

The Gospel Paul Preached: A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the position that 1 Corinthians 15 contains an adequate gospel message enabling one to be born again.

From biblical theology, we learn that the saving gospel message is a unit, a single whole. Like a cut-diamond, it is an entity possessing multiple facets. One apostle presents one facet, while another presents a different facet. Of course, the divine Author superintended every word that flowed from their quills. Accordingly, we need not superimpose one writer's facet on another writer's gospel message. Each apostle may speak for himself. The apostle John gives a clear record of what one may believe resulting in eternal life. In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul gives a clear record of what one may believe resulting in forgiveness, which is what this paper will expound. Though not part of this project's purpose, let me point out that the moment a person believes in Jesus Christ, he is baptized into union with Christ. Whether the means by which he was so baptized was through faith in Jesus Christ in a context of eternal life, or in a context of forgiveness, God provided him with many blessings—all spiritual blessings—"in Christ." Only biblical theology enables us to see the height, depth, and breadth of our "so great salvation." This paper will focus on simply one aspect of the riches of divine grace.

Before proceeding, let's define several terms used in this paper. "Phase 1" speaks of that moment in time a person believes on the Lord Jesus Christ and is born again. "Phase 2" speaks of the entirety of a Christian's life: from the moment of the new birth to death or the Rapture. "Phase 3" is Heaven. The term "gospel" is synonymous with "good news," which, depending on context, may denote the specific truth one may believe to be born-again, or to truth providing the framework within which a Christian grows and lives to lease the Lord. As will be observed in the exposition below, "preaching" = "delivering," and "receiving" = "believing." In addition, "save," or "salvation," may biblically denote either Phase 1 salvation—being born again at a moment in past time, or Phase 2 salvation—being delivered from current testing/troubles in one's life.

Not all facets of the saving gospel are explicit in every salvific passage. Not every facet of the gospel must be believed or even known for eternal salvation. Yet, we are to preach the whole counsel of God—preaching that is rooted in healthy theology. In this way, we may derive a well-rounded understanding of a biblical category and so proclaim it, including the work of evangelism. Because many schools neglect biblical theology, sometimes disdain it, we need Chafer Theological Seminary to train men to do biblical theology. Taking a positive approach to theology, students learn to rightly divide God's word in grace and truth, and not to be schismatic. The entire Bible is God-breathed, given to us that we might see light in His light. It is thus wise to pursue all scripture has to say on a subject and not put on blinders regarding any subject.

After two millennia, some dismiss 1 Corinthians 15:3b-5 as having saving content. It is, they claim, an insufficient message to grant one eternal life. For example, an author says,

It's my contention that Paul is not here explaining the saving message he shared with unbelievers. There's too much Paul doesn't say here to make it a statement of his saving message."¹

The same author also says,

If Paul was stating here [1 Corinthians 15] the precise way in which we should share our faith, then surely every word would be important." ... if this is precisely how Paul wants us to share our faith, how can we leave anything out?²

¹ Bob Wilkin, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:3-11," *Grace in Focus*, January/February 2008 (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society), 1. Note: Though this paper takes exception to what it sees as mismanagement of the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15, I recognize that the free grace men being quoted have made significant and positive contribution to free grace theology. This article is an attempt to let iron sharpen iron, not to stir up discord and vitriolic reaction.

² Ibid.

The first quotation illustrates theological eisegesis, inferring that one must import content from other parts of scripture into Paul's writing because he supposedly does not say enough. This author does not permit Paul to speak for himself. This author further implies that without adding additional content to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, our witnessing falls short of what it takes to lead an unbeliever to saving faith in Christ, leaving an unbeliever still in his sins. The danger of employing theological eisegesis is real in that for centuries, especially from Augustine's time, Reformed theologians, Roman Catholics, and Arminians have done so superimposing their understanding of perseverance on all of scripture.

The second quotation is amiss because by the use of "precise"³ and "every word," the writer presupposes that there is an exact way to present a saving gospel message and that elsewhere scripture reveals "every word" of this precise message. He identifies the Gospel of John as that "elsewhere." Thus, the assumption is that if Paul does not express precisely what John says, as is the case in 1 Corinthians 15, then Paul has not said enough by which an unbeliever may be eternally saved. The use of "precise" assumes both a premise and a conclusion that are unproven, supposing that one knows this precise method by which to present the gospel apart from which all other methods fail, or are at least inferior.

Another contemporary objection to viewing 1 Corinthians 15 as a sufficient gospel message is that in context Paul argues for the historical validity of the resurrection while refuting a heresy that denies the resurrection.⁴ Does the fact that Paul disputes bad doctrine imply that he, therefore, does not reveal a saving gospel message? I know of no logic that would compel us to such a conclusion.

RECAP OF PAUL'S PRIORITY GOSPEL CONTENT (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

The Top Priority Content Paul Preached (15:1a)

With "moreover" (δὲ) the apostle leaves his teaching on spiritual gifts (chapters 12-14) and moves to the subject of the gospel's content focusing particularly on the resurrection—because some now denied Christ rose from the dead. This saving gospel message the Corinthians "received" = "believed" (15:2, 11, 14, 17); Paul had also "received" *it* (15:3; in fact, he received it directly from the Lord, Galatians 1:11-12), then "preached" = "delivered" *it* (15:1, 2, 3, 11, 14; cf. 12), and labored more to spread it (15:10) and "witnessed" to it (15:15).

