, and never leaves. The Spirit of God takes up residence in that life to continue God's work of salvation. He molds, shapes, and produces the character of God in our life until He takes us to heaven.

Two Conditions for "Being Saved"

#1—Hold Fast the Word

This matter of salvation is a serious issue, which is why Paul took so much time to discuss it with the Corinthians. It is so serious that he qualified the statement, "you are being saved," with two conditional statements. First he said, "If you hold fast the word which I preached to you."

I always found English boring in school, and would periodically go to summer school to relearn what I failed to learn during the year. The Lord must have a sense of humor, because then I went to Bible College and Seminary where I had to learn about verbs, nouns, and other parts of speech—this time in Hebrew and Greek. How was I to know what a Greek conditional sentence is? I didn't even know what an English conditional sentence was! Thus, I had to relearn English again so I could know what we were talking about in Greek.

All that to say that in Greek there are several kinds of conditional statements. This first phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:2 is what is called a first class condition. A first class condition assumes that something is probably true. We do that with our conditional sentences in English. "Well you can come along if you want to." We know they really want to, so there is no doubt as to what they are going to do.

That is the way it is here as well. "If you hold fast the word

which I preached to you”—Paul assumed they were holding fast to the word, though it’s not a guarantee. This is a reality in your life *only if* you hold fast the word preached to you. If you don’t hold fast, then this would be an indication that you never really received the gospel in the first place.

Multitudes of people have made a profession of faith, but they don’t hold fast to the gospel. They were never really saved. You say, “Who are you to judge?” I am not anyone to judge, but the God who is the judge of all men (1 Peter 4:5) has said that this gospel is the gospel by which you are **being saved**, but only “if you hold fast the word which I preached to you.” This is a word of warning that we need to take seriously.

In a similar vein, the writer of Hebrews said, “Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are” (Hebrews 3:6). We have become part of the family of Christ, part of God’s household, but only—and note what the writer says next—“if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.” Saving faith is an enduring faith.

The writer of Hebrews went on to say, “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance, firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:12, 14).

The warning in this passage is to be careful because some may not have a believing heart. You’ve gone through the motions, you may have an emotional feeling associated with that “decision,” but the reality of it is that unless you hold fast to the gospel, you’re not truly saved.

The writer of Hebrews also wrote, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. For He is faithful who promised” (Hebrews 10:23). I believe the truth of the gospel, I believe what God has promised, I haven’t stopped believing it since the day I placed my faith in Christ, and by His grace, I will not stop believing it. This is the gospel by which you are being saved, but only if “you hold fast to the gospel which was preached to you.”

#2—Believed in Vain?

The next phrase Paul used in 1 Corinthians 15 contains the sec-

ond condition—“unless you believed in vain.” Paul said that you are being saved if you are holding fast. He thinks they probably are saved, although another possibility also might be true—perhaps they believed in vain.

Paul’s point is that maybe they didn’t really understand the facts of the gospel and thus believed in vain. Many today are making professions of faith because they want to be happy, because they don’t want to go to hell, or perhaps because they want to have a good marriage. However, they have no concept of their personal sin and guilt before a holy God.

Paul said that perhaps they didn’t really understand what the gospel was, and thus their belief was in vain because it was without comprehension. As believers, we need to be sure people know what the gospel is when we call them to faith in Christ. It’s not just some emotional response to believe in Christ; they have to understand the gospel. They must know Christ died and that His death paid the penalty for their sin.

It doesn’t matter if you are a member of a church; it doesn’t matter whether you were baptized in a church; it doesn’t even matter whether you are a teacher in a church. Unless you have turned from you sin and placed your faith in Christ alone, you are going to hell. People who trust Christ plus their baptism, plus communion, plus the sacraments, plus their church membership don’t truly understand the gospel.

If you believe in something that you didn’t understand, if you didn’t really understand that Christ died for your sins, if you didn’t really understand He was bodily raised from the dead, then you weren’t truly saved. You believed to no purpose. Paul did not say they didn’t believe, he said they perhaps believed in vain. We need to be careful that we don’t believe in vain as well.

Thus, if you don’t continue to hold fast to the gospel, it means your faith was not a saving faith. People say, “I have my faith.” But maybe you have a vain faith, a faith that accomplishes nothing. James 2:19 says that the demons believe and tremble, but they are not saved. They have an assent to the truth, but they haven’t placed their trust in the facts of the gospel.

