

PAUL AND THE GOSPEL

HOW DID PAUL USE THIS WORD IN HIS EPISTLES?

By Arlen L. Chitwood

Paul's use of the word "gospel," meaning *good news*, must always be understood contextually. Paul did not use this word as it is used, almost without exception, in theological circles today — as a reference only to the gospel of the grace of God. Rather, Paul used the word, time after time, as a reference to *the good news* which had been delivered to him by "the revelation of Jesus Christ," following his conversion (Gal. 1:11, 12).

Paul used the word, *much more often than not*, as a reference to the main crux of his ministry — *the good news pertaining to that encompassed within the mystery*, which had been delivered to him, which he, in turn, had been called to proclaim to Christians throughout the Gentile world (Eph. 3:1-11; Col. 1:25-29). And the Christians to whom Paul ministered would easily understand his use of the word "gospel" from the context of that which he had either said or written.

This central thrust of Paul's ministry becomes *self-evident* as one reads through the Book of Acts and the Pauline epistles.

Paul proclaimed both the gospel of the grace of God and the gospel of the glory of Christ, but he proclaimed the good news pertaining *the grace of God* with a view to his then being able to proclaim the good news pertaining *the glory of Christ*. Paul explained to individuals *how they could be saved*, with a view to subsequently being able to explain to them *why they had been saved*.

For example, note how plainly the matter is outlined in Paul's final message to the Christians in Ephesus, through their elders (Acts 20:24-32). Or, for that matter, note also how plainly the matter is outlined in Paul's epistle to the Christians in Ephesus (1:7ff; 2:1ff; 3:1ff). And a similar structure can be seen in other epistles, not only in the Pauline epistles but in the general epistles as well.

But, because of an existing confusion in the dual nature of I Cor. 15:1-4 in this respect, this passage will be used to illustrate the point. This whole passage is invariably used erroneously by Christians, not in a dual sense, but in a singular sense — as a reference *only* to the gospel of the grace of God.

This passage though begins with *the gospel of the glory of Christ* (vv. 1, 2), then briefly moves back to *the gospel of the grace of God* (v. 3), and then comes back to where it began, to *the gospel of the glory of Christ* (v. 4) — *providing the complete gospel message, covering past, present, and future aspects of salvation*.

Paul, in this passage, *began* with the central message which he had been called to proclaim; *then he briefly moved back* to the message of the gospel of the grace of God, which, of necessity, must be proclaimed first to the unsaved; *then he came back* to the message which is to be proclaimed to individuals once they have heard the gospel of the grace of God — *the central message which he had been called to proclaim throughout the Gentile world*.

"Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand;

By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures;

And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (I Cor. 15:1-4).

The problem emerges when a person attempts to not only make Paul's reference to "the gospel" in verses one and two a reference to the gospel of the grace of God but make that stated in these verses pertain to his entire statement pertaining to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ in verses three and four.

It is the "death" of Christ *alone* which pertains to *the gospel of the grace of God*. The "burial" and "resurrection" of Christ move beyond this and pertain to things surrounding the continuing good news, *the gospel of the glory of Christ*.

Note the type beginning in Exodus chapter twelve. "Death" *alone* is seen in this chapter. "Death" had been decreed upon the firstborn, but God provided a way for this death to be carried out in *a vicarious manner*.

And it is exactly the same today. "Death" has been decreed upon the firstborn, but God has provided a way for this death to be carried out in *a vicarious manner*.

In the type, this was done through the death of paschal lambs and the proper application of the blood from these slain lambs. In the antitype, this is done exactly the same way. The Paschal Lamb has died in the stead of the firstborn, but the blood must be applied (through believing).

"Burial" and "resurrection" though move beyond this in the type (the Red Sea passage and emergence from the Sea on the eastern banks [cf. I Cor. 10:2; Col. 2:12; 3:1ff]). And it is exactly the same in the antitype.

I CORINTHIANS 15:1, 2

Verses one and two refer to the good news (the gospel) which Paul had previously proclaimed to those in Corinth, which they had accepted and upon which they presently stood. This good news had to do with *present and future* aspects of salvation (not past, as seen in the gospel of the grace of God), it had

to do with *holding fast* to that which had been proclaimed (with the possibility that there could be *loss*), and it had to do with Christians in Corinth either *believing* or *not believing* the message with reference to a *purpose (or cause)* in view.

The present and future aspects of salvation in this gospel are shown by the words, "By which also ye are saved [*lit.*, '...ye are being saved']"; *holding fast* to the message proclaimed is shown by the words, "if ye keep in memory [*lit.*, 'if ye hold (are holding) fast'] what I preached unto you"; and *believing* or *not believing* the message with reference to a *purpose* in view is shown by the words, "unless ye have believed in vain [*lit.*, '...believed apart from a purpose (or, 'without a cause in view')]."

The present and future aspects of salvation have to do with *the salvation of the soul* (cf. James 1:21; I Peter 1:4-9). The eternal salvation which we presently possess — *the salvation of the spirit*, wherein man passes "from death unto life" (cf. John 5:24; Eph. 2:1, 5) — places man in a position where he can realize *the salvation of his soul*. And these two aspects of salvation *must always* be kept completely separate, one from the other.

The thought of Christians *holding fast* to those things in the message being proclaimed can be seen in the second and fourth warnings in the Book of Hebrews. The same word appearing in the Greek text of I Cor. 15:2 appears twice in the second warning (3:6, 14) and once in the fourth warning (10:23). *holding fast* in the second warning is with reference to "the heavenly calling" and "the hope" set before Christians (vv. 1, 6); and *holding fast* in the fourth warning is with reference to this same hope — "the profession of our faith [*lit.*, 'the confession of the hope']" (vv. 23-25).

Then, the thought of Christians *believing without a purpose (or cause)* is a reference to the fact that a person has been saved *for a revealed purpose* — a purpose seen, in its entirety, in

the gospel of the glory of Christ. And that purpose is the same as the purpose pertaining to man's creation in the beginning — "...let them have dominion" (Gen. 1:26, 28). Man has been saved with a view to his one day occupying a *position of power and authority with Christ in His kingdom*, which has to do with realizing the present aspect of salvation at a future date — *the salvation of one's soul*.

Believing without a purpose (or cause) in verse two leads a *person nowhere*. An individual has been saved for a purpose, which can be seen and understood *only through believing the gospel which Paul referred to in the previous verse*; and this is a purpose which can one day be realized *only through governing one's life accordingly*, set forth in verse two.

I CORINTHIANS 15:3, 4

Note the way verse three begins. The fact that what Paul is about to say is not the same as that which he had previously said is really *self-explanatory*. Paul states this in so many words.

Verse three begins, "For I delivered unto you *first of all* that which I *also* received..." That which he is about to reference is something which he had delivered unto them *first* (prior to delivering the good news to which he had previously referred, in vv. 1, 2), and this is something which he had *also* received (that is to say, he had received this *in addition* to the good news referred to in vv. 1, 2).

The message which Paul delivered unto those in Corinth *first* can be seen by going back to I Cor. 2:1, 2:

"And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God.

For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Paul, when he *first* went to Corinth, couldn't begin with a message pertaining to the gospel of the glory of Christ, referred to in I Cor. 15:1, 2 (and also in I Cor. 2:1, preceding, as in I Cor. 15:1, 2, a reference to the gospel of the grace of God [2:2; 15:3]).

When Paul *first* went to Corinth, he found a city filled with unsaved Gentiles. And he *had to first* minister to those in Corinth on this basis. He *had to first* proclaim the simple message pertaining to the gospel of the grace of God unto them. He *had to begin* with "Jesus Christ and him crucified." He *couldn't begin* elsewhere.

But, once individuals had believed, once individuals had passed "from death unto life," *then Paul could move beyond this message*.

And this is exactly what he did. Paul spent one and one-half years in Corinth "teaching the word of God among them [*among those who had been saved under the preaching of the simple message pertaining to the gospel of the grace of God*]" (Acts 18:11; cf. I Cor. 2:3ff).

And this is why Paul, in I Cor. 15:1, 2, could allude to these things through simply calling their attention to "*the gospel* [*the good news*'] which I preached unto you..." They would *know exactly* what he meant, for he had previously spent *an extensive period of time* teaching them things pertaining to this gospel. And they would *also understand* the distinction when he moved back in time and referred to the gospel of the grace of God which he, of necessity, had proclaimed to them *at the very beginning* (v. 3).

But, though moving back in this manner, Paul then came back to where he had begun — *referencing things pertaining to the central message which he had been called to proclaim throughout the Gentile world* (v. 4).

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