

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

- I. We Must Prioritize the Message of the Gospel (15:1-3)
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Introduction

Keeping first things first is a constant challenge in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Never has that been more important than today. The church has been given one mission and that is always to have 1st place in our lives. We call it the Great Commission – making disciples of all nations. (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). The church is unique in many ways compared to any other institution or entity in the world. At the core of our unique identity is this truth: *the mission of the church is actually determined by the message of the church*. And, the mission of the church is to put, above everything else, the proclamation of the message of the church which is simply called “The Gospel.” Now, the gospel is not the only message of the Bible or the church, but it is the first and most important message of both. This is what the most prolific writer of the New Testament, and perhaps the most famous Christian who ever lived, said in 1 Cor 15 (esp vs. 3-6).

It is accurate to say that the primary reason Jesus came was so we would have a gospel to proclaim (cf Luke 19:10). We are living in a day when more and more

churches and more and more pastors and preachers are putting less and less emphasis on the gospel. It will be the death of any church. At every opportunity, both in church and out of church, the gospel should be heard and clearly explained and people should have a chance to respond to that gospel. It is keeping first things first.

We Must Prioritize the Message of the Gospel
1 Corinthians 15:1-3

Paul begins this chapter with a somewhat surprising, but also a helpful statement. “Now I want to make clear (*ESV*, “remind you) for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand...” (15:1) The word for “make clear” is the Greek word, *guorizo*. The translation Thiselton points out, “Is more difficult than might appear.” (Thiselton, *TNIGTC*, 1183) Paul uses this verb in 12:3 to mean “I give you to understand.” (Thiselton, *ibid*). I believe the CSB translation “to make clear”, both by context and force, is most fitting. Obviously, these Corinthians knew and understood the gospel enough to be saved by it. But for reasons Paul will innumerate he obviously felt the need to make crystal clear what the essence of the gospel truly is. In the early church there was a need to continuously clarify the heart of the gospel. The same is true today. It is popular to say important issues like racism, immigration,

poverty are gospel issues. This is misleading. Dealing with such issues may be an implication of the gospel, but they are not the gospel.

Paul adds in verse 2, "...and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain." (15:2) This is an amazing statement we will return to at the end of this section. Simply put, Paul said the gospel was so important it is how anyone is saved. How can persons come to know God through faith in Jesus Christ unless they hear and respond to the gospel? With that being true, Paul's next statement logically follows: "For I passed on to you as most important what I also received..." (15:3). Paul says the most important message of the church is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the one message, the foremost message, that should always make the cut in our preaching and teaching. Paul had to deal with many subjects in this church. They included incest, sex, spiritual gifts, lawsuits, divisions, marriage, the single life, temptation, the Lord's Supper, speaking in tongues. But he declares that the most important subject is and always will be the gospel. To reiterate, it is not the only message of the church, but it is the main message of the church. "The gospel is the priority as it represents 'the fundamentals of the Christian faith'—the baseline and touchstone for all that is taught." (Schreiner, TNTC, 303). We must always and forever prioritize the gospel.

We Must Define the Essence of the Gospel
1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Paul feels a need to define exactly, almost to the last letter of the last word, what the gospel is. He wants there to be no doubts or ambiguities. He lets us know there are three key components to the gospel: “For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...”

(15:3) Paul refers to the fact that he is “passing on” what he had “received.” Hayes points out that this is the same terminology he uses in describing how he received the tradition of the Lord’s Supper (11:23). This indicates that this confession is very old and most likely dates back to the time when Paul was also called to be an apostle, within about three years after Jesus was crucified (Hayes, *Interpretation*, 255). It goes back to the mid A.D. 30’s. The first truth of the gospel is that “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures...” (15:3). The word “for” literally means “in behalf of.” Jesus died in behalf of the sins of the world and because of the sins of the world he died as penal our substitute. He died in our place and for our sins. He was our penal substitute bearing in our place the wrath and judgment of God we all deserved. Scriptures that specifically point to His death include Ps.16; Ps.22; Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and the story of Jonah.

