

What is the Gospel?

by D. A. Carson • 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 • adapted to Outline form for easier reading
Originally posted at: <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/articles.php>

Many have commented on the fact that the church in the western world is going through a time of remarkable fragmentation. This fragmentation extends to our understanding of the gospel. For some Christians, "the gospel" is a narrow set of teachings about Jesus and his death and resurrection which, rightly believed, tip people into the kingdom. After that, real discipleship and personal transformation begin, but none of that is integrally related to "the gospel." This is a far cry from the dominant New Testament emphasis that understands "the gospel" to be the embracing category that holds much of the Bible together, and takes Christians from lostness and alienation from God all the way through conversion and discipleship to the consummation, to resurrection bodies, and to the new heaven and the new earth.

Other voices identify the gospel with the first and second commandments—the commandments to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. These commandments are so central that Jesus himself insists that all the prophets and the law hang on them (Matthew 22:34-40)—but most emphatically they are not the gospel.

A third option today is to treat the ethical teaching of Jesus found in the Gospels as the gospel—yet it is the ethical teaching of Jesus abstracted from the passion and resurrection narrative found in each Gospel. This approach depends on two disastrous mistakes. First, it overlooks the fact that in the first century, there was no "Gospel of Matthew," "Gospel of Mark," and so forth. Our four Gospels were called, respectively, "The Gospel According to Matthew," "The Gospel According to Mark," and so forth. In other words, there was only one gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This one gospel, this message of news that was simultaneously threatening and promising, concerned the coming of Jesus the Messiah, the long-awaited King, and included something about his origins, the ministry of his forerunner, his brief ministry of teaching and miraculous transformation, climaxing in his death and resurrection. These elements are not independent pearls on a string that constitutes the life and times of Jesus the Messiah. Rather, they are elements tightly tied together. Accounts of Jesus' teaching cannot be rightly understood unless we discern how they flow toward and point toward Jesus' death and resurrection. All of this together is the one gospel of Jesus Christ, to which the canonical Gospels bear witness. To study the teaching of Jesus without simultaneously reflecting on his passion and resurrection is far worse than assessing the life and times of George Washington without reflecting on the American Revolution, or than evaluating Hitler's *Mein Kampf* without thinking about what he did and how he died. Second, we shall soon see that to focus on Jesus' teaching while making the cross peripheral reduces the glorious good news to mere religion, the joy of forgiveness to mere ethical conformity, the highest motives for obedience to mere duty. The price is catastrophic.

Perhaps more common yet is the tendency to assume the gospel, whatever that is, while devoting creative energy and passion to other issues—marriage, happiness, prosperity, evangelism, the poor, wrestling with Islam, wrestling with the pressures of secularization, bioethics, dangers on the left, dangers on the right—the list is endless. This overlooks the fact that our hearers inevitably are drawn toward that about which we are most passionate. Every teacher knows that. My students are unlikely to learn all that I teach them; they are most likely to learn that about which I am most excited. If the gospel is merely assumed, while relatively peripheral issues ignite our passion, we will train a new generation to downplay the gospel and focus zeal on the periphery. It is easy to sound prophetic from the margins; what is urgently needed is to be prophetic from the center. What is to be feared, in the famous words of W. B. Yeats in "The Second Coming," is that "the centre does not hold." Moreover, if

in fact we focus on the gospel, we shall soon see that this gospel, rightly understood, directs us how to think about, and what to do about, a substantial array of other issues. These issues, if they are analyzed on their own, as important as they are, remain relatively peripheral; ironically, if the gospel itself is deeply pondered and remains at the center of our thinking and living, it powerfully addresses and wrestles with all these other issues.

There are many biblical texts and themes we could usefully explore to think more clearly about the gospel. But for our purposes we shall focus primarily on **1 Cor 15:1-19**.

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them-- yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed. ¹²But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (NIV)

I shall try to bring things to clarity by focusing on **eight summarizing words** (six of which were first suggested by John Stott), **five clarifying sentences**, and **one evocative summary**.

A. EIGHT SUMMARIZING WORDS:

What Paul is going to talk about in these verses, he says, is “the gospel”: “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you” (v. 1). “By this gospel you were saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you” (v. 2). Indeed, what Paul had passed on to them was “of first importance”—a rhetorically powerful way of telling his readers to pay attention, for what he is going to say about the gospel lies at its very center. These prefatory remarks completed, the first word that appears in Paul’s summary is “Christ”: “I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ died for our sins” and so forth. That brings me to the first of my eight summarizing words.