The warning is clear. We think, “I made a decision; I’ve be-

lieved.” If you did, you will continue to hold on to that faith. If you do not, then you believed in vain.

Have you really heard the gospel and received it? Have you taken your stand in the gospel and are you continuing to stand in that truth? Is the power of God at work in your life accomplishing His redemptive work of salvation, molding and shaping you, and preparing you for glory? Do you hold fast to that truth? If not, then the only other alternative is that you’ve believed in vain.

PART TWO

The Crux: Four Basic Facts of the Gospel We Preach (1 Corinthians 15:3-11)

To review, in the first two verses of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul established a basic foundation by reminding the Corinthians of his ministry with them. He said they were acting like either they didn't know the gospel, or that they had forgotten it. It was a rebuke, because he told them what they should not only know, but be practicing. He then made four statements about this gospel:

1. It's the gospel "which I preached to you." This is not new; he had preached it to them before.
2. It's the gospel "which you received." They welcomed this message and believed it.
3. It's the gospel in "which you stand." They took their stand in the gospel and that's where they stand presently, committed to the truth concerning Jesus Christ.
4. It's the gospel by "which you are saved." They could not be saved apart from the gospel. Salvation comes only through faith in the gospel.

In this next section—which comprises the next nine verses of 1 Corinthians 15—Paul made four statements about the gospel that he preached. Those four basic facts are: **1.** Christ died for our sins. **2.** He was buried. **3.** He was raised on the third day. **4.** He appeared. These four basic statements give the content of what he preached

to them. This was the heart of his message; those four facts summarize the gospel that you must believe to be saved.

The Gospel As a Matter of First Importance

Paul began by saying, “For I delivered to you as of **first importance** what I also received” (1 Corinthians 15:3a). “First importance” means foundational or primary. Everything is built on the gospel; it doesn’t imply that other things aren’t important. However, what Paul focused on in these next three verses are foundational truths out of which the rest of Scripture flows.

The Gospel Paul Received

Paul, by way of introducing the four basic facts of the gospel, also said that he had delivered to them “what I had **received**.” He started by emphasizing this simple truth: what I told you was what I had received. Back in verse one he had said, “I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you.” Thus, what he **delivered** to them was the gospel, and the gospel he delivered to them was the gospel that he had **received**. In effect, Paul was a broker of the gospel.

As was noted earlier, Paul didn’t learn the gospel from Peter or John or one of the other apostles. Paul received the gospel directly from the Lord—and it was this gospel that he delivered to the Corinthians.

CHAPTER FIVE

Christ Died for Our Sins (1 Corinthians 15:3)

Christ Died for Our Sins According to the Scriptures

The first fact of the gospel Paul preached was that “**Christ died for our sins**” (1 Corinthians 15:3). The fact of His death and the purpose of His death are stated clearly.

Christ’s death for our sins is the most basic fact. But, you say, many people have died—millions of people have died throughout history. Many also were crucified. Even on the day Christ died on the cross, He was crucified between two other men. What, then, is significant about the death of Christ? Simply, it is that He died **for our sins**.

Christ Died for Our Sins According to the Scriptures

The death of Christ as our substitute is the heart of the gospel. It’s not just that He died, but that He died **for our sins**. The first thing Jesus said regarding the ministry of the Holy Spirit was that He would convict the world of sin (John 16:8). As a result, I am able to recognize that I am a sinner, and can in turn comprehend my need for Christ to die in my place to pay my penalty. “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). “God has made Him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). In short, He died **for our sins**.

Multitudes of people think they are saved because they go to church and do good works. Unfortunately, they just don't understand the fundamental truth that "all have sinned; there is none righteous; and the wages of sin is death" (Romans 3:23; 3:10; 6:23). They don't understand the truth that someone has to die because the penalty for sin is death. "Without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). This is why Jesus Christ came and died.

The Preposition "Huper"

The preposition translated "for"—in the phrase "Christ died **for** our sins"—comes from the Greek word *huper*. Sometimes *huper* is referred to as the preposition of the atonement because it is often used when talking about the death of Christ on our behalf.

