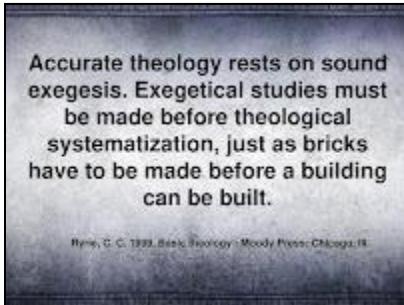


Monday, September 6, 2010

Understanding the Gospel: Exegetically and Theologically



Some Free Grace people use their dogmatic theology to interpret the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15, but unfortunately their definition of the gospel is not based on solid exegesis. For example, one groundless gospel advocate writes that a "major reason why the burial and post-resurrection appearances of Christ are not technically part of the gospel, and therefore not part of the required content of saving faith, is the double occurrence of the phrase, '*according to the Scriptures*' in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. This prepositional phrase provides symmetrical literary markers in the passage that distinguish the actual *content* of the gospel from the *evidences* for that gospel." [1] Similarly, Pastor Dennis Rokser of Duluth Bible Church writes that "the burial of Christ's body, as well as His being seen by others after His resurrection, are not integral components of the Gospel (as '*according to the Scriptures*' are not attached to these statements)". [2] It's important to notice that these conclusions are theological conclusions, *not* exegetical conclusions. This is significant because as Charles Ryrie has said, "Accurate theology rests on sound exegesis. Exegetical studies must be made before theological systematization, just as bricks have to be made before a building can be built." [3] What's more, the exegesis of the passage actually argues *against* the conclusion that the twice repeated phrase "according to the Scriptures" in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 distinguishes "the actual *content* of the gospel from the *evidences* for that gospel." In light of the exegesis of the text (that

is, getting the meaning of the passage out of the text itself), it is not the twice repeated phrase "according to the Scriptures" that marks out the content of the gospel, but rather the four *hoti* content clauses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 that reveal the actual *content* of the gospel! R. J. Sider explains: "There is no reason for limiting the traditional element to [1 Corinthians 15] vv. 3-4 as does HERING. Since the series of *hoti* ["that"] clauses depending on *paredoka* ["I delivered"] continues through verse 5, vv. 3-5 would seem to be the minimum which can be designated with certainty as part of that which Paul had received. The *traditio*, then, included a citation of at least some of the eyewitnesses....The verification of Jesus' resurrection by the citation of the carefully preserved tradition of eyewitnesses is, accordingly, a significant part of the Gospel which Paul considers of 'first importance'....There are four clauses introduced in the same way with *hoti*, and the latter three are connected in an identical fashion with *kai*: *that...He died...and that He was buried, and that He was raised...and that He was seen.*"[4] Sider goes on to make a theological point: "One can of course grant that Christ's death and resurrection are mentioned more often than his burial and appearances, and are in some sense more important items of belief. But this in no way leads to the conclusion that the burial and appearances (*ophthe*) are not independent issues to be discussed in addition to the death and resurrection." [5] In other words, Christ's burial and appearances are not somehow swallowed up or subsumed by the death and resurrection simply because the latter are emphasized more. To put it another way, Christ's burial and appearances do not magically disappear from the content of the gospel (or the things "of first importance") simply because the death and

resurrection are in some sense more important. Yet this is the reductionist reasoning of groundless gospel advocates. Stegall supposes that a theological *emphasis* on Christ's death and resurrection equates to an *exclusion* of the burial and appearances from the gospel.[6] Such reasoning is non sequitur however, because an emphasis on one truth does not automatically mean the exclusion of a related truth. It will be helpful to discuss this whole issue of "theological weight" in more detail so as to avoid any misunderstandings.