So, what is his goal? *brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you*, putting before us the main point of the first 19 verses: a recap of the gospel message (εὐαγγέλιον).⁵ He will answer such questions as "what is the priority content of the gospel? What has and does its content accomplish?" And, "What are the implications if the resurrection is fiction?"

Paul's polemical approach does not neutralize what he considered saving content of the gospel. 1 Corinthians 2:2 discloses that during his first visit to Corinth, he was *determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*. Christ's death for our sins is top priority gospel information (cf. 1:13, 18, 23; discussion follows under 15:2). In chapter 15, as he recaps the gospel he preached, he again mentions Christ's death and includes His resurrection.

The Corinthians Received Top Priority Content (15:1b)

Continuing to emphasize the gospel message Paul says they "received" *it* that is tantamount to "believed" *it* (see vv. 2, 11, 14, 17), which many of them did during the apostle's initial evangelistic contact with Corinth. It was at this moment of faith that each believer was born-again—not before, not later. For this reason Paul can elsewhere say they are sanctified (1:2), washed and justified (6:11).

³ A quick count noticed that "precise" or "precisely" occur seven times in the article.

⁴ Ibid, 2.

⁵ Later in 2 Cor 9:13, the apostle reveals that his gospel message had Phase 2 implications, i.e., its content brought about not only their new birth but also their obedience to the gospel that challenged believers to give to help others with pressing needs.

The Corinthians Stand in Top Priority Content (15:1c)

These believers/receivers did not believe then turn away. Instead, he says “you stand” (ἑστήκατε) in *it*, i.e., they stand firmly in the priority truths of the gospel, though some do not, which is why we have this chapter in the NT (note 15:12). The verb “stand” functions to denote a stand in the past that continues to demonstrate stability in the gospel.⁶ To “stand” in the gospel message—in its priority elements about to be revealed—is to embrace its message as true and applicable without wavering.⁷

The Corinthians are Saved by Top Priority Content (15:2)

Receiving the gospel message and thus the free gift of salvation is an once-for-all event by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone resulting in eternal salvation. To flesh out this summary statement we would say to believe in Jesus Christ alone—whether in a context emphasizing eternal life, forgiveness, or righteousness. Being eternal such salvation is *forever*—not subject to loss. Eternal salvation was theirs forever as of the moment of receiving the gospel message.

Moreover, the gospel message extends beyond providing one with the means to heaven. The top priorities of the gospel are just that: top priorities. The gospel’s revelation beyond the priority content includes Phase 2 (Christian life) instruction, which the Corinthians are badly in need of as the previous 14 chapters reveal. They need this on-going salvation in the sense of deliverance from:

1. Church schisms (chapters 1-4; 11:18-19),
2. Incest (chapter 5),
3. Litigious spirits (6:1-11),
4. Immorality (6:12-20),
5. Deliverance into good decision making (chp. 7),
6. Deliverance from abuse of liberty and legalistic attitudes (chps 8-11),
7. Mismanagement of spiritual gifts (chps. 12-14),
8. Bad doctrine that denies the resurrection (chapter 15).

Paul broadens what he means by the gospel’s content when he switches from the simple relative “which” (ὃς, three times in 15:1 and once at 15:2a) to “that word which” (τὴν λέγῳ, 15:2b). Yet *this* ongoing salvation/deliverance is not a free gift like eternal forgiveness and eternal life are. The apostle conditions this Phase 2 salvation on two factors:

Condition #1: *If you hold fast that word which I preached to you.* “That word” functions like a relative⁸ clause that strongly calls attention to the larger gospel message that Paul preached, they received, and now stand in.

λόγος [“word”] often denotes not simply *word*, *message*, or *act of speaking* but also the *content* or substance of a *declaration*, *assertion*, *proposition*, or *other communicative act*. The verb εὐαγγελίζομαι already means to proclaim the gospel; hence Paul refers to the substance of the gospel that I proclaimed to you.⁹

These Corinthians were eternally saved when they received/believed Paul’s gospel message. For them, heaven at that moment became a done deal. In addition, if they will experience on-going salvation or deliverance, they must continue to embrace the gospel in its fullness. Paul is building up to the *content* of the gospel’s saving message—its importance, substance, and ability to save both temporally and eternally.

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 1184 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000). Libronix CDROM.

⁷ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*, electronic ed., DBLG 2705, #13 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997). Libronix CDROM

⁸ A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 954 (Logos, 1919; 2006). Libronix CDROM

⁹ Thiselton, *Corinthians*, Libronix CDROM.

Condition #2: (*By which also you are saved*) *unless you believed in vain*.¹⁰ The apostle reveals that if one has believed a false gospel message—which is a groundless gospel without Christ’s actual death and resurrection—he is not eternally saved. And if not eternally saved he cannot expect salvation/deliverance from troubles in *this* life. One must first be born again, then through sound teaching and application he may experience deliverance during his Christian walk.¹¹

So, what is it to believe “in vain” (εἰκῆ)? Grammatically it may mean to believe in a vain way,¹² which is to believe without the result of forgiveness; thus, the individual is still in his sin.¹³ It may also mean to believe in a vain object. In light of how the apostle here stresses the importance of embracing priority gospel content, it makes sense to see him saying “unless you believed in a vain object,” i.e., in a gospel message not backed by Christ’s real historical death and resurrection. Either way, the individual remains without forgiveness and eternal life.