Concerning *huper*, one Greek Grammar said: "This is the normal preposition used in texts that deal with Christ's substitutionary atonement."¹⁰ *Huper* is naturally suited to the meaning of substitution. This is why we talk about substitutionary atonement as the foundational truth of the gospel—Christ died *for* our sins.

There are 149 uses of *huper* in the New Testament, with most of those passages focusing on substitutionary atonement. Here are a few examples:

- **2 Corinthians 5:14:** "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this that one died for all. Therefore all died." This verse obviously talks about a substitutionary death—Christ died for us.
- **2 Corinthians 5:21:** "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Jesus Christ came to pay the penalty for our sin. Until you come to grips with the fact that you are a sinner, separated from God and under His condemnation, you cannot be saved. The penalty for our sin is not church membership, baptism or anything else. It is death.
- **Galatians 1:4:** The Lord Jesus Christ is the One "who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father."

¹⁰ *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996) by Daniel Wallace, page 383.

He gave Himself for our sins; He paid the penalty.

· **Galatians 3:13:** “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law.” How did He do it? By “having become a curse for us, because it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” He came under the condemnation of sin. He became a curse and took the judgment that was due us by paying our penalty.

· **Romans 5:6-8:** “For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” This is the amazing message of the gospel in a nutshell—Christ died *for* us.

Christ Died for Our Sins According to the Scriptures

The next phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:3 says that Christ died for our sins “**according to the Scriptures.**” Paul was not referring to any one particular Scripture, but to all the Old Testament Scriptures that emphasize God would provide a Savior who would die and pay the penalty for our sins.

Earlier in this letter, Paul alluded to one such Old Testament passage when he said, “For Christ our Passover has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). The death of Christ was our Passover lamb being sacrificed.

The Passover lamb refers to the Old Testament Book of Exodus. The nation Israel was in bondage in Egypt, and God was going to slay the firstborn of every family in Egypt. He told the Jews to slay a lamb, and then to put the blood of that lamb over the doorposts and on the lintel of the house. Later that night, when He went to slay the firstborn, if He saw blood on the doorposts and lintel of a home, He would pass over them. He would accept that blood as an indication that a death had occurred to take the place of their firstborn.

This event was in anticipation of the time when God would provide His Son to be our Passover lamb. When John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the nation Israel, he said, “Behold the Lamb of

God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). His announcement declared that Jesus is that ultimate sacrificial lamb, the only One who can pay the penalty for sin. Therefore, all the sacrifices of the Old Testament look forward to the coming of Christ.

The theme of the Book of Hebrews is the superiority of Christ in replacing all the Old Testament systems, sacrifices, and ceremonies. The Old Testament sacrifices, under the Law, were a reminder of sin year by year (Hebrews 10:3). Hebrews 10:4 states, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Clearly the problem with the sacrifice of animals was that they couldn’t take away sin.

Because of this, the next verse states: “Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me” (Hebrews 10:5). The writer, in a fitting summary, explained that Jesus Christ was born into the human race so that He could bear the sins that the animals could not. He is our Passover Lamb.

Lastly, in Isaiah 53:11, the prophet wrote, “By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many.” He provided righteousness for us, in that “He will bear their iniquities.” Then, note in the middle of verse 12: “He poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He himself bore the sin of many.” It couldn’t be any clearer—we need someone to take our place. We are only saved by His death in our place.

CHAPTER SIX

Christ Was Buried and He Was Raised (1 Corinthians 15:4)

Christ Was Buried

The next fact of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is that *He was buried*. This fact is simply a statement of the reality of His death. You only bury a dead person. Paul didn't give evidence to support that He really died, such as the soldier running a spear into His side, or that they wrapped Him in burial cloths. Paul didn't have to argue and present proofs. Instead, he simply accepted His death as a fact—He was really dead when they took Him down from the cross.

In the Roman world, soldiers didn't take someone down from the cross and put them in a tomb if he wasn't dead. The penalty for doing that would be to go to the cross yourself! Therefore, Roman soldiers wouldn't dare do this.

This truth will form the bridge to the next basic fact of the gospel. The proof that Jesus really died is seen in the fact that after three days He was raised from the dead. That's all the evidence we need.

Christ Was Raised

A Change in Tense

In this third basic fact of the gospel—"He was raised on the third day"—Paul changed tenses. The first two verbs, He *died* and

He *was buried*, are aorist tenses. This is the tense, as we noted earlier, that is often used for the past tense in Greek. It's not the only use, but it would be the normal tense used to refer to a past event.