There are two senses to consider in regards to the relative weight of each part of the gospel: the *exegetical* sense and the *theological* sense. Notice the order, first the exegetical and then the theological. As to this order, Charles Ryrie remarks: "Biblical Theology stands in the closest connection to exegesis, for it builds directly upon it." [7] With this in mind, the following observations can be made:

EXEGETICALLY speaking, all four verbs in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 are coordinate and their meanings are copulative.[8] Stegall seems to agree that all four verbs are coordinate.[9] However, he doesn't agree that the four verbs are linked together by the *kai* conjunction in the simple "copulative" sense where these "words are piled together" in a "chain".[10] Notice what A. T. Robertson says in his classic book *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (p. 1182): "The simple copulative idea [i.e. joining together coordinate words or word groups and expressing addition of their meanings] is, however, the most common use of *kai* where words are piled together by means of this conjunction....The chain with

kai as the connective may go on indefinitely....So we have *kai hoti* three times in 1 Cor. 15:4 (*kai* to connect *hoti* clauses)." Similar to how Stegall fails to mention the grammatical point noted by Daniel Wallace in his textbook that the Greek word *hoti* in 1 Corinthians 15:3ff is a "content conjunction"[11], it is telling that Stegall never once mentions these exegetical truths by A. T. Robertson concerning the copulative sense of the *kai* coordinating conjunction in 1 Corinthians 15:4ff! Sadly, Stegall's groundless gospel is "theologically contrived, not exegetically derived." [12] As R. J. Sider and other scholars [13] have noted regarding the exegesis of the passage in 1 Corinthians 15, "it is necessary to insist on the fact that the syntax by no means supports any hypothesis which subordinates 'he was buried' to 'he died'. Syntactically, *hoti etaphe* [i.e. 'that he was buried'] is as independent of 'he died' as it is of 'he was raised'." [14] Sadly, Stegall simply dismisses these exegetical considerations with a virtual wave of the hand by saying, "Both the burial and appearances are parallel to Christ's death and resurrection according to the syntax of the passage, but this still does not make them elements of the saving gospel as we shall see." [15] Stegall then proceeds to talk about the "greater theological magnitude" of Christ's death and resurrection, but in so doing he is in effect putting the cart before the horse, because as Charles Ryrie has noted, "Accurate theology rests on sound exegesis." [16]

THEOLOGICALLY speaking, all four verbs in vv. 3-5 do not all carry the same theological weight within the things "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3). All four verbs are indeed "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3), but within this framework two

are *primus inter pares*, or first among equals. (This principle of "first among equals" is evident not only within the gospel, but also within the Trinity, the family, the greatest commandment,[17] the kings of Israel,[18] the twelve apostles,[19] and the elders of the local church.[20]) Although all four verbs in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 are exegetically parallel and part of the gospel, they do not all carry the same theological weight within the gospel. A few examples will suffice in this regard. First, notice that the double occurrence of the phrase "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4) is only attached to Christ's death and resurrection. In contrast to what groundless gospel advocates would have us believe,[21] with the twice repeated phrase "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4), the apostle Paul is simply corroborating and clarifying the theological truths of Christ's death *for our sins* and His resurrection *forevermore*, not somehow cutting or curtailing the content of the gospel! In 1 Corinthians 15:3b and 4b Paul *adds theological truth* to the bare facts of Christ's death and resurrection: "Christ died *for our sins*" (the truth of justification in seed form) and "was raised on the third day *forevermore*"[22] (the promise of eternal life in seed form). These theological truths are according to, or in conformity with, the Scriptures (see Isa. 53:4-12; Ps. 16:8-11; Acts 13:34-37; cf. Rom. 6:9; Heb. 7:25; Rev. 1:17-18, *etc.*). Garland affirms: "That Christ died and that he was resurrected on the third day are facts, but their meaning is interpreted by the Scriptures." [23] By contrast, in 1 Corinthians 15:4a and 5 Paul does *not* add theological truth from the Scriptures to the *historical* facts of Christ's burial and appearances to the twelve disciples. Paul simply declares the historical events: "He was buried" (1 Cor. 15:4a) and "He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve" (1 Cor.