There is nothing in and of itself unusual that people die. People die every day. It wasn’t even unusual back in the days of Jesus for people to be crucified. Thirty-thousand Jews were crucified on one occasion by imperial Rome. What made his

death so unique and stand out above every other death in history is that he died *in behalf of our sins*. The emphasis is surely on the fact that Christ died. The verb is in the aorist tense denoting a single past event, setting up for these Corinthians the main theme of the chapter which is both the resurrection of Jesus and our own resurrection. He died, but also “never to die again.” (CF. Rom 6:9) (Thiselton, *TNIGTC*, 192)

There is another part of the gospel we don't pay much attention, but it is also very important. We often don't emphasize it. It is “that he was buried...” (15:4). To some that may seem redundant or even unnecessary, but obviously Paul did not think it was a small detail at all. Why? Because the point is only dead men are buried. The detail of burial is not only a necessary part of the story of the gospel; it was actually a fulfilment of biblical prophecy.

Isaiah prophesied seven hundred fifty years before this event, “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, but he was with a rich man at his death, because he had done no violence and had not spoken deceitfully.” (Isa. 53:9). It is entirely possible that Paul was anticipating objections to the resurrection of Jesus, because if you deny the resurrection you either have to deny that he was raised (as many skeptics do) or you have to deny that he really died (as some other religions do.) In other words, either he was never really raised or else he never really died.

Of course contemporary readers would have realized this was also to address the rumor that someone had stolen the body (see Matt 28:11-15). The very rumor itself substantiates the fact that Jesus was indeed buried. Further, a sealed tomb and being guarded by a crack garrison of Roman soldiers goes against any so called “Swoon Theory,” the idea that Jesus really didn’t die, but rather somehow revived and broke out of the tomb on his own.

The gospel emphasizes: 1) Jesus literally died; 2) Jesus was actually buried; and 3) Jesus was physically raised a resurrected Lord. “...that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...” (15:4). It should go without saying that the other two parts of the gospel do not matter if this third part is not true. Whether or not Jesus died, there is only one way to know that his death for our sins was efficacious and that is the resurrection. The cross is the payment. The empty tomb is the proof the payment was approved and accepted.

The reference to Christ’s burial in verse 2 confirms the reality of his death, but then Paul points to a line of eyewitnesses to confirm he really was raised from the dead.

“And that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the

apostles. Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.” (15:5-8)

Hayes is correct in stating that this proves that Paul “Did not think of the resurrection of Jesus as some sort of...truth beyond history...rather it was an event that occurred in the immediate past...for which historical eyewitness testimony was readily available...” (Hayes, Interpretation, 157). Jesus appeared repeatedly. He appeared to Peter, then the 12 (the disciples) and to more than 500 brothers at one time. Some are still alive so go and ask them! Then He appeared to James, then all the apostles. Finally, on the Damascus Road (Acts 9), Paul says I saw Him too (vs 5-8). He is alive! The evidence is simply overwhelming.

We Must Emphasize the Power of the Gospel 1 Corinthians 15:2; 9-12

Why is the gospel the most important message in the Bible? Why is the gospel the most important message of the church? Why is the gospel the most important message of the Christian? Because, as Paul stated earlier, “it alone has the power of salvation.” (cf Rom 1:16) It is by the gospel, “...you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you-unless you believed in vain.” (15:2) There is no deliberation, equivocation, or hesitation. The gospel is the only message that has the power to take anyone from sin to salvation, from hell to heaven, from death to life, and from darkness to light. Not surprising, Paul points to himself as the supreme example of the power of the gospel.

“For I am the least of the apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, so we proclaim and so you have believed.”

(15:9-11)

The transparency and honesty of Paul is both heartwarming and breathtaking. He fully admits he is the least of all apostles. He should not even be called an apostle. He was the ultimate “anti-apostle” by persecuting God’s church, but it was the resurrected Lord who saved him by grace, changed him by grace, and empowered him with grace to do the work that he did, and become the person he became. Suffice to say that every true child of God could put his name in this paragraph. I freely admit I am the least of all preachers, the chief of all sinners. I, too, have broken God’s heart, fallen short of God’s glory, failed in doing God’s will, but because of the resurrected Lord, I can say, “By the grace of God I am what I am and his grace toward me was not in vain.” And, what he did in me He does in all who believe.