In this fact—"He was raised"—Paul switches from the aorist tense to the perfect tense. A perfect tense, again, pictures something that happened in the past but the result continues to the very present. He was raised, at a time in the past, and He continues to be resurrected. That is, He continues to be a raised person today, never to die again (cf. Romans 6:9).

It Is a Simple Fact

Jesus' resurrection is an historical event; it happened at a fixed time in history. Christ hung on a cross and died at a particular time on a particular day in past history. He was taken down from the cross, His body was wrapped in burial cloths and He was buried in a tomb. This, too, happened at a specific point and time in history; nothing is uncertain or unsure about it.

Jesus' Own Testimony

During His earthly ministry, Jesus taught that He would be resurrected. "Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign, yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth'" (Matthew 12:38-40). In this passage, Jesus clearly prophesied of His coming death, burial, and resurrection.

Matthew 16:21 says, "From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and be raised on the third day." He was going to suffer and die, and then after three days He was going to be raised.

Consider John 2:18-21. Jesus had just cleaned out the temple of its moneychangers, and the Jews asked Him, "'What sign do you show us as your authority for doing these things?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'It took 46 years to build this temple, and will you

raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.” Jesus, of course, wasn’t speaking of the physical temple, but rather of His physical body—”Destroy this physical body and in three days I’ll raise it up.”

Thus, on several occasions, Jesus Himself spoke of the certainty of His death, burial, and resurrection.

The Importance of the Resurrection

The overarching theme of 1 Corinthians 15 is that Jesus’ resurrection is a critically important fact of the gospel. He was raised to secure our justification (cf. Romans 4:25). Now that righteousness had been provided for sinful people, His work was done. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is essential proof of this. Paul later said, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless” (1 Corinthians 15:17). If Jesus is still in the grave, Paul said, then you are still in your sins; Christ isn’t a Savior, and Jesus was just another criminal crucified on a cross.

According to the Scriptures

Jesus Christ “was buried and He was raised on the third day **according to the Scriptures**” (1 Corinthians 15:4). This parallels the earlier statement: “Christ died for our sins **according to the Scriptures**” (1 Corinthians 15:3). As we noted earlier, Paul referred to the teaching of Old Testament Scriptures. He didn’t quote any, but he could have used a multitude of passages.

One such passage is Isaiah 53. In verse 10, we see that the Father “was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering.” The Book of Hebrews shows how Christ was the one sacrifice that did what all the animal sacrifices combined could not do—He was able to remove our sin as our guilt offering. Isaiah continued, “He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand” (Isaiah 53:10b). That is, He was sacrificed for our sins but He will live again.

Beginning in the middle of verse 11, Isaiah wrote, “By His knowledge the righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many as He will bear their iniquities.” No other way exists to have our sins for-

given—He'll justify the many by bearing their iniquities. "Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, He will divide the booty with the strong because He poured out Himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet He Himself bore the sins of many and was numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

Do you see the connection? He's going to die to pay our penalty, and yet He's then going to live! The death, burial and resurrection of Christ were all prophesied hundreds of years before they actually occurred.

Someone once said, "The religions of the world are all based upon the lives and teachings of their founders, but only biblical Christianity rests upon the death and resurrection of its Savior." This is the foundation of what we believe—there is no Christianity, and there is no hope, apart from these events—the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Christ Appeared (1 Corinthians 15:5-11)

In this section of 1 Corinthians 15, we have seen that Christ died for our sins, He was buried, and He was raised from the dead. The fourth fact of the gospel is that *He appeared* to witnesses. This fact is proof that His resurrection truly occurred. Numerous people saw Him bodily alive on the earth after His resurrection; He was present on earth for people to see.

The word “appeared” is a good translation. We get the word “ophthalmology” from this word, as well as “optometrist.” It means “to see.” Beginning in verse 5, Paul listed six different witnesses—those who can confirm the bodily resurrection of Jesus because they **saw** Him with their own eyes.

These witnesses were a selected group of people. Paul didn’t mention all the people Christ appeared to. In addition, it is important to note that no one in the church at Corinth was an eyewitness of the resurrection. This is, of course, the case for us. People say, “Nobody today has seen Him.” That’s true, but no one in the church at Corinth had seen Him after His resurrection either. All they had to go on was the testimony of the eyewitnesses, which is all we have to go on today as well.