If one has believed a gospel vain/empty of priority content, he is not born again, forgiven, nor enabled by the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, he does not hold fast to a complete gospel message and will not experience on-going Phase 2 deliverance, but defeat by the world, flesh, and devil. A commentator objects to this understanding of 1 Corinthians 15, asking,

Is the mere fact that God’s Son died a horrible death on the cross good news for us? Is the fact that He was raised good news for us? These facts become good news for us for only one reason: They affect the destiny of believers. God uses the crucifixion and resurrection to enable believers to escape the Lake of Fire and to be with Him forever. We cannot limit our definition of the gospel to vv. 3–8, because what precedes these verses is what makes His death and resurrection good news for Christians.

... We must always remember that vv. 1–2 show why this is good news for believers: *the gospel ... by which also you are saved*. Specifically, Paul says that the gospel gives salvation to the believer. In other words, God gives life to everyone who believes in Jesus for that free gift.

... No one would ever accuse Paul of minimizing the cross and resurrection, but the bottom line of his gospel was that Jesus saves from eternal condemnation all who simply believe in Him. John would express the same point in terms of receiving eternal life (John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47; and 20:30–31).¹⁴

Note four things regarding these comments: (1) The lead question asks whether “the mere fact that God’s Son died a horrible death on the cross [is] good news for us?” I would answer “no,” as he asked the question. Yet, the fact that Jesus’ death was “for our sins” makes it good news, indeed. (2) He interprets “you are saved” as Phase 1 salvation (receiving the gift of eternal salvation), which fails to give sufficient attention to the two conditional clauses that place “saved” in a Phase 2 (Christian life) context, which we discuss above under the two conditions. (3) This writer exclaims “Paul says that the gospel gives salvation to the believer,” then elucidates as follows: “In other words, God gives life to everyone who believes in Jesus for that free gift.” How

¹⁰ Characteristic of Perseverance theologies, which include Reformed, Arminian, and Roman Catholic traditions, is this comment by Harold Mare, “The Resurrection of Christ (15:1–11),” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*: Volume 10. 282, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976, Libronix CDROM. “The ‘if’ clause in v. 2 implies that Paul believes they are really holding firmly to the Word of God and are therefore saved. So the sentence ‘Otherwise you have believed in vain’ means that the gospel assures salvation unless the supposed faith they had was actually empty and worthless and therefore unenduring.” In other words, the only saving faith is a faith that perseveres. Such a position enjoys neither exegetical nor biblical theological support.

¹¹ Jeremy D. Myers, “The Gospel is More than ‘Faith Alone in Christ Alone,’” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19:37 (Autumn 2006), Libronix CDROM, seems to interpret “saved” in a Phase 2 sense, which does not imply that other aspects of his article are on target. There are several good insights in this article, though it falls into the trap of superimposing John’s gospel on Paul’s. Remove this misleading principle of interpretation and his conclusion—that Paul gives an insufficient gospel message—fails.

¹² “εἰκῆ ... There is firm lexicographical evidence for the meaning *without due consideration, or in a haphazard manner ... or thoughtlessly or at random* (1 Clement 40:2). Here Paul envisages the possibility of such a superficial or *confused* appropriation of the gospel in which no coherent grasp of its logical or practical entailments for eschatology or for practical discipleship had been reached (Thiselton, *Corinthians*. Libronix CDROM.

¹³ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*, electronic ed., DBLG 1632, #2 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997). Libronix CDROM

¹⁴ John H. Niemelä, “The Cross in John’s Gospel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 16:1 (Spring 03) Libronix CDROM.

did he arrive at this elucidation? As we observe more than a few times in this paper, one reaches such a conclusion by superimposing the Gospel of John on Paul's epistle. However, Paul does not interpret his use of "saved" as the impartation of eternal life. Contextually, Christ died "for our sins" and because of the realities of His death and resurrection, believers have "forgiveness" of those sins (15:3 & 17). The issue is forgiveness, not life, though neither John nor Paul would object to the other's gospel emphasis. They are dealing with the same diamond, just different facets." And, (4) he says that eternal life becomes the possession of "everyone who believes in Jesus *for that free gift*" (italics added). Contexts where eternal life and faith/belief are found speak of faith in Christ Himself with eternal life being a result of faith not the object of faith, as is forgiveness, sonship, etc.

IDENTIFYING THE PRIORITY CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL (1 Corinthians 15:3-10)

Paul delivered what he himself had received (15:3a)

He testifies *I delivered to you first of all that which I also received*. "First of all" may have a temporal sense speaking of what he first preached before he preached the second and third things. It may also denote, which is more likely here, what is most important, or of top priority.¹⁵ A leading Lexicon gives its meaning "*as of first importance* 1 Cor 15:3."¹⁶ Since he previously stated that he determined to preach Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2), it would be repetitious to say that the first thing out of his mouth concerned Christ's death and resurrection. Accordingly, Paul reveals in verses 3b-5 what he considered top priority gospel content. The gospel includes many truths, but 15:3b-5 are the crucial priority of the gospel, which he would preach if he preached nothing else. "The stress is on the centrality of these doctrines to the gospel message."¹⁷

Four Aspects of the Gospel's Priority Content (15:3-7)

Now 15:3b-5 forms a unit that answers the question, what is Paul's priority gospel content. In spite of protesters who assert "Paul is obviously *not* giving a list of 'core essentials' that must be believed in order to be eternally saved,"¹⁸ this is in fact what Paul does with the caveat that "must" be changed to "may." With four "that" (ὅτι) clauses,¹⁹ the apostle boldly puts forth what he preached/delivered and what the Corinthians received/believed for eternal salvation.