15:5). The gospel (including the historical events of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances) was of course "promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures" (Rom. 1:2; cf. Ps. 22:1-22; Isa. 53:1-12; Rom. 10:16, NKJV; 1 Pet. 1:10-12, *etc.*), but Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is to affirm that the *theological* facts of Christ's death "*for our sins*" (cf. Isa. 53:4-12, *etc.*) and resurrection on the third day *forevermore* (cf. Ps. 16:8-11, *etc.*) are indeed "according to the Scriptures" and just as much part of the good news as the historical facts of the gospel! Thus, while all four facts in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 are part of the gospel and "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3), Christ's death and resurrection have more theological weight. Consider a second example showing that the truths of the gospel have various theological weights. Notice the emphasis on Christ's substitutionary death in Scripture. This gospel truth is emphasized the most, as Stegall even indicates.[24] It is the heart of the gospel message.[25] Paul preached "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). Paul equates the gospel with "the word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:17-18). And he says that he "determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Is Christ's resurrection excluded from the gospel because it doesn't carry the same theological weight as His death? Of course not! Yet this is one of the reductionist reasonings of groundless gospel advocates in regards to Christ's burial and appearances. Such an interpretation goes against the plain and obvious meaning of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15 where he clearly includes Christ's burial and appearances not only in "the gospel" (1 Cor. 15:1), but also in the things "of first importance" (1 Cor.

15:3ff). And so we see that within the gospel, within the things "of first importance," there exists the principle of *primus inter pares*, or first among equals.

In reality, this whole discussion regarding "theological weight"[26] is beside the point in answering the question "What is the content of the gospel?" It is telling that while Stegall is vocal and verbose about the "theological weight"[27] of the various *hoti* clauses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, he is completely silent regarding the exegetical truths noted by Daniel Wallace and A. T. Robertson that these clauses are content clauses and that the *kai* coordinating conjunctions which connect them are to be understood in the simple "copulative" sense where "words are piled together" in a "chain"![28] These key exegetical truths are foundational and irrefutable, and that is probably one reason why Stegall simply avoids them — because they highlight the error of his groundless gospel. He is redirecting the discussion away from these exegetical truths to discuss something that is beside the point in terms of the actual content of the gospel. The issue of "theological weight" is beside the point (in determining the actual content of the gospel) because the content of the gospel is determined from the exegesis of the text, not from the theology of the text; for we would not have theology if it did not first come from exegesis (as Ryrie has noted). Furthermore, the content of the gospel is not affected by the theological weight of the clauses. In other words, even though Christ's burial and appearances have less *theological* weight than Christ's death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, all four clauses still remain content clauses of the gospel because each is introduced by a *hoti* (or *kai hoti*) content conjunction.[29]

In conclusion, we can summarize by saying that all FOUR verbs in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 are part of "the gospel" (1 Cor. 15:1) and are "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3). Among these four equals it is apparent that in terms of "theological weight" TWO are *primus inter pares*, or first among equals: Christ's death *for our sins* (1 Cor. 15:3), and His resurrection on the third day *forevermore* (1 Cor. 15:4). And among these two equals ONE is primary, that being Christ's death *for our sins* — which ALONE paid the complete sin debt (1 Cor. 15:3; cf. Jn. 19:30; 1 Cor. 1:17-18, 23, 2:2, *etc.*).

ENDNOTES:

[1] Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ* (Milwaukee: Grace Gospel Press, 2009), p. 578, italics his.

[2] Dennis Rokser, *Let's Preach the Gospel*, p. 33.

[3] Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, pp. 16-17.

[4] Ronald J. Sider, "St. Paul's Understanding of the Nature and Significance of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians XV 1-19," *Novum Testamentum* 19 (April 1977): pp.

132-134, italics his, first and second ellipsis added. NOTE: I transcribed portions of the Greek text into English.

[5] Ibid., p. 134, note 40.

[6] Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 581, cf. p. 588, etc.

[7] Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 16.

[8] A. T. Roberson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research*, pp. 1034, 1181-1182. Similarly, Daniel Wallace affirms that the Greek word *kai* is a coordinating (not subordinating) conjunction which "links equal elements together" (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 667).

[9] Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, pp. 560-561, 581.