What Paul recorded in this passage was not intended to prove to an unbelieving people that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Rather, this was written to reassure people who had already placed their faith in Christ of the facts that they believed. We can’t use this text to prove to people that Christ was raised from the dead. I can-

not prove it to you, nor does Paul try to prove it either. It is simply accepted as fact.

Thus, Paul gave us six selective examples of those that Christ appeared to, serving to show that His resurrection is not a made-up story.

1. He Appeared to Cephas

First of all, “He appeared to Cephas” (1 Corinthians 15:5a). Cephas is the Aramaic name for Peter, both names meaning “the rock.” Jesus gave Peter this name in John 1:42.

Jesus appeared to Peter at a specific point in time. Peter saw Christ on several occasions after His resurrection. One of the most extensive accounts is at the end of the gospel of John. After fishing, Jesus confronts Peter and says to him three times, “Peter, do you love Me more than these?” (John 21:15-17).

This is not, however, the appearance Paul was talking about here. Rather, he was talking about the events that took place on that first Sunday after Christ’s resurrection. On that day, Peter was the first disciple that Jesus appeared to. The actual details of that event are not recorded, but in Luke 24:34 the apostles tell two people—the men whom Jesus spoke to on the Emmaus Road—that Christ has been raised and had appeared to Peter.

Peter was a well-known figure in the Corinthian church. Some in Corinth said, “We’re followers of Peter” (1 Corinthians 1:12). Perhaps he had visited that city. Paul spent 18 months with the church at Corinth. During that time, a variety of teachers would have come to further instruct the believers. Peter may well have visited the church during this time. The Corinthians were probably quite familiar with him and his ministry, and the knowledge that Peter was an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ would have surely buoyed their faith.

2. He Appeared to the Twelve

Next, He appeared to the twelve. The twelve weren’t the twelve at that appearance; rather, they were the eleven because Judas had gone out and hung himself (Matthew 27:5). However, “the twelve” became the identifying title of this special group, and they can be

referred to as the twelve even if only eleven were present. Similarly, today we might say the Senate is in session, even though every Senator may not be present.

This appearance of Jesus to the twelve after His resurrection is recorded in Luke 24:36 and John 20:19. In John 20:19, the eleven disciples were in a room with the door locked because they were afraid of the Jews. Jesus came and stood in the midst of this room. This appearance took place in the evening of the day that Christ arose—that first Sunday of Christ’s resurrection.

The twelve were His special, official representatives. They led the way in carrying the message of the resurrected Savior to the world. When Matthias replaced Judas in Acts 1, Peter said it was so he can join with the other eleven apostles in being eyewitnesses of His resurrection and testifying of this to the world (v. 22).

Thus, these twelve went out and told people that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the Messiah of Israel, died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin so that people could be forgiven by believing in Him. “How do you know?” people may have asked. “We saw Him after His resurrection,” they replied. “He was raised from the dead and He’s alive!”

3. He Appeared to More Than 500 at One Time

Next in 1 Corinthians 15:6, we read: “He appeared to more than 500 brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep.” Perhaps you could say that Peter was an emotional person, and being distraught with what happened to the Messiah, maybe he just thought he saw the resurrected Christ. You perhaps could also say that the other ten disciples—who were thinking that He was going to set up the kingdom for Israel but ended up being crucified—were in disarray, and therefore possibly doubt that they had really seen the resurrected Christ.

However, with this appearance we have 500 witnesses—all at one time—who saw the resurrected Christ. Five hundred people do not hallucinate all at the same time. The expression “at one time” is one adverb in Greek, and it denotes that they were all there at the same time.

It is not specifically recorded in the gospels when this appear-

ance happened. Some commentators think this is probably what occurred when Jesus instructed some of His followers—the eleven and other faithful followers—to meet Him at an appointed mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16).

Much of Jesus' earthly ministry took place in Galilee, by the Sea of Galilee. As a result, Jesus would have had many followers in this location. It would have been much safer and easier for a group this size to assemble in Galilee. Therefore, it is quite plausible that this may have been the occasion when the 500 would have seen Him at one time.