Conclusion

Of all the messages, that we can glean from the scripture to share with the world, far and away the most important, the one that should take first priority and be first

in line is the gospel. Other messages can encourage, uplift, exhort, etc., but only one message can bring eternal salvation and that is the gospel. Preach it and watch it do its work!

The Resurrection: An Appendix

Christianity stands or falls with the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The whole of New Testament faith and teaching orbits about the confession and conviction that the crucified Jesus is the Son of God established and vindicated as such “by the resurrection from the dead according to the Spirit of holiness” (Rom 1:4).

Resurrection Options

- 1) *The Swoon Theory*. Jesus did not really die, according to this theory. He passed out or fainted as a result of the enormous physical punishment he suffered. Later he revived.
- 2) *The Spirit Theory*. Jesus was not raised bodily, but he did return in a spirit form or as a spirit creature. This view is held by the Jehovah’s Witnesses cult. They teach that Jesus was created by God as the archangel Michael.
- 3) *The Hallucination Theory*. This perspective was initially set forth by the German scholar David Strauss (1808-1874). The disciples, wanting desperately to believe Jesus was alive, simply imagined his resurrection.
- 4) *The Vision Theory*. The disciples had experiences which they interpreted or understood to be appearances of the risen Jesus.

- 5) *The Legend/Myth Theory*. Over time the Jesus stories were embellished and exaggerated. The resurrection is something of a wonder story indicating the significance the mythical Jesus held for His followers.
- 6) *The Stolen Body Theory*. This is actually the earliest theory that attempts to explain away the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It goes back to Matthew 28:11-15, where it is recorded that the soldiers who guarded Jesus' tomb were bribed by the Jewish leaders to lie and say, "His disciples came during the night and stole Him while we were sleeping" (v. 13).
Occasionally it is alleged that the body could also have been stolen by the (1) Jewish leaders, (2) the Romans, or even (3) Joseph of Arimathea.
- 7) *The Wrong Tomb Theory*. Belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus rests on a simple mistake: first the women and later the men went to the wrong tomb by accident.
- 8) *The Lie-for-Profit Theory*. The alleged resurrection of Jesus was a "religious hoax" perpetuated by Jesus' disciples. His death by crucifixion was a huge disappointment, but his followers saw a way to turn it into financial profit.
- 9) *The Mistaken Identity Theory*. Sometimes related to the wrong tomb theory, this view says the women mistook someone who they thought

was Jesus. Support for this view is sometimes sought from John 20:11-18.

10) *The Twin Theory*. Robert Greg Cavin argued that Jesus had an identical twin brother. They were separated at birth and did not see each other again until the crucifixion. Following Jesus' death, his twin conjured up a messianic identity and mission for Jesus.

11) *The Muslim Theory*. Islam rejects the biblical witness concerning the crucifixion of Jesus. God instead provided a substitute for Jesus, perhaps even making the person look like Jesus. Surah 4:157 in *The Koran* says, "They declared: 'We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.' They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did." Among Muslims there is no unanimity on who took the place of Jesus.

An Apologetic for the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus

- 1) The failure of naturalistic theories to explain the event.
- 2) The birth of faith in the disciples and the radical change in their lives.
- 3) The empty tomb and the discarded grave clothes.
- 4) His appearance first to women.
- 5) Change in the day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday by Jews.
- 6) Unlikely nature of mass hallucination.

- 7) Numerous and varied resurrection appearances which lasted for forty days and then abruptly ended.
- 8) The fifty-day interval between the resurrection and the proclamation of the gospel at Pentecost (Acts 2) in Jerusalem.
- 9) The failure of the Jewish leaders and the Romans to disprove the message of the empty tomb.
- 10) The unexpected nature of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.
- 11) The conversion of two skeptics: James the half brother of Jesus and Saul of Tarsus.
- 12) The moral character of the eyewitnesses.
- 13) The early creedal witness of 1 Corinthians 15:3-7.
- 14) The accepted character and claims of Jesus.
- 15) Reliable eyewitness documents recording the events.