

“The Gospel”

The Twenty-Eighth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians: 15:1-11; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

What is the gospel? If *White Horse Inn* producer Shane Rosenthal walked up to you with his digital recorder and asked, “what is the gospel?” what would you say? If you can’t come up with the answer immediately, then please pay close attention. The gospel is what Jesus Christ did to save sinners. The gospel is called “good news” because the gospel is the proclamation of a certain set of historical facts—that Jesus suffered and died as a payment for our sins, and that he was raised by God from the dead on the third day as proof that his death turned aside God’s wrath toward sinners. Apart from the good news of the gospel, we have no hope of heaven because we are sinners and cannot save ourselves, not even with God’s help. This is a non-negotiable and fundamental article of the Christian faith. It is a sad commentary that so many professing Christians are so confused about such an important matter.

We come to the last major topic Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians—the bodily resurrection of believers. While I want to qualify what I am about to say by affirming that all of Scripture is God-breathed, and therefore profitable for teaching, rebuking and training in righteousness, Paul’s discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the most important chapters in all the Bible—especially in our current context. The reason for this is simple. Paul defines the gospel in verses 1-11. He speaks of the fact of the resurrection in verses 12-19, and of the relationship of the bodily resurrection of believers to the second coming of Jesus Christ in verses 20-28. Paul goes on to define the importance of the resurrection for Christian living in verses 29-34, before addressing the nature of the resurrection body in verses 35-58. All of these things matter because they deal with the very foundation of our faith.

Since the wages of sin is death, and since we are all sinners, death is an inevitability. Try as we will, we cannot escape the reality of death. Death has claimed three of our own church members, and affected virtually every family represented here this morning. Therefore, we ignore this subject to our own peril. In the face of this horrible foe, Paul anchors the Christian’s hope in the resurrection of our bodies. Just as Jesus died and was raised from the dead three days later, so too shall we be raised on that final day when Jesus comes to judge the world, raise the dead, and makes all things new. At death, our bodies and souls are torn apart. In the resurrection God reunites them. This is why Paul’s discussion of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15 is so important, since it is in this resurrected state that we will live for all of eternity in the presence of Christ on a new heaven and earth.

The doctrine of the bodily resurrection was a serious problem for the Greeks in Corinth, who were taught that at death, the soul (which was pure spirit and therefore good) was liberated from the prison house of the body (which was material, and therefore evil). To the pagans, death was almost a good thing, since we are finally rid of our bodies which are the source of bad habits and evil desires. According to his comment in verse 12 of chapter 15—“*how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*”—Paul must address this matter with the Corinthians because a number of them were laboring under the mistaken and pagan assumption that the resurrection is spiritual only, and that the dead will not be raised (bodily), but exist throughout eternity as disembodied spirits.

As Paul sees things, to deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is to deny the Christian faith. Unless Christians are raised from the dead on the day of resurrection—even as Jesus Christ was raised from the

dead on the first Easter—Christians are to be pitied more than all men. For if Jesus Christ is not bodily raised from the dead, then Christ’s death does not pay for our sins, nor does it reverse the curse (death). This means we are still in our sins. It also means that we are false witnesses about Jesus Christ, because we have been telling everyone that God raised him from the dead.

Therefore, Jesus Christ’s bodily resurrection is fundamental to Christianity. As B. B. Warfield once put it, the resurrection is “the cardinal doctrine of our system: on it *all other doctrines hang*.”¹ If Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead, then he is God in human flesh and Christianity is true. If Jesus did not rise from the dead then Christianity collapses and cannot be true. If Jesus’ body still lies in a unknown tomb somewhere near Jerusalem, then it is “sex, drugs and rock and roll,” to paraphrase Paul’s point in verse 32. If the dead are not raised, “let us eat, and drink, for tomorrow we die.

For Paul, all of Christianity hangs upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a topic he addresses up in verses 1-11 when he defines the gospel. Paul begins this section by connecting Christ’s resurrection directly to the gospel which he first proclaimed to the Corinthians. Paul states in verse 1, “*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand.*” Just as he did when writing to the Galatians (cf. Galatians 3:1), Paul reminds his readers of the gospel which he has already preached to them. The Corinthians received that gospel and it is the gospel which is said to be the foundation of the church.² This is, of course, a highly problematic point for Roman Catholics, who argue that the church was founded on the office of apostle, not upon the message which was proclaimed by the apostles and their successors, the bishops. It is the preaching of the gospel which establishes the church—a point which Paul emphasizes again in the following verse. Get the gospel wrong, and we have nothing, no matter how many bishops there are.