[10] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research*, pp. 1181-1182, emphasis added. In contrast to Greek scholar A. T. Robertson who understands the *kai* conjunctions in 1 Corinthians 15:4ff in the coordinating and copulative sense, Stegall tries to argue that in 1 Corinthians 15:4a and 5a (but not 1 Cor. 15:4b - how convenient!) the *kai* COORDINATING conjunctions should be understood in a SUBORDINATING sense (Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, pp. 580-585). As if this conclusion isn't enough of an exegetical

stretch, Stegall then goes on to argue that such a SUBORDINATION equates to an ELIMINATION from the gospel (Ibid). But here again Stegall is at odds with A. T. Robertson who specifically includes Christ's burial and appearances in the gospel (see A. T. Robertson, *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*, commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:3, 15:4, 15:5). In an attempt to justify his exegetical gymnastics and hermeneutical leaps, Stegall has seized upon a somewhat obscure footnote from Daniel Wallace's textbook *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (p. 667, note 2). In short, Wallace's footnote says that often coordinating conjunctions like *kai* can have a notion of subordination on a deep structure level and can thus be translated as "in order that" or "in order to". The first thing to notice is that even *if* this was the sense of two of the *kai* conjunctions in 1 Corinthians 15:4ff, it still doesn't remove Christ's burial or appearances from the content of the gospel. But there are several reasons to conclude that Wallace's footnote does *not* apply to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 and cannot be used to support Stegall's partial gospel interpretation of the passage. The first reason is that Wallace never applies the footnote to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 as Stegall attempts to do. In fact, the only time Wallace mentions 1 Corinthians 15 anywhere in the chapter it *isn't* to show that any part of the gospel is subordinate to the others, but instead to show that the *hoti* clause in 1 Corinthians 15:3 is introduced by a "content conjunction"! (Ibid., p. 678.) It is telling that Stegall never once mentions this exegetical point highlighted by Wallace. The second reason why Wallace's footnote cannot be used to support a partial gospel interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is because such a connection leads to a mistranslation of the passage. This is an important consideration and

even Wallace advises the exegete to: "Test each option with an interpretive translation in determining the best one." (Ibid., p. 668.) Stegall argues that the passage should read as follows: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, *in order to be buried*, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, *in order to appear* to Cephas, then to the twelve." (Notice that not only is the sense of *kai* changed from "and" to "in order to," but the tense of the verbs is changed as well. The verb "was buried" in the original is changed to "be buried," and the verb "appeared" in the original is changed to "appear".) However, if such a translation is correct and conveys the intended meaning of the passage, why do no versions of the Bible translate 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 the way Stegall has suggested? (Even Wallace in his [NET BIBLE](#) doesn't translate the passage the way Stegall has suggested.) That Stegall must rewrite the Bible to support his groundless gospel is a glaring problem! Such practices are characteristic of cults such as the Jehovah Witnesses and their *New World Translation* but should have no place in the life and ministry of Bible believing Christians! The third reason why Wallace's footnote cannot be used to support a partial gospel interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is that it leads to unbiblical, illogical, and confusing conclusions. Based on his unique translation Stegall concludes: "As this relates to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 we could say that just as someone would not bury a living person, so the Lord's burial (v. 4a) was dependent upon Him dying first (v. 3b). And just as a person could not be seen by others unless he arose from the dead, so the Lord's post-resurrection appearances (v. 5a) were dependent upon Him rising from the dead first (v. 4b). In this respect,

the burial and appearances are clearly [?] seen to be semantically subordinate to the two main clauses in the passage. The claim that 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 contains a 'golden chain' of elements that *must be* of equal theological weight and that *must* all be elements of the saving gospel, is clearly [?] seen to be unfounded." (Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 585.) Besides being confusing there are several obvious flaws in Stegall's statements. As Norman Geisler would say, the logic is self-refuting. Notice that Stegall is taking an equally firm contrary position in that he believes certain elements of the text *must not* be of equal theological weight and *must not* be elements of the saving gospel. Furthermore, if Stegall's logic and reasoning are consistently applied to the passage, we are left to erroneously conclude that Christ's resurrection is semantically subordinate to His death because we could say that someone would not resurrect a living person, so the Lord's resurrection (v. 4b) was dependent upon Him dying first (v. 3b). Based on Stegall's reasoning the argument could also be made that Christ's resurrection is subordinate to His burial because His resurrection was dependent upon Him being buried first. Is Christ's resurrection now not part of the gospel because it is dependent on His death and burial? Of course not! Although these conclusions are consistent with Stegall's logic they are at odds not only with the content of the gospel but also with the entire context of the passage which stresses the importance of the resurrection. Another problem with Stegall's reductionist reasoning is that it evidences the logical fallacy of being non sequitur. In other words, Stegall's conclusion does not follow his premise. Stegall's premise is that Christ's burial and appearances should be understood in a subordinate sense; his conclusion is that they are not elements of