4. He Appeared to James

“Then He appeared to James” (I Corinthians 15:7a). Two men named James are of particular interest to us in the New Testament. There was James who was the brother of John, and who was part of the inner circle of the twelve disciples. Within the twelve there were three—Peter, **James** and John—who were privileged to have an especially close relationship with Christ. Herod had this James executed by the sword (cf. Acts 12:2).

This, however, is not the James that Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 15. If he were, then the James mentioned here would be one of the twelve. He had just discussed Christ's appearance to the twelve, so why would Paul single him out again?

The James mentioned here, then, is the one that Paul saw when he went up to Jerusalem years after his conversion. He said that when he went up to Jerusalem, “I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother” (Galatians 1:19). Thus, the James mentioned here in 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the brothers of our Lord.

This James was a prominent figure in the early church. He oversaw the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. He also may have visited the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 9:5, while talking about liberty and his right to have a wife, Paul said: “Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?”

Because the church at Corinth was familiar with the Lord's brothers, it is quite plausible that James may have been to Corinth,

along with the other brothers of the Lord. Paul, thus, reminded the Corinthians that James saw the resurrected Lord.

5. He Appeared to the Apostles

“Then to all the apostles” is the next appearance that Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:7. This appearance would evidently be the one recorded in Acts 1:3-8, when He met with His apostles. You may be thinking, “I thought we just saw that He appeared to the twelve. Now he says He appeared to all the apostles. What is the difference between the twelve and the apostles? I thought they were the same group?”

Some commentators think this is indeed another reference to the twelve, with Christ appearing to all of the apostles as a group.

Another possibility is that this is a reference to the twelve apostles, along with other apostles as well, such as James. Even though he was not one of the twelve, James can be classified among the apostles because he saw the resurrected Christ. In Acts 4:4, 14, Luke seems to indicate that Barnabas was classified as an apostle as well. Thus, in this appearance, the apostles saw Him—the twelve and any others that might have been classified as apostles.

6. He Appeared to Paul

“He appeared to me also” (1 Corinthians 15:8). The appearance to Paul was not just a dream or a vision; it was a bodily manifestation of the resurrected Christ. This appearance enabled Paul to be called an apostle since he had physically seen the resurrected Christ (cf. Acts 1:22). This final appearance also speaks of the impact that the resurrected Christ had on the life of the Apostle Paul.

Last of All

The final appearance of the resurrected Christ was to Paul (“last of all”). This appearance is the subject matter of 1 Corinthians 15:8-11. The apostle talked about the grace of God that brought about the miraculous transformation in his life, enabling him to zealously proclaim the Christ he had once persecuted.

Paul was the last eyewitness of the resurrected Christ. The list

of eyewitnesses doesn't continue on throughout church history. Jesus appeared to him "last of all."

A current movement, however, exists among churches around the world that there is a revival of the apostolic gift. *Apostolic Churches* is a book in my library. It interviews men who call themselves apostles. This claim by these modern-day apostles cannot possibly be true—there are no apostles today, because Paul was the last one. He was the last to have seen Jesus Christ bodily after His resurrection, which is a requirement for someone to be called an apostle (cf. Acts 1:22).

Untimely Born

Paul says he was "one untimely born." Discussion abounds, if you want to pursue it in the commentaries, about this word *untimely*. It's not used any other time in the New Testament. It is, however, used three times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint.

In 1 Corinthians 15, and in other places in Greek writings, it can refer to a miscarriage or an abortion. However, the translation here of the Greek word *ectromity*, as "one untimely born" is supported by the context. After all, one born out of time, not at the right time, or in a unique setting would be considered as one *untimely born*.

All the other appearances took place within 40 days following Jesus' resurrection and before He ascended to heaven. Paul's appearance, however, occurs years later. It was an untimely, abnormal birth.

Paul Is the Least of the Apostles

1 Corinthians 15:9 says, "For I am the **least of the apostles**. Not fit" . . . that is, not worthy . . . "to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Prior to his conversion, Paul went everywhere doing all he could to persecute Christians, to imprison them, and to have them put to death. He was there when Stephen was stoned to death, giving his hearty approval (cf. Acts 8:1). This is why he felt that he was "the least of the apostles." Paul never got over the grace of God that would save such an unworthy person as himself.