(1) The gospel is Christological; it is Christ-centered. The gospel is not a bland theism, still less an impersonal pantheism. The gospel is irrevocably Christ-centered. The point is powerfully articulated in every major New Testament book and corpus. In Matthew’s Gospel, for instance, Christ himself is Emmanuel, God with us; he is the long-promised Davidic king who will bring in the kingdom of God. By his death and resurrection he becomes the mediatorial monarch who insists that all authority in heaven and earth is his alone. In John, Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father except through him, for it is the Father’s solemn intent that all should honor the Son even as they honor the Father. In the sermons reported in Acts, there is no name but Jesus

given under heaven by which we must be saved (cf. Acts 4:12). In Romans and Galatians and Ephesians, Jesus is the last Adam, the one to whom the law and the prophets bear witness, the one who by God's own design propitiates God's wrath and reconciles Jews and Gentiles to his heavenly Father and thus also to each other. In the great vision of Revelation 4-5, the Son alone, emerging from the very throne of God Almighty, is simultaneously the lion and the lamb, and he alone is qualified to open the seals of the scroll in the right hand of God, and thus bring about all of God's matchless purposes for judgment and blessing. So also here: the gospel is Christological. John Stott is right: "The gospel is not preached if Christ is not preached."

Yet this Christological stance does not focus exclusively on Christ's person; it embraces with equal fervor his death and resurrection. As a matter of first importance, Paul writes, "Christ died for our sins" (15:3). Earlier in this letter, Paul does not tell his readers, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ"; rather, he says, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Moreover, Paul here ties Jesus' death to his resurrection, as the rest of the chapter makes clear. This is the gospel of Christ crucified and risen again.

In other words, it is not enough to make a splash of Christmas, and downplay Good Friday and Easter. When we insist that as a matter of first importance, the gospel is Christological, we are not thinking of Christ as a cypher, or simply as the God-man who comes along and helps us like a nice insurance agent: "Jesus is a nice God-man, he's a very, very nice God-man, and when you break down, he comes along and fixes you." The gospel is Christological in a more robust sense: Jesus is the promised Messiah who died and rose again.

(2) The gospel is theological. This is a short-hand way of affirming two things. First, as 1 Corinthians 15 repeatedly affirms, God raised Christ Jesus from the dead (e.g. 5:15). More broadly, New Testament documents insist that God sent the Son into the world, and the Son obediently went to the cross because this was his Father's will. It makes no sense to pit the mission of the Son against the sovereign purpose of the Father. If the gospel is centrally Christological, it is no less centrally theological.

Second, the text does not simply say that Christ died and rose again; rather, it asserts that "Christ died for our sins" and rose again. The cross and resurrection are not nakedly historical events; they are historical events with the deepest theological weight.

We can glimpse the power of this claim only if we remind ourselves how sin and death are related to God in Scripture. In recent years it has become popular to sketch the Bible's story-line something like this: Ever since the fall, God has been active to reverse the effects of sin. He takes action to limit sin's damage; he calls out a new nation, the Israelites, to mediate his teaching and his grace to others; he promises that one day he will send the promised Davidic king to overthrow sin and death and all their wretched effects. This is what Jesus does: he conquers death, inaugurates the kingdom of righteousness, and calls his followers to live out that righteousness now in prospect of the consummation still to come.

Much of this description of the Bible's story-line, of course, is true. Yet it is so painfully reductionistic that it introduces a major distortion. It collapses human rebellion, God's wrath, and assorted disasters into one construct, namely, the degradation of human life, while depersonalizing the wrath of God. It thus fails to wrestle with the fact that from the beginning, sin is an offense against God. God himself pronounces the sentence of death (Gen 2-3). This is scarcely surprising, since God is the source of all life, so if his image bearers spit in his face and insist on going their own way and becoming their own gods, they cut themselves off from their Maker, from the One who gives life. What is there, then, but death? Moreover, when we sin in any way, God himself is invariably the most offended party.

That is made clear from David's experience. After he has sinned by seducing Bathsheba and arranging the execution of her husband, David is confronted by the prophet Nathan. In deep contrition, he pens Psalm 51. There he address God and says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (51:4). At one level, of course, that is a load of codswollop. After all, David has certainly sinned against Bathsheba. He has sinned horribly against her husband. He has sinned against the military high command by corrupting it, against his own family, against the baby in Bathsheba's womb, against the nation as a whole, which expects him to act with integrity. In fact, it is difficult to think of anyone against whom David did not sin. Yet here he says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." In the most profound sense, that is exactly right. What makes sin sin, what makes it so vile, what gives it its horrific transcendental vileness, is that it is sin against God. In all our sinning, God is invariably the most offended party. That is why we must have his forgiveness, or we have nