

# **1 Corinthians 15**

## *The Credibility of the Gospel*

**15:1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel (Good News) I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved (Note the connection between being saved and the gospel), if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.**

We just finished a three-week section on the spiritual gifts, six weeks if you attended the evening classes. Yet still, there is no consensus on how the gifts work and if they are in fact normative today. Depending on who you talk to you will get a different answer. It would be nice if it was crystal clear and everyone was on the same page. Unfortunately that is not going to happen this side of heaven. Like Paul said in chapter 13, we see dimly from our earthly perspective. Our understanding at best is incomplete. In the end, both the cessationist and the charismatic will make it to heaven. The verdict is out on who will win the argument and say, "I told you so."

Murkiness may be excusable when it comes to the spiritual gifts; but it is not allowed when it comes to the gospel because at stake is one's salvation. Ultimately, it is the gospel or good news that saves. A person cannot be a Christian without knowing it because it is the heart of the Christian message. The problem in Corinth was that some folk did not believe that a dead person could be raised. During their era, Gnosticism was in its very early stages. Gnosticism taught that matter was evil and that in order for a person to be saved; his spirit must be released from the body, which was seen as a sort of prison that held captive the spirit. Consequently, the suggestion that a physical body, which was once dead and then brought back to life, totally contradicted this new philosophy since the spirit was supposed to escape the body; not remain captive in it. Gnosticism went on to be a major stumbling block for the early church for the next couple centuries.

So what is the gospel? It is the most important aspect of Christianity and the one that is pivotal to remember. If you walk away from our study in Corinthians and you only really grasp one thing this is the one I want you to recall. The gospel quite simply is the good news about Jesus. You have to get this right and more importantly believe it; otherwise there is no hope for going to heaven. Paul who tends to be very wordy explains it very succinctly. This has caused many scholars to suggest that what we are reading is an early church creed that had been passed down so it could easily be memorized. If this is the case, this predates Paul's own theology. This would be significant because 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians was written around 55 AD, about 30 years after the resurrection of Christ. If this is an established early church creed; then it could go back 10 or 20 years before the book of Corinthians was written. One of the main reasons why the resurrection is not the result of legend is because the manuscript evidence shows up 30 years after the resurrection. That is not enough time for a legend to develop because many of the eyewitnesses would be still alive. With that said, if this is indeed an early Christian creed; this could have been a tradition that was passed down from as early as five years after the resurrection. At the time there was no New Testament and people had to rely on oral tradition. Consequently, memorizes something very succinct was important. Notice the brevity of the creed and how it is enveloped with the word "that" four times. Okay Here is the gospel.

**3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received (Notice Paul is sharing something he received): **that** Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 **that** he was buried, **that** he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and **that** he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.**

Okay that is the gospel and a verse I would love you to memorize. All of the elements are very important. We will go over them one by one.

1. **Christ died for our Sins:** : You cannot just say Christ died for you, without mentioning sin, because it makes another person feel better. If you omit this essential truth his death becomes worthless. The gospel presentation must include the reality that sin is the reason one cannot go to heaven. It is the stink that makes everyone defiled

before a holy God. It is the manure on our shoes that must be removed before we can enter God's house. You cannot present the gospel without mentioning sin. Since Paul mentions this is accordance with the Scriptures a good verse to recall is in Isaiah 53:5-6

**Isaiah 53:5-6**

*5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

- 2. Christ was Buried:** The second part of the gospel is that the corpse of Christ was buried in a tomb. Not only was he taken off the cross and buried in the tomb; but there were Roman soldiers who were guarding the tomb so there would be any funny business by the disciples or other followers of Christ. Imagine watching someone you have placed your hope in carried to and buried in a tomb. It would take the wind out of you. We are going to have a Good Friday service so we can relive emotionally what that must have felt like. The corpse of Jesus buried in a tomb symbolized an end to an era, kind of like a flower that has been ripped a part by the blade of a lawn mower.
- 3. Christ was Raised from the dead:** The final proclamation of the gospel was that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. For the believer this meant the emotional cycle had swung full circle from the lows of despair to the highs of sheer wonder and astonishment. It can't be possible you would utter to yourself. It is not of course, from a human perspective, instead it is the greatest miracle. The one foe that has defeated even the fiercest of souls has been rendered ineffective in his attempt to defeat the badly beaten and mutilated righteous servant. As the song goes, because he lives we will live. In the book of Matthew Jesus explains that the plight of Jonah foreshadowed his experience.

**Matthew 12:40**

*40 "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

The Psalms also indicate that the Holy One would not see decay.

**Psalm 16:10-11**

*10 For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.  
11 You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

Like I said, if you only remember one thing; let it be this: Jesus died for our sins. He was buried. He rose from the dead after three days.

So here is what Paul has done so far. He has told them the Gospel is what saves. He has also mentioned the creed which was passed down to Him. Next he turns to eyewitnesses.

The first one is Cephas, the Greek name for Peter. In the creed he reaffirms that the resurrected Christ first appeared to Peter. In the gospel of John; the disciple Jesus loved, mentions that when he heard the tomb was empty; he outran Peter to the tomb because Peter was heavy. However, John did not go in; but Peter did. He was the first of the disciples to see the remnants of the grave clothing of Christ. Peter was also looked upon as one of the main leaders of the church; if not the most significant. One cannot dismiss the fact that when the Jews at Pentecost received Christ; Peter was preaching. In addition, when the Samaritans believed; Peter had to be summoned before they received the Holy Spirit. Finally, when Cornelius and his family, the first Gentiles to receive Christ believed; it was Peter who was there sharing the gospel. Peter is

significant and those in Corinth respected Peter; but had reservations about Paul being a legitimate disciple. The fact that what Paul was sharing was the same thing Peter taught was huge.