By the Grace of God, **I Am What I Am**

We have a wonderful statement in verse 10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am.” You ought to have this verse underlined in your Bible. Paul doesn’t try to make his past prettier. It’s not, “I’ve been thinking about my past, and I was searching.” Rather, “I was as bad as you could get. I was the worst of the worst.”

Consider Paul’s personal testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-15:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost.

Why did God save Paul? Verse 16 says, “Yet for this reason I found mercy so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”

Paul said, “God saved me for one reason. I was the chief of sinners, the worst of the worst, and that should speak volumes to everyone—‘He can save you, too!’ You can be saved no matter what you’ve done, however vile you are.” Why? Paul would say, “Because he saved me, and I was the worst! If His grace is great enough and powerful enough to save the worst of sinners, me, He can surely save you, too.”

Sometimes the longer we’re believers, the more likely we are to forget what we once were. We get so impatient with sinful people: “How could they do that? It’s so vulgar, that’s so vile. I just don’t even want to be around them.” Oh really? Do you remember who you were? Jeremiah the prophet said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9). Are you an exception? I don’t think so!

This was the view of the Pharisee—“I thank you, Lord, that I am not a sinner like other men” (Luke 18:11). Unfortunately, it is also the view of some today—“I know I was a sinner before Christ

saved me, but I never sinned like they sin.” Maybe you didn’t do all the vile things they did, but as a holy God looked at you, He saw a heart just as vile, just as sinful, and just as corrupt.

Paul never lost sight of the grace of God that saved him. Likewise, if it weren’t for His grace that reached down to where you were and drew you to Himself, you’d be lost today. That’s the way it is for all of us. It’s “by the grace of God I am what I am.”

The Grace of God in the Life of Paul

It is important to understand that the grace of God does not occur at salvation and stop. The grace of God takes hold of us, transforms us, and makes us new, as it did with Paul on the Damascus Road. With Paul, as with us, we should have a testimony that unfolds as a life enabled and empowered by the grace of God. He wrote, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain” (1 Corinthians 15:10). That is, his grace was not empty, ineffective, or fruitless. This is the same word we studied in 1 Corinthians 15:2—“unless you believed **in vain**.” God’s grace wasn’t limited to an experience that occurred at a point in time in the past. Rather, it transformed the Apostle Paul for the rest of his life.

The idea that somehow God saved me in an isolated moment in time—and I may or may not continue to walk with the Lord—is a foreign concept to Paul. God’s grace took hold of his life, and it never let go.

What’s the evidence, you may ask? Look at the next phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:10—“I labored even more than all of them.” At first glance, it sounds like we’ve moved from Paul acknowledging his sinfulness, to Paul elevating himself.

His laboring more than all of them—with “them” referring to the other apostles—could be taken as Paul labored more than any one of them individually. Or, it could be that he labored more than all of them put together. Either way, that doesn’t sound very humble, does it?

The word “labor” is an interesting word, especially when put in the context of God’s grace at work. The Greek word used here is *copiao*, and it means, “to toil to exhaustion,” “draining labor.” In

essence, Paul said, “I gave every ounce of my strength and it wore me out; I was exhausted in the work of the Lord. But it was God’s grace doing it.”

Paul’s point demonstrated that God’s grace did not prove vain. He wasn’t boasting; he wasn’t saying that he was a better person than any of the other apostles. After all—“yet not I”—he wasn’t the one doing this hard labor. Rather, it was the grace of God through him. “I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the **grace of God with me**” (1 Corinthians 15:10). It was because God’s grace was poured out on him in a special way that he was able to labor more than the other apostles.

Paul Preached the Gospel As a Result

Paul wrapped up this section in verse 11: “Whether, then, it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.” Literally, it is “whether then I or they.” In other words, whether it was Paul or it was the other apostles, it didn’t matter. Paul, as a result of seeing the resurrected Lord and having his life transformed by the grace of God, preached that same gospel with all of his strength. The Corinthians were the beneficiaries of this transformation in the Apostle Paul. He preached the gospel to them and they believed.

CONCLUSION

The Church's Responsibility

As we have seen in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, the gospel according to the Scriptures is the simple message that Christ died for our sins, He was buried, He was raised on the third day, and He appeared to many witnesses after His resurrection. This is the same gospel by which we are saved. This is the gospel we are to stand on. And this is the gospel we are to preach—nothing more, and nothing less.