First Aspect of the Priority Content: *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures* (15:3b). It is a priority of Paul's gospel message that Jesus Christ died—specifically He died for our sins.²⁰ The Lord's crucifixion for our sins denotes that we are sinners in need of forgiveness and "for" (ὕπέρ) speaks of how His death justly dealt with our sins in the divine courtroom. The following quotation objects.

¹⁵ Thiselton, *Corinthians*, Libronix CDROM, says, "First and foremost captures the logical rather than temporal force of ἐν πρώτοις in this context, i.e., of *first importance*."

¹⁶ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer [=BDAG], *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, "Based on Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen [sic] Literatur, sixth edition, ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, with Viktor Reichmann and on previous English editions by W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker.", 3rd ed., 893 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Libronix CDROM.

¹⁷ Mare, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 10:282. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976. Libronix CDROM

¹⁸ Zane Hodges, "The Hydra's Other Head: Theological Legalism," *Grace in Focus* (September/October 2008) (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society), 2-3.

¹⁹ Thiselton, *Corinthians*, Libronix CDROM, says "Murphy-O'Connor rightly appeals to the demonstrable convention of using ὅτι to denote quotation marks, with καί to add emphasis."

²⁰ Being priority content, Matthew also reveals that Christ's death was "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Many passages keep priorities biblical and point us to Christ's death for our sins, even the sins of the entire world (Romans 5:6; 8:32; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 21; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 2:9; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2; cf. John 11:50-52; 18:14). Accordingly, even if one wants to argue that you do not have to know or believe in Christ's death and resurrection for eternal salvation, to follow the apostles' examples you have to preach this message. Of course, if we preach it, then unbelievers will not be ignorant of the historical facts on which Christianity stands or falls.

While Paul does say, “Christ died for our sins,” he fails to specifically mention the cross or the blood of Christ in these verses. Many feel that it is important to point out to people where and how Jesus died. Yet Paul doesn’t do that here.

Again, if it is essential for someone to believe that Jesus died *on the cross* and that He *shed His blood* for our sins, then Paul isn’t giving enough information here.²¹

Perhaps this presses the notion of being “literal” too far for words are vehicles—inerrant vehicles in scripture—that communicate ideas, thoughts, concepts. Whether an apostle says “died,” “crucified,” “cross,” or “shed blood,” the semantic range of these terms intersect in the Savior on the cross, giving up His life that we might receive life. Whether the words one uses to communicate the fact of Christ’s death for our sins are one or more of these just mentioned, they sufficiently communicate a priority aspect of the gospel, which when believed save.

The larger problem with the above quotation in its section, “Things Which Are Typically Added In When Using 1 Corinthians 15:3-11,” is that it apparently wants to sack the idea that believing Jesus died for one’s sins is a sufficient object for saving faith. In this section, the author talks about how Christians may import “justification by faith alone apart from works” into 1 Corinthians 15 when witnessing, thus supplementing what Paul says. He mentions as further possible supplementary content subjects such as Jesus’ perfect humanity and the deity of Christ. Then follows the quotation given above.

The author seems to imply that because some believers import additional content into 1 Corinthians 15, it proves that 1 Corinthians 15 does not provide a sufficient gospel message. This article demonstrates otherwise. By the way, the complaint (not by the above writer) that implementing the content one communicates when witnessing is an inferior methodology is at cross-purposes to sound biblical theology.

Moving on, note the expression “according to the scripture.” It occurs two times once with the first aspect then with the third aspect of the priority content. Theologically this phrase affirms that Christ’s death and resurrection are fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy. Stylistically, the two phrases serve to link intimately the first and second aspects of Paul’s priority content as well as the third and fourth aspects.

Second Aspect of the Priority Content: *He was buried* (15:4a). This could have been included in the Lord’s obituary. It is almost universally recognized that this aspect of Paul’s gospel message is one with the first aspect, being designed to provide historical validation of the Lord’s death for our sins. Jesus did not merely swoon in the tomb; He was a corpse. People do not bury the living except, of course, where pagan notions prevail.

Third Aspect of the Priority Content: *He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures* (15:4b). “He rose” is actually He was raised (the passive voice means raised by a power outside of Himself) and with continuing effect.²² It is self-evident that a dead Savior cannot save anyone. Thus, preaching that Christ was raised from the dead is a wonderful apologetic designed to encourage faith in the resurrected One resulting in forgiveness and eternal life

Paul’s use of the Greek tenses is interesting.²³ Both verbs, “died” and “buried,” are aorist tenses denoting a past, once-for-all event for our sins (cf. Hebrews 10:8-14). “He was raised” is a perfect tense to show how Christ’s resurrection—a real past event—has continuing effect on God’s people, especially those who “consider themselves to be dead to the tyranny of sin but instead alive to God for a walk in newness of life” (my rephrasing; cf. Romans 6:4, 11; Philippians 3:10).²⁴

²¹ Wilkin, “Another Look...,” 2.

²² Robertson, *Grammar*, Libronix CDROM.

²³ Mare, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Libronix CDROM, says “That he was raised forever (the perfect tense is used here) agrees with the Scripture in Psalm 16:10; so also does Paul’s statement about the third day, which may be based on Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:40 that relate his three days in the tomb to Jonah’s three days inside the fish Jonah 1:17). According to Jewish reckoning, ‘three days’ would include parts of Friday afternoon, all of Saturday, and Sunday morning. Compare the parts of two Sundays implied in the phrase ‘after eight days’ (John 20:26).”