the gospel. This logical fallacy results from his failure to distinguish the difference between *correlation* and *content*. Stegall is confusing a supposed "deep structure level" correlation with the specific content of the gospel. However, the content of the gospel is not changed by some supposed "deep structure level" relationship of the clauses. In other words, even if two of the four coordinate content clauses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 have a subordinate relationship or correlation to the others, all four clauses still remain content clauses because each is introduced by a *hoti* content conjunction. A supposed subordination of Christ's burial and appearances does not equate to their elimination from the gospel. Hence, Stegall's entire argument is rather beside the point and gives no validation to his partial gospel. For more information see my article: "[Getting the Gospel Right](#)," pp. 11-15, esp. 14-15.

[11] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 678.

[12] Thomas L. Stegall, "*Vigilance Regarding the Truth of the Gospel: Reengaging the Heresy of the GES 'Crossless' Gospel, Part 1*" (accessed, May 4, 2010). http://indefenseofthegospel.blogspot.com/2010/05/vigilance-regarding-truth-of-gospel_04.html

[13] See my article: "[Getting the Gospel Right](#)," pp. 11-13.

[14] Ronald J. Sider, "St. Paul's Understanding of the Nature and Significance of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians XV 1-19," pp. 134-135.

[15] Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 560.

[16] Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, pp. 16-17.

[17] See Matthew 22:34-40; cf. Matthew 23:23, NIV.

[18] Commenting on Deuteronomy 17:20, Warren Wiersbe writes: "Deuteronomy 17:20 suggests that the king was to be 'first among equals' and not elevated above his brothers." (Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* [Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007], p. 347.)

[19] For example, commenting on Acts 2:37-39, Warren Wiersbe affirms: "Note that they addressed their question to the other Apostles as well as to Peter, for all twelve were involved in the witness that day, and Peter was only first among equals." (Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* [Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996], Vol. 1, p. 410.)

[20] Cf. *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch.

[21] Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 579.

[22] The verb "was raised" (*egegertai*, 1 Cor. 15:4) is in the perfect tense, emphasizing abiding results. There is general agreement on this grammatical point among theologians and even Dennis Rokser affirms: "The phrase 'He rose again' (*egegertai*) is a perfect tense verb indicating past completed action with abiding present results. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead on the third day and He remains alive to this very day. He is a living Savior who got out of death, Hell and the grave alive!" (Dennis Rokser, *Let's Preach The Gospel*, p. 33; cf. S. Lewis Johnson, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1255; W. Harold Mare, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 10 vols., vol. 10, p. 282; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar Of The Greek New Testament In Light Of Historical Research*, p. 896; Earl Radmacher, *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1937; Thomas L. Stegall, "The Tragedy Of The Crossless Gospel," *The Grace Family Journal* [Special Edition 2007]: p. 33). Norman H. Camp declares the gospel truth when he writes that "the body of Jesus was raised from the grave, never to die again." (Norman Camp, *The Resurrection of the Human Body*, p. 28.)

[23] David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 684.

[24] Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 76.

[25] Under the heading "**THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST**" and under the subheading "HIS DEATH," Ryrie affirms: "In relation to the gospel it is its heart (1 Cor. 15:1-3)." (Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible, Expanded Edition*, New American Standard

Bible [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995]: pp. 2059-60, bold and capitalization his.) Commenting on the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15, James Denney similarly writes: "In other words, there was no gospel known in the primitive church, or in any part of it, which had not this as its foundation - that God forgives our sins because Christ died for them." (Denney, *Studies in Theology*, p. 104.) Denney goes on to emphasize that "St. Paul makes Christ's death for our sins the foundation of the only gospel known to the primitive church." (Ibid., p. 109.)

[26] Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 585.

[27] Ibid., pp. 580-585.

[28] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 678; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar Of The Greek New Testament In Light Of Historical Research*, pp. 1181-1182.

[29] The same point can be made by restating the thought and putting the emphasis on Christ's death and resurrection. In other words, even though Christ's death and resurrection have more *theological* weight than Christ's burial and appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, all four clauses still remain content clauses of the gospel because each is introduced by a *hoti* (or *kai hoti*) content conjunction.