The second set of witnesses the creed describes as the Twelve. This is a technical term that refers to the twelve disciples of Christ. I want to point out that there is a distinction between the Twelve and the apostles that Paul will share about in a few verses. I have heard some Christians teach that there are apostles today like there were back in the days of Jesus. This is simply not true because of three main reasons which are found in Acts 1:21. When the disciples choose someone to replace Judas, here was the criteria.

1. They had to have been with Christ since the baptism of John
2. They had to have accompanied the other disciples as they followed Jesus
3. They had to have been eye witnesses of the resurrection of Christ

Those were the qualifications for being a disciple, which is the primary reason why others who claim they are apostles today must be dismissed from consideration. In the end, only those in the first century would have qualified. When Paul mentions Jesus appeared to the Twelve; this is a technical term that only referred to the apostles. There has always been a distinction between the capital A-apostles, and the small a-apostles.

### **6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.**

Next Paul mentions that Jesus appeared to five hundred other believers, most who are still alive. In other words, Paul is saying if you don't believe me or the testimony of the Twelve; there are plenty of others out there that have seen Christ after his resurrection. What this means is that the church in Corinth had the opportunity to seek these folks out and ask them about their experiences. I was watching a show the other day and they interviewed a man who was on a ship in Pearl Harbor when the USS Arizona was blown apart and sank in seconds by Japanese bombers. He shared about the surprise attack and the injuries and fatalities of that day. 1,777 were killed on the USS Arizona alone. Listening to him share the stories made the account come alive. There is nothing like listening to an eyewitness. In the same way Paul was informing the church there were many others who shared his account of the bodily resurrection of Christ. I hope the church took advantage of that because that would have been something. It would be phenomenal to listen to someone's firsthand experience of that amazing event.

### **7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.**

Here Paul is referring to James, the half-brother of Jesus. Now James is not to be confused with James and John, the brothers of Zebedee. That James, we are told, was killed by Herod Antipas in Acts 12:2. Nor is he to be confused with another disciple, known as James, the son of Alpheus. The James Paul discusses is James, the brother of Jesus, and the leader of the church in Jerusalem. His inclusion as a witness is significant because there was a time he did not believe that his brother was the Messiah. We read about this in John 7:5, where it says, not even his brothers believed. If you cross reference this to Mathew 13:55 you find out the brothers of Jesus were named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. In Galatians 1:19; Paul identifies James as the brother of the Lord. In the end, the greatest witnesses are those that were once unbeliever, but came to saving faith. Apparently with James, this happened sometime after the resurrection of Christ.

After James, Jesus appeared to all of the apostles. This would include the others, outside the Twelve already mentioned. These are small a-apostles. They are the ones God used to share the gospel and to plant churches cross-culturally. One of the most notable was Phillip, who preached the gospel in Samaria and performed signs and wonders so they would believe. Other disciples that would fit this category included Luke, Barnabus, and the seventy that were sent out to evangelize for Jesus.

**8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 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, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.**

Finally, Paul concludes with his own experience with Jesus. Like James, the brother of Jesus, Paul was also once an unbeliever. However, unlike James, Paul was actually a persecutor of the church. He wanted to extinguish the church which made his conversion all that more amazing.

Jesus revealed himself to Paul not through a vision; but through an appearance. In other words, Paul is saying that he saw the resurrected Christ. Interestingly, he mentions that he is the least of all the apostles and one who was untimely born. The Greek word used for untimely refers to one who was born prematurely or with physical defects. The word is probably meant to highlight the fact that he was not your typical apostle. He did not begin his gestation period by following Jesus. Instead he received his call in the midst of hatred for Christians. In that sense his conversion was an act of God's grace. There was simply nothing Paul ever did to warrant him being an apostle. Paul recognized God's grace and worked twice as hard making up for all the wrong he had done to the church. I imagine he was able to work harder because he was more motivated to because of the wicked things he did to the church.

Paul concludes by restating what he said in the beginning of the chapter. The gospel he preaches is not just his own opinion; but it has a rich history that includes Peter, the Twelve, the five hindered brothers who are alive, and James the brother of Jesus. In the end he is saying, the gospel hasn't changed. It is the same one we all preached since the beginning. Consequently, to reject the resurrection was to reject the gospel which brings salvation.

Today, in addition to those mentioned in the passage, we have historians such as Tacitus and Josephus, who were historians that worked for Rome who attest to the death and resurrection stories. We also have the church fathers such as Clement and Polycarp who were disciples of Peter and John respectively. All of them died for Christ because without doubt, they believed the resurrection account was true.

So why should this matter to you? It should matter because the church has taken great care to make sure the gospel message was passed down to you. There is a rich tradition of men and women who withstood persecution because they wanted to continue to be a witness for the next generation. The greatest testimony to the church is that it has preserved throughout all the centuries. My hope is that this will inspire you to pass the message down to those who don't know Christ. God uses the gospel to bring others to saving faith. Be faithful in passing down the creed of the early church. <sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,