²⁴ Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner and Robert Walter Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), Libronix CDROM, 176.

Fourth Aspect of the Priority Content: Christ was seen by multiple eyewitnesses.

That He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James,²⁵ then by all the apostles. (15:5-7)

The fourth aspect is one with the third.²⁶ 15:6, which begins with no connective, serves “the function of adding corroborative verification in the public domain and providing a Pauline transition to the important v. 8.”²⁷ Being corroborative in nature, Paul’s evidence does not put forth this information as exact truth to be believed or else one is not yet eternally saved. It is put forth to convince a sinner that Christ rose from the dead—from a death for our sins—and to believe it.

If we ask further “why does Paul provide corroborative verification for the resurrection and not for Christ’s death/burial, we find the answer in the theme of the chapter: Paul’s main thrust is to validate the resurrection. This does not, however, neutralize that the apostle here gives us gospel essentials, which when believed result in the gift of forgiveness and all else a new believer receives “in Christ.” Those embracing theological eisegesis react at the notion one may believe in Jesus Christ—in His death and resurrection—resulting in eternal forgiveness and life. Why?—because their methodology compels them to add to Paul’s priority gospel content the imported notion of faith in Christ for eternal life, thus superimposing John on Paul.

Sound biblical exegesis and theology does not superimpose one apostle’s writing over another, or attempt to mitigate apparent differences by dismantling what one apostle teaches to promote what another says. When biblical theology properly functions, we discover that there is one gospel, like a diamond, that manifests multiple facets. Paul and John each provide a facet. If we witness to an unbeliever using content from the Gospel of John, we encourage the unbeliever to believe in Jesus Christ resulting in eternal life. If we witness to an unbeliever using Paul’s priority gospel essentials, we encourage the unbeliever to believe in Jesus Christ—in his death for our sins and resurrection—resulting in the gift of forgiveness.

Paul Personally Testifies to the Resurrected Christ

Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am 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; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. (15:8-10)

The apostle labored more than all by the same grace that saved him initially on the Damascus Road and continued to enable his ministry. Labored doing what?—preaching/delivering priority content of the gospel

²⁵ Mare, *Expositors’ Bible Commentary*, concludes that “The James mentioned in v. 7 certainly is not one of the two apostles of that name—James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus (Matt 10:2-4), since the whole group of apostles is mentioned next and would include these two. Instead, it must be the Lord’s half-brother (Matt 13:55), who had, with his brothers, joined the apostolic band (Acts 1:14) and had become prominent in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13).”

²⁶ Charles C. Bing, “How To Share The Gospel Clearly,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 7:1 (Spring 94), 58 (The Grace Evangelical Society, 1994; 2002), Logos CDROM, says, “In vv 4–5 we find two great propositions of the Gospel and their supporting evidence. We could diagram the verses like this:

Christ died for our sins	1) First proposition
according to the Scriptures	1a) Scriptural proof
and was buried	1b) Physical proof
He arose	2) Second proposition
according to the Scriptures	2a) Scriptural proof
and was seen	2b) Physical proof

Dr. Bing’s diagram portrays well the apostle’s revelation, though JOTGES, from which this quotation comes, having departed from traditional free grace roots, now rejects that 1 Cor. 15:3b-5 expresses sufficient saving gospel content; see quotations at beginning of this article.

²⁷ Thiselton, *Corinthians*, Libronix CDROM.

message to unbelievers, along with extended gospel truth to save/deliver believers from temptation, sin, and divine discipline.

Of interesting and practical note is the final verse of the chapter: *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord* (15:58). As the grace granted to Paul enabled him not to labor in vain, so our labor in the Lord “is not in vain”—there will be no futility in our work.²⁸

When commenting on “I am the least of the apostles,” a writer says

The closing three verses [15:9-11] are almost never mentioned when people use these verses to share their faith. Why? I believe it is because people believe that Paul is giving information here that isn't really important today when we share our faith. Yet if these verses aren't important for us to use when we share our faith, then how can we say this passage is given to us to show us how to share our faith clearly?²⁹

Is the writer's experience broad enough to postulate that these verses “are almost never mentioned” when Christians evangelize? However that may be, we have no hermeneutical principle compelling us to conclude that if Paul gives top priority gospel content in 15:3b-5 then he intends for everything in the entire paragraph to be the object of saving faith? This conclusion ignores the purpose of corroborative evidence and seems driven by *a priori* ideas, not by careful attention to Paul's contextual flow. Apparently, the methodological error of superimposing John over Paul again rears its head.

TWO EFFECTS OF THE GOSPEL'S PRIORITIES (1 Corinthians 15:11)

Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

The following quotation is on target, especially in the way it points to one's “personal trust in the significance of” the priority facts of the gospel message.

Certainly the Gospel consists of a set of facts and it is crucial that any presentation of the Gospel relate the correct facts (cf. 1 Cor 15:1–4). However, the concern of the Free Grace Gospel is not to ask for simple historical affirmation, but to call the individual to personal trust in the significance of these facts for himself. The moment the unbeliever recognizes his own sinfulness and believes that Christ alone has provided complete forgiveness through His death—in other words, at the moment of personal trust in Christ alone for salvation—that person is justified and receives the gift of eternal life.³⁰

Moreover, it was not Paul only who preached a gospel that elevated to great prominence Christ's death for our sins and resurrection (15:3b-5). He says “whether it was I *or they*” (ἐκεῖνοι), i.e., the other apostles. He proceeds with this clause: “so or ‘in this way’ we keep on preaching” (present tense). The first effect, then, because of the priority of Christ's death and resurrection, is that all preached accordingly. Paul's content was not unique to his ministry, but all the apostles taught the same priorities. Their unswerving communication of Christ's death for our sins and resurrection had results.