The fact that Paul speaks of the Corinthians as “brothers” yet again shows how differently Paul views the situation in Corinth from that of Galatia. The Corinthians were having trouble understanding the gospel and were struggling to work through those truths they had initially embraced. Unlike Galatia, this church was not plagued by Judaizers who were attacking the gospel. The Corinthians were recent converts to Christianity from paganism. These people were struggling with Christian maturity, and trying to leave behind non-Christian ways of thinking and doing. Although Paul harshly rebuked the Galatians (“you stupid Galatians”). Paul does not speak of the “stupid Corinthians.” He warmly calls them brothers, despite their many struggles and the immorality present in the church. It is one thing for a church to be made up of struggling sinners. It is another thing entirely to deny the gospel, or tolerate those who do.

In verse 2, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the message which he had preached to him and upon which that church was founded. “*And by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*” This is a watershed verse in this epistle. “*By this gospel*” (literally “through” *dia* this gospel) the Corinthians are saved. Not only is the verb in the present tense (giving the sense “you are being saved”) but Paul also goes on to say that the Corinthians must hold fast to that gospel. When seen in light of verse one—the gospel was preached to the Corinthians and received by them—the point is that through the gospel (defined below as the saving work of Jesus Christ)—the

¹ Warfield, “The Resurrection of Christ a Historical Fact,” 178.

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 200.

Corinthians are being saved, provided they do not reject that gospel.³ The same thing is true for us.

This simply means that the Corinthians must hold fast to that which Paul has already preached to them—this is not an Arminian proof-text for falling away as some have argued. Because it is through the gospel (and only through the gospel), that the Corinthians will be delivered from God’s wrath (i.e. “saved”), they must cling tenaciously to that message which Paul has preached and which they have received. There can be no deliverance from sin without holding fast to the gospel, since the gospel is the proclamation of the facts regarding Jesus Christ’s dying for our sins and rising again from the dead.

Should the Corinthians fall back into their old ways of thinking and doing (and trust in human righteousness and goodness to save them), then the gospel will be of no avail to them and they will suffer the fate of certain of the Galatians (cf. Galatians 5:4—“*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace*”). Those who have believed for a time (temporary faith) will find that the gospel will be of no avail for them unless they *remain* united to Christ through faith. Christians must persevere to the end to be saved. But let us not forget that such perseverance is based upon Christ’s preservation of his own—as we read of the Good shepherd in John 10:25-30. God’s elect do persevere to the end, because Christ preserves them to the end. Not one of his sheep will get away. This is how we know who are God’s elect: they persevere and do not fall away.

Paul now proceeds to define the gospel in verses 3-8. Throughout these verses his focus is upon the objective, historical, and factual nature of what Christ has done on behalf of sinners. Paul simply proclaimed these facts to the Corinthians (i.e., “he delivered”) those things he himself had received from Jesus and the other apostles. The language which he uses refers to the careful handling of sacred tradition (cf. Luke 1:1-4).⁴ From the very beginning of the apostolic age, the preaching of the church was centered in what Jesus Christ has done for sinners through his life, death and resurrection.

Paul spells this out in verses 3-7, “*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*”

The first thing which Paul does when it comes to defining the gospel, is to make it clear that Jesus Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures. Since the New Testament (especially the gospels, which contain the historical account of the crucifixion) was not yet complete and the gospels had probably not yet been written when Paul writes this letter, much of apostolic preaching was done directly from the Old Testament (especially passages such as Isaiah 52:13-53:12, our Old Testament lesson this morning). This is certainly the case with the Christian preaching we find opening chapters of the Book of Acts. The preaching of the gospel is a truth claim centered in the fact that Jesus Christ fulfilled messianic prophecy, and that Jesus was raised from the dead, and that everyone knew this to be the case.

For Paul, the essence of the gospel is clearly found in the saving death of Jesus “for our sins,” which was

³ See the discussion of the difficulties with the grammatical construction of this verse in Morris, 1 Corinthians, 200-201.

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 201.

long foretold by the Old Testament prophets and which has now been fulfilled through the events underlying the gospel. Apparently, apostolic preaching (prophecy) was centered in recounting the facts surrounding Christ's death and resurrection which were presented as events which fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. Paul unpacks the meaning of the death of Jesus in other texts such as Romans 3:25; 5:6-11; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21.