The Devil's Scheme

If you were the devil, what would you attack to undermine the church's effectiveness? Certainly, you would probably attack the gospel—the message of Christ's death as the substitute for sinners, and Christ's resurrection from the dead as the final demonstration of His victory over death, sin, the world, and the devil. You can go to churches today and hear good talks, but never hear a message about Christ. In many churches, we're all about the family. Well believers, we should be all about the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Our Responsibility

We are to proclaim this same gospel message to a world that, for the most part, believes they are "good Christians." We are to present the facts of the gospel and allow the Spirit of God to take that truth to the heart and mind of those He is drawing to salvation.

God's Responsibility

It is, then, the work of the Spirit to bring the power to the gospel message we proclaim. Only God can save people. This is a crucial point. We think that because we preached the gospel and people don't respond that we should make some adjustments to our message or use some other methods that will make it more attractive.

That's not the way God works. He works the same way He worked in Paul's day. By the grace of God, the Spirit of God takes the message of Christ and brings it to the heart of a person so that they recognize that they are in a lost, sinful condition and can turn from their sin and place their faith in Christ. Only God can enable this transformation to take place.

Paul's Example

Everywhere Paul went, he unashamedly preached the gospel. One example is found in Acts 26. In this chapter, Paul, on trial for preaching the gospel, gave his testimony before King Herod Agrippa. He told him about his own conversion, when the resurrected Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus. He told him what his life was all about prior to his salvation—how he locked up many of the saints in prisons, and gladly assented to putting many of these believers to death (Acts 26:10).

The reason he was going to Damascus was to continue to hunt down and persecute Christians. “And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:11). Paul devoted every ounce of his being to the destruction of believers.

Then, on the road to Damascus, he tells Agrippa that he fell to the ground and was questioned by Christ, “‘Why are you persecuting Me?’ Paul replied, ‘Lord, who are you?’ Christ said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet’” (Acts 26:14-16a).

Picking up again in verse 16, Jesus said, “For this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness.” Paul certainly became a witness—an “eyewitness kind of testifier,” because he saw Him. His goal, or purpose, was to preach the gospel message to “open their eyes so they may be turned from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:18).

Paul was standing before King Agrippa in all his splendor. Paul knew he was on trial for his life. And what was he concerned about telling the king? Was he trying to defend his own life, giving rea-

sons why he should live? No! His only concern was to tell him the simple message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to testify how He changed his life and made him new. This is the message that Christ gave to Paul to preach. He was driven to be obedient to this God-given responsibility to preach the gospel.

Peter's Example

Peter, too, was passionate about proclaiming the gospel. In Acts 10, Peter was given the privilege of being the first to preach the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ to an assembled group of Gentiles.

You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who are oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God" (Acts 10:38-40).

Peter, of course, as we saw in 1 Corinthians 15:5, was one of those witnesses.

We continue with Peter's sermon: "He ordered us"—He didn't suggest but rather He ordered—"to preach to the people, and to solemnly testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins" (Acts 10:42-43).

Look what happened as a result of Peter's faithfulness to proclaim the gospel: "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon those who were listening to the message" (Acts 10:44). Peter took this responsibility to preach the gospel very seriously, and as a result God saved many Gentiles that day.

This is God's method for salvation—people like you and me faithfully proclaim the simple gospel message and the Holy Spirit takes that message, uses it to convict people of their sin, and then miraculously saves them. We cannot do what only God can do. What was Peter's responsibility? It was to present the gospel of

Jesus Christ and leave the results up to God.

Our Purpose

Therefore, our purpose, individually, and as a church, is to proclaim Jesus Christ. This is what we must do—carry that same message and use the same methods that Paul and Peter used. We think people won't be interested in it. Tell them anyway. We can't decide what the Holy Spirit will do with the message. Rather, we must simply leave the results in His hands. We are called to boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ—this is what our life as believers is to be all about.

Think about it—when did the Holy Spirit transform you and make you new as a result of hearing and believing that Christ died for your sins, was raised from the dead, and is alive? You must believe that He is the Savior, and when you truly believe in Him, the Spirit of God comes into your life in a transforming way and makes you new. You're never the same again, never, ever. And you, too, will long to tell other people of this beautiful message so that they also may be transformed.

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