And so you believed. “So” (οὕτως) occurs twice, each time intensifying what precedes. Hence, the apostle first makes a strong point that they preached the gospel *so*, or *in this way*.³¹ In what way, again?—in the way that prioritized Christ's death for our sins and His resurrection. In addition, the Corinthians so believed. That is, their faith attached itself to the gospel message prioritizing Christ's death and resurrection. *In this way*, they believed. The verse has both manner of preaching and manner of believing in view. The Corinthians, as did all audiences to which the other apostles preached, believed/received the gospel in keeping

²⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., 3:660 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976). Libronix CDROM.

²⁹ Wilkin, “Another Look...,” 1.

³⁰ J. Kevin Butcher, *JOTGES* 2:1 (Spring 89), (The Grace Evangelical Society, 1989; 2002), 30.

³¹ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, vol. 4, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker's Greek New Testament library, 289 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000).

with the priority content identified in 15:3b-5. It is *this* content the Corinthians received/believed so that Paul may elsewhere say that they are sanctified in Christ Jesus (1:2, cf. 1:30), washed and justified (6:11), and forgiven (15:17).

In the light of this verse, an author implausibly says

While Paul does refer to the fact that his readers believed (vv 2, 11), he doesn't say what it is that they believed. He doesn't say that they believed that simply by faith in Jesus they were once and for all justified or given everlasting life that can never be lost.³²

Au contraire! *What* they believed is clearly spelled out in verses 3b-5 and concisely summarized in verse 11 with *so*, or *in this way* they believed. Consequently, they are not "in their sins" (15:17) because Christ's death and resurrection are historical realities. Anyone not "in his sins" is eternally forgiven, born-again, and justified. Thank God, for who would want eternal life without eternal forgiveness? To live eternally without forgiveness only a fool would cherish.

How then does one see this context falling short of a saving gospel message? By using bad methodology, i.e., foisting what another apostle says on Paul's priority gospel content. Such a practice is skewed for it does not permit Paul to speak for himself. Paul is capable of saying what his priority gospel message—his adequate, saving gospel—is, which others believed and by which God forgave them. Paul does not need John's insights anymore than John needs Paul's insights.

One Gospel: Two Content Facets

We do not argue here that preaching the gospel as Paul and other apostles did, and believing it as the Corinthians did, is the *only* way to preach and believe for eternal salvation. Paul does not say that. Neither does John say that his way is the only way, or best way, to preach and believe the gospel, other ways being inferior. Both presentations of the gospel are saving gospel messages, whether it is believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, resulting in eternal life, or believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was resurrected resulting in everlasting forgiveness. Some are drawn to John's approach when witnessing, others to Paul's gospel priorities. Still others utilize both approaches depending on to whom they witness. Whether John's or Paul's gospel content, it has the full authority of divine revelation behind it as well as the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit.

What about People in Other Religions who Believe?

Someone may object "Well, the Catholics and Mormons believe that Jesus died for our sins, and they are not eternally saved." Not necessarily! Any person who has believed that Jesus died for his sins (personalized) and was raised from the dead, *without at the same time clinging to some notion of good works*, is eternally saved.³³ One has either believed or has not believed; there is no middle ground, i.e., half-believe, half not believe. The problem here is not that some people ensnared in false religions believed insufficient gospel

³² Wilkin, "Another Look..." p. 1. In an earlier edition of JOTGES, however, the editor quotes favorably the following from Harry Ironside: "Look at the result of believing the gospel. Go back to verse two, 'By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.' That is, if you believe the gospel, you are saved; if you believe that Christ died for your sins, that He was buried, and that He rose again, God says you are saved. Do you believe it? No man ever believed that except by the Holy Ghost."

It is the Spirit of God that overcomes the natural unbelief of the human heart and enables a man to put his trust in that message" (H. A. Ironside, "A Voice from the Past: What Is The Gospel?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 11:1 [Spring 98], 57 [The Grace Evangelical Society, 1998; 2002]). To remain consistent, JOTGES can no longer quote Ironside favorably in this regard.

³³ In a personal conversation I had with Zane Hodges, he said that the notion of "apart from good works" is not explicit in the Gospel of John and that one must go to a passage such as Ephesians 2:8-9 where it is explicit. Let me add that neither is it explicit in 1 Corinthians 15:1-19. But this is why we have biblical theology, comparing scripture with scripture, so that by studying the "whole counsel of God" we may derive the most complete understanding of a subject. It may be argued, nevertheless, that "faith *alone*" is implicit in both John's Gospel and 1 Corinthians 15 because since faith *alone* in Jesus Christ eternally saves, then good works are automatically rendered unnecessary or excluded.

content, but that they are in a Church group or cult that immediately begins to stifle growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ for it turns them away from grace to a works/perseverance oriented religious system.

What about Jesus Christ who is the Object of Saving Faith?

What does one need to know and believe about Him who loved us and gave Himself for us? John says that faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, results in “life in His name” (John 20:31). Thus, to be persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, God’s specially appointed Savior, and God’s Son or deity, provides one with eternal life. An unbeliever’s understanding of “Christ” and deity will be embryonic, perhaps not much more than “Jesus is more than man thus able to save me!” Delivering this content concerning the Person of Jesus Christ is John’s method of preaching the gospel.