While the mention made by Paul in verse 4 of Christ's burial comes as a surprise to some, (why would Paul place such emphasis upon Jesus' burial?) our Lord's burial is proof he really died. As our catechism puts it in question 41, "his burial testifies that he really died." Jesus did not merely "swoon." And having established that Jesus was really died, Paul immediately moves on to mention Christ's resurrection on the third day, an event foretold in very general terms in Isaiah 53:10-12 and Psalm 16:10.

From Paul's statement, ("*he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*") it is clear that the resurrection entails the reanimation of life to a dead corpse which was buried in a manner, according to the gospel account and consistent with Jewish traditions. Paul says that Jesus *was raised* from the dead, which is probably a way of emphasizing that the Father raised Jesus from death to life and that Jesus' resurrection is a permanent state.⁵ The perfect tense is used in this way six times in this chapter of Corinthians, but only once elsewhere in the New Testament. Jesus *is* (not *was*) the Risen Lord!⁶ He will always be the Risen Lord.

According to the facts of the gospel and the messianic prophecy which underlies it, Jesus died in the ordinary sense of the term and was brought back to life while still in the tomb. In fact, there is no way whatsoever to make sense of the gospel apart from Christ's bodily resurrection. The resurrection has nothing to do with an "Easter" experience on the part of the disciples (an event which changed their lives). Nor was this resurrection faked by the apostles. Nor was it mass hysteria as argued by analytic philosopher Anthony Flew.⁷ The tomb was empty because Jesus was raised bodily from the dead! On this fact (the bodily resurrection), the entire Christian faith stands or falls. If Christ be not raised from the dead, then we ought to eat, drink and be merry, because this life is all that there is.

While the empty tomb is taken by many to be the essential proof of the resurrection (i.e. Warfield's comment to the effect that the empty tomb is sufficient to found Christianity upon),⁸ Paul does not put it this way in 1 Corinthians 15. Because of his experience, Paul speaks of Christ's Easter appearances to his disciples in the days before his Ascension as the primary proof of our Lord's resurrection. Paul recounts a number of these appearances for his readers.

The resurrected Lord Jesus physically appeared first to Peter, then to the twelve (the other apostles who had assembled in the upper room according to John 20:19 ff), then to over five hundred people at once, most of whom were still living. This may be the event referred to in Matthew 28:16 ff—"Now *the eleven*

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 202.

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 202.

⁷ Cf. Gary Habermas and Anthony Flew, Did Jesus Rise Again from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate, ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

⁸ Warfield, "The Resurrection of Christ a Historical Fact," 190

disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted,” and it is very likely that people who had seen Jesus both before and after the crucifixion were well known in the early church (see the recent book by Richard Bauckham—*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*). In effect, Paul is saying “you guys know who these witnesses are, and if you don’t believe me, go ask them.” The resurrection is clearly a factual event and Paul appeals to those with knowledge of it, because they had seen the Risen Christ with their own eyes (cf., the comments in 1 John 1:1-3). All the Jews or the Romans had to do is produce Jesus’ dead body and Christianity was over before it started. But they don’t. Instead, the Jewish authorities called Jesus a magician and a deceiver.

This also explains why the early church did not venerate Christ’s tomb as a holy place or a shrine. From the beginning Christians were aware of Christ’s presence in their midst through word and sacrament in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus didn’t invite the disciples to come visit the tomb. Rather after walking out of it, he appeared to them alive in a number of post-resurrection appearances. Jesus is present with his people through word and sacrament, and not through pilgrimages to “holy” places. Jesus comes to us, we don’t have to go to places where he once was in order to find him.

Paul goes on to say that Jesus appeared to James (the Lord’s brother) and other unnamed apostles which probably led to James’ conversion, since neither James nor his brothers believed in Jesus during his earthly life (cf. John 7:5). But by the time the events recounted in Acts 1:11 occur, Jesus’ brothers are numbered among the founders of the church. How did this happen? Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection and they believed that he was who he claimed to be. According to John 2:22, “*when therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*” Of course, the disciples believed the Scriptures while they were with Jesus before the resurrection. John’s point is that after Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples understood the promises far better than they ever could have before. Now it makes sense.

