

The Gospel is Not in Vain (1 Cor. 15:1–2)

By Jacob Gerber

Paul’s transition from chapter 14 to chapter 15 is abrupt. Paul quickly introduces a new subject concerning the resurrection of the dead.¹ In this case, however, Paul gives us no hints as to why Paul has taken up this issue, whether by a report or by a direct question raised from the Corinthians themselves (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:11; 7:1).² Eventually, Paul will make his particular concern clear enough, which is that some have begun to say that there is no resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:12). Rather than attacking this issue directly, Paul masterfully opens his discussion of this subject by reminding the Corinthians of the basics of the gospel, since there is no indication that the Corinthians believed themselves to be out of step on this subject with Paul.³ It seems, rather, that the Corinthians have embraced the gospel without entirely realizing the implications of the gospel concerning the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.⁴ Paul has much to say on this subject, but he begins with a simple assertion that *the gospel is not in vain*.

The Delivery of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:1a)

If so, then Paul’s statement, “I would remind you,” or, more literally, “I make known to you,” may be a “gentle rebuke.”⁵ Paul is returning to teach the ABCs of the gospel to people who believe themselves to be ready for spiritual graduate school. With bitter irony, this word “make known” (γνωρίζω, *gnōrizō*) is the opposite of what Paul wrote two verses earlier in 1 Corinthians 14:38: “If anyone *does not recognize this* [lit., “is unknowing”; ἀγνοεῖ, *agnoei*], he *is not recognized* [lit., “is not known”; ἀγνοεῖται, *agnoeitai*].”⁶ The Corinthians believe themselves to be advanced, but because they do not *know* these basic facts, they will not be *known* by God unless they correct their thinking.⁷ So, Paul offers a remedial education on the gospel to these proud, but confused, Corinthians.

The first two verses contain one long sentence that is saturated by the word “gospel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, *to euangelion*).⁸ While there are multiple words that Paul could have chosen to describe the act of *preaching*, he twice uses the word for “preaching the gospel” (εὐηγγελισάμην, *euēngelisamēn*; v. 1,

¹ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 311.

² Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 335.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 625.

⁴ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 683.

⁵ Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 197.

⁶ Our word “agnostic,” meaning one who does not know (usually used in reference to ignorance about the existence of God), comes from this word.

⁷ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 799.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 626.

2). In Greek, Paul is reminding the Corinthians that he “gospelled the gospel” to them. In other words, Paul is saying that he went to great lengths to teach them the gospel, so that there should be no confusion whatsoever about what the gospel implies about the resurrection of the dead.

The Response to the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:1b–2a)

Next, Paul goes a step beyond what *he* did by preaching the gospel to them, to talk about their threefold response to the gospel: “which also you received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved” (v. 1b–2a; my translation).⁹ First, then, Paul says that the Corinthians *received* the gospel. Paul used this same word earlier in 1 Corinthians 11:23 to describe how *he* had received the tradition about the Lord’s Supper, and then delivered on that tradition to the Corinthians. Paul will use these words for receiving and delivering the tradition of the gospel in v. 3: “For I *delivered* to you as of first importance what I also *received*....”¹⁰ This suggests, then, that Paul is not giving a general summary of the gospel in v. 3–4, but a more formal confession of faith used in the early church.¹¹

Second, Paul says that the Corinthians *stand* in this gospel. That is, the church *exists by means of* the gospel, *standing* in the gospel, so that the church would *fall* without the gospel.¹² Even the perfect tense of the verb (i.e., “in which you have stood”) points to a previously established fact, with ongoing implications: “Standing means established and continuing firm in faith as a tree stands when it is well rooted.”¹³ Not only did the Corinthians *receive* the gospel in the beginning, but their ongoing existence as a church depends on continuing to *stand* in that gospel.

Third, Paul says that the Corinthians *are being saved* by this gospel. This verb is expressed in the present tense, describing ongoing, incomplete action. In terms of our justification, we have already, once-for-all been pardoned of our sins, accepted by God, and counted as righteous in God’s sight by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to us by faith.¹⁴ So, for those who have trusted Christ by faith, our justification is complete and final. Justification, however, is not the totality of our salvation, but only the foundation of it. So, while our justification is final, God continues to work out “all other saving graces” of transforming and conforming us into the likeness and image of Christ by the

⁹ The ESV does not translate the threefold repetition of the word *καί* (*kai*), meaning “and” or “also.” This is not necessarily wrong, since Greek uses the word *καί* in ways that are often redundant in English. Nevertheless, I have put back the word “also” in this translation to see that each of these elements forms a link in a chain of response to the gospel. (Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 336.)

¹⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 682.

¹¹ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 254–55.

¹² Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 268.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 626.

¹⁴ Q. 70. What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone. (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #70)

process of sanctification.¹⁵ While Christ has already saved us to the uttermost from the *condemnation* of our sin by justification, the present tense that Paul uses here expresses the ongoing work of God to save us to the uttermost from the *corruption* of our sin by sanctification (cf. Heb. 7:25).

The Warnings of the Gospel (1 Cor. 15:2b)

In light of this great work of the gospel in Corinth, Paul issues two warnings to keep the Corinthians on track: "...if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (v. 2b). First, there is a warning about holding fast, and, second, a warning about believing in vain. The word *holding fast* means "to adhere firmly to traditions, convictions, or beliefs."¹⁶ Elsewhere, this word *in vain* may either mean *without cause* (cf. Col. 2:18) or *without effect* (Gal. 3:4; 4:11).¹⁷ If Paul means *without cause*, then the warning against believing *in vain* "suggests a hasty, ill-thought-out, belief commitment."¹⁸ If, however, Paul means *without effect*, then Paul would be talking about worthlessness of their faith if there is no resurrection of the dead (cf. v. 16–19). Together, Paul is warning them to "adhere firmly" to the gospel, because the gospel is *not* "without effect." Or, put positively, Paul is urging the Corinthians to persevere in their faith because of the reliability of the gospel promises that the dead will indeed be raised up with Christ. As David Garland writes, "While graveyards may remind one of the brevity of life, the resurrection ensures the brevity of death."¹⁹

Discussion Questions

1. What is the gospel? How does Paul talk about the gospel in this passage, and elsewhere? If someone asked you to explain the gospel, would your explanation match what Paul says about the gospel here? Specifically, why does Paul use the language of delivering and receiving a tradition when he talks about preaching the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1a, 3)? Why must the gospel rest on historical fact if it is to have any value for us?
2. What does it mean to "stand in" the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1b)? What does that imagery teach us about the strength and stability of the gospel, even in the midst of difficult and unstable times in this life? What does Paul mean when he says that we "are being saved" by this gospel (1 Cor. 15:2a)? What does the gospel promise us *immediately* in terms of our justification? What does the gospel promise us

¹⁵ Q. 75. What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life. (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #75)

¹⁶ κατέχω, in *BDAG*, 3rd ed., 533.

¹⁷ Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 312.

¹⁸ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 256.

¹⁹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 681.

progressively in terms of our sanctification?

3. If the word *gospel* means “good news,” does Paul need to give us any warnings about the gospel (1 Cor. 15:2b)? Why does Paul warn us about the need to “hold fast” to the gospel? Why does Paul give a warning about having “believed in vain”? How do these warnings exhort us to persevere in our faith? How do these warnings encourage us in this life? How do these warnings keep us from veering off into faithlessness, sin, and destruction?

Notes