Paul delivered as top priority content what we learned above in 1 Corinthians 15:3b-5. Thus what does one need to know about Jesus Christ to be eternally saved?—that He died for my sins and was raised from the dead. This is explicit; that it was for my forgiveness is contextually implicit (cp. vs. 3b, “for our sins” with v.17, “still in your sins”).

Neither apostle says, or even hints, that we must do the work of evangelism his way or settle for something substandard. They showed no arrogance in this regard, neither should we.

Has There Been a Dispensational Shift?

Initially Christ’s apostles could not bring themselves to believe that Jesus would be crucified; in fact, Peter on one occasion so resisted the idea that Jesus rebuked him saying “Get behind Me, Satan” (Matthew 16:23). Yet, Peter believed that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” which the Lord said the Father had illumined to his understanding (Matthew 16:16-17). What Peter *did* believe, not what he had not yet become persuaded, was sufficient for eternal salvation.

In keeping with the earlier section “One Gospel: Two Facets,” the evidence indicates that prior to the cross faith in the Person of Christ as the Messiah was a saving faith. In light of the fact that all four gospel writers preach the cross, and Paul (with the apostles) made it a top priority aspect of their gospel message, and the Corinthians so believed, we should vigorously preach the Cross that unbelievers may receive the message for forgiveness and eternal life.

What about Filling in Holes?

This question assumes that there are holes in the sense that if an apostle, such as Paul, does not say what John says, that Paul has a hole in his content that can only be filled-in by borrowing from John’s gospel. The presupposition is that John’s gospel is the only authoritative record of how to deliver the gospel and, based on that theory, extrapolates that we should superimpose John on Paul. Here we go again! If we remove the faulty hermeneutic of overlaying Paul or Peter or Luke with John, the system that thrives on such methodology comes down like a house of cards.

END RESULTS OF A GOSPEL UNGROUNDING IN THE HISTORICAL REALITIES OF CHRIST’S DEATH AND RESURRECTION (1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

How important is the resurrection in the plan of God to man’s eternal destiny and, thus, to gospel preaching? These verses vigorously answer this question. The issue is what is historically true, thus should have a top priority place in our preaching *and* the unbeliever’s object of faith.

End Result #1: Without Christ's Death and Resurrection, the Apostles' Doctrine is Vain (15:12-14a)

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty.³⁴

The “if” that leads off this section assumes the truthfulness of the statement, i.e., if the apostles are preaching (present tense) Christ's resurrection (and they do). Several times Paul says he preached/delivered a gospel that included the resurrection (15:1-4, 11; in fact, he labored tirelessly at such preaching, 15:10). It is, therefore, incredible that some in Corinth deny the resurrection because if Christ has not been raised, then all the hard work put into preaching a gospel message that makes Christ's death and resurrection a top priority issue is *vain* (κενός), denoting what is *unsuccessful, ineffectual, or powerless*.³⁵ Paul uses the word in several passages³⁶ to speak of his or others' work in the ministry not being successful.

End Result #2: Without Christ's Death and Resurrection, a Believer's Faith is Vain (15:14b)

And your faith is also empty (κενός, again). The emphasis in 15:14 is on a “resultant lack of successful impact”³⁷ so that regardless of how they strain to believe, or to persuade themselves that the apostles preaching is true—if the resurrection has not happened—their faith is utterly ineffectual, powerless to produce forgiveness and eternal life.

End result #3: Without Christ's Death and Resurrection, the Apostles are False Witnesses (15:15)

Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise.

In this passage, witnessing and testifying are synonymous with preaching and delivering the gospel, with perhaps slight different nuances. We might see the term “communicate” as the common denominator. Thus, all apostles—any person for that matter—who communicate a message about Christ that includes the resurrection, others may rightly and immediately brand false witnesses, *if* there is no resurrection.

End result #4: Without Christ's Death and Resurrection, Christians are Still in Their Sins (15:16-17)

For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!

Our faith is “vain” (κενός) according to 15:14, meaning empty of saving content and ineffectual to bring eternal salvation, if Christ has not been raised. Now our faith is also “futile” (μάταιος) speaking of how faith in a non-resurrected Christ accomplishes nothing in terms of forgiveness.³⁸ A commentator points out that

³⁴ TDNT, Libronix CDROM, comments that “When Paul says that preaching and faith are κενός if Christ is not risen (1 C. 15:14), the antithesis in v. 20 may be applied both to the divine content and to the divine efficacy in the broadest possible sense, the latter with reference to deliverance from [destruction]. Hence κενός means both without content and also ineffective.”

³⁵ Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: Exegetisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament., 2:281 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990-c1993).

³⁶ See 1 Thess. 2:1; 3:5; 1 Cor. 15:10; 15:58.

³⁷ TDNT, Libronix CDROM.

³⁸ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 9th ed., improved (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2003), 180. CDROM. Trench says when comparing “vain” and “futile” says “The first, κενός, is ‘empty’ ... the second, μάταιος, ‘vain’ ... (‘idle’)... In the first is characterized the hollowness, in the second the aimlessness, or, if we may use the word, the resultlessness. ... Thus κενὰ ἐλπίδες [vain hopes]... are empty hopes, such as are built on no solid foundation.”³⁸

Paul uses *κενός* also—synonymously with → *μάταιος* (v 17)—in a ... discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. If the eschatological salvific event of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is denied, the kerygma [=preaching] and the faith are *empty of content* (v. 14b, c; cf. Rom 4:14 and 1 Cor 1:17 with → *κενόω*), i.e., *unfounded, meaningless, and void*.³⁹

The horror here is that without a resurrected Christ, Paul says, *you are still in your sins!* They are *not* sanctified (1:2, 30); they are not “washed” and “justified” (6:11), thus still unforgiven. By God’s sheer grace, however, the Lord does not impute trespasses to those not born-again (2 Corinthians 5:19). This does not mean that the Lord has forgiven them or that they have a ticket through the pearly gates for they will appear *unforgiven* at the Great White Throne. Nevertheless, their eternal judgment will be on other grounds: *according to their works* (Revelation 21:12-15). The *only* place one finds eternal forgiveness before God is “in Christ” (Colossians 2:13-14; cf. Ephesians 1:7). Moreover, the only entrance into Christ is to *believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved* (Acts 16:31). For *he who believes in Me*, Jesus said, *has everlasting life* (John 6:47).

End Result #5: Without Christ’s Death and Resurrection, Dead Christians Have Perished (15:18)

Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. With the reality—the historical events—of Christ’s death and resurrection, we are assured that our departed loved ones are “at home with the Lord.” And so, though we grieve at their passing, we have hope knowing that they have not gone on to oblivion. Without resurrection, departed loved-ones are perished, gone, never again to be seen or heard. With the resurrection, not only they but all believers will experience resurrection and live forever with the Lord.

End Result #6: Without Christ’s Death and Resurrection, Christians are Objects of Great Pity (15:19)

*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable, or “pathetic.”*⁴⁰ If there is no resurrection so that this life is all we have, yet we suppose/hope there is an afterlife—a heaven or Paradise—we deserve sympathy for our pathetic condition.⁴¹ Or, as a Greek Lexicon puts it, “we deserve more pity than anyone else.”⁴²

CONCLUSION

A free grace writer tells of a man he talked to who said “there was no single book in the Bible that includes everything we must believe to be born again.”⁴³ Not so! There are a number of passages in the Gospel of John that are, properly understood and believed, a sufficient gospel message, resulting in eternal life. Romans 10:9-10 properly understood and believed results in imputed righteousness. Likewise 1 Corinthians 15:3b-5 when received/believed results in forgiveness. In fact, a moment of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ delivers to the believer at least 33 Things⁴⁴ in what I like to call the Eternal Salvation Package.

In addition, there is no foul, no harm, in using a central passage to witness to an unbeliever and in importing content from other passages to supplement. All scripture is God-breathed and profitable for doctrine—including doctrine relevant to the work of evangelism.

The above quoted writer also says:

It grieves me that some Free Grace people are abandoning the evangelistic purpose of John’s Gospel. When they do so, *they no longer know what the saving message is* (emphasis added). They pick and choose verses

³⁹ Horst and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary*, Libronix CDROM.

⁴⁰ Swanson, *Dictionary*, Libronix CDROM.

⁴¹ BDAG, *Lexicon*, Libronix CDROM.

⁴² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 1:750 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989).

⁴³ Wilkin, “Another Look...,” p. 2.

⁴⁴ See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, “The Riches of Divine Grace” (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1962), 3:225-266.

and doctrines here and there and make up what they think a person must believe to be born again. *The result is a well-intentioned message. But it is man-made.*⁴⁵

I have fellowshiped with free grace people since the early 1960s and do not know anyone who has abandoned the evangelistic purpose of John's gospel. I know scholars and students who see a multiple purpose for the writing of the Gospel of John, but one of those purposes remains evangelistic. The author of the above quotation has perhaps been introduced to someone(s) who has abandoned John's evangelistic purpose and I would agree that is a mistake.

However, when he says that those who abandon John's evangelistic purpose "no longer know what the saving message is," he plunges into the dark. It is possible—though not probable[?]⁴⁵—that someone does not know John's evangelistic message, yet still has a handle on a sufficient thus saving gospel message from 1 Corinthians 15; Romans 10 or Ephesians 2. Unless one's thinking is in bondage to a methodology that insists on overlaying the rest of the apostles' writings with John's gospel content, it should be clear that as helpful as John's gospel is, he is not the only apostle to reveal a sufficient saving gospel message. There is only one gospel, but it has multiple facets. Faith in any facet of the gospel results in all 33 Things of the Salvation Package of which eternal life is only one.

Paul plainly makes known a sufficient gospel. He received it (from Jesus Christ Himself, Galatians 1:11-12), preached/delivered it as did other apostles, and the Corinthians as thousands of others throughout the Roman Empire received/believed it. What did they preach and receive: Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, was buried, rose the third day according to the scriptures, and was seen by multiple eye-witnesses.

We do not have to second-guess Paul and conjecture that he preached additional content that the Corinthians also had to believe to be saved eternally. He is straightforward, clear, leaving no question as to what the top priority content of his gospel message was and thus what the Corinthians believed to become forgiven.

We do well, therefore, to resolve as Paul did upon approaching Corinth to know nothing among unbelievers except Christ and Him crucified, buried, raised, and seen. Preach the cross; preach the resurrection; preach forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life as vigorously and clearly as possible. The Holy Spirit's ministry will not permit the word to return void; He will make adequate whatever our preaching and witnessing attempts are as we walk by means of the Spirit.

--See attached Appendix--

P.S.: This paper is a work in process. Any and all constructive feedback will be appreciated. Please your emails to me at president@chafer.edu.

⁴⁵ Wilkin, "Another Look...", p. 2.