In verse 8, Paul now recounts to his own experience of the Risen Christ while on the road to Damascus (spelled out in detail in Acts 9:1-31). “*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*” Jesus appeared physically to all of the founders of the church, Paul being the last—with the implication being that Jesus stopped appearing to people after he appeared to Paul (cf. Acts 1:11). When Paul speaks of himself as “abnormally born” he uses the Greek word for miscarriage or an abortion. Paul is referring either to the abnormal way he was converted, or to the fact that he regards himself as completely unworthy of the call he has received.

That the latter is probably the case, can be seen in verses 9-10. “*For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy 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, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*” Paul had not been among the disciples when Jesus was alive—we don’t know if Paul ever heard or saw Jesus during our Lord’s messianic mission. We do know that Paul had been a persecutor of Christ’s church. Paul does not feel worthy of being an apostle, since the others are elsewhere described as being with Jesus from the beginning (cf. Acts 1:21-22). But Paul was personally called by Jesus to his apostolic office. Everything Paul is as an apostle he owes to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Paul has given himself completely to his calling—he can state with a clear conscience that he (being energized by the grace of God) has worked harder than any of the others. Paul is not bragging, but making an important point.

Despite Paul’s lowly status and given the gracious nature of his call to his office from the Lord of the

church, Paul ties his message directly to that preached by the other apostles. In fact, Paul can affirm in verse 11. “*Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*” Paul, Peter, Apollos and the others, preached the same gospel: Christ’s death, burial and resurrection according to the Scriptures and as Paul says plainly, this was sufficient to found the church in Corinth, just as it had been sufficient to found churches everywhere. Paul preached this gospel. The other apostles preached this gospel. And this gospel is what the Corinthians believed. Yet everything hinges upon the fact of Christ’s resurrection, a matter Paul addresses in the next section (vv. 12-19), and our subject for next time.

What, then, should we take with us from this passage?

One of the biggest shocks I’ve ever experienced as a Christian is witnessing the inability of professing Christians to define the gospel. If you’ve heard the *White Horse Inn* interviews we’ve done throughout the years with people at Christian colleges and conventions about this very topic, you know that things are bad. Really bad. Based upon these interviews, many professing Christians know very little about the basics of the Christian faith, including the gospel. People can repeat various Christian slogans they’ve heard, but since it is just assumed in church circles these days that people know what the gospel is, no one talks about it, much less defines it. So, it is no wonder that people stumble badly when trying to define something so basic to the Christian faith, that you cannot even be a Christian without believing it.

If you cannot define the gospel when asked, you need to remedy that, pronto. And for those of you who wonder why I keep harping on this, I cannot assume that all of you can answer that question correctly. My job is to make sure that this good news is proclaimed to you and that you know what the gospel is.

As Paul spells out in the opening section of 1 Corinthians 15, the gospel is anchored in those historic events associated with the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Preaching the gospel, or sharing the gospel with a non-Christian (evangelism) simply involves recounting the basic facts that Paul sets out here (and which we find the gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). This means that we should be able to communicate the facts surrounding the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus in such a way that the people with whom we are discussing these things, understand that we are speaking about things that really happened—historical facts. Because the gospel is true, it is simply our business to proclaim and share those facts with non-Christians. Let the facts speak for themselves, and then trust the Holy Spirit to create faith through the proclamation/communication of the gospel. This is how we do evangelism. We simply tell people what Jesus did. We tell people that the gospel is true.

Finally, since the gospel is centered in these historical facts, Martin Luther was absolutely correct to speak of the gospel as being “outside of us.” In other words, our relationship before God does not depend upon how we feel at any given moment. The gospel does not depend upon how sorry we are for what we’ve done. It doesn’t even matter how sincere we are, or how many works we have done. Our salvation depends upon what Jesus did *for* us and in our place. Our salvation was accomplished for us on a Roman cross about two-thousand years ago one Friday afternoon a short walk outside the walls of Jerusalem. This is what we mean when we speak of the gospel as something grounded in the objective facts of history. Jesus died for our sins. He was buried. He was raised from the dead on the third day.

Faith is our act of trusting in what Jesus did *for* us, to save us from our sins. But there can be no faith apart from the facts of the gospel. And so faith can only be our response to the facts associated with the gospel. Can you answer that question, “what is the gospel?” Do you believe that what Jesus did saves you from your sins, and will rescue you from facing the judgment of God on the day of judgment? This

is the message we must preach, because message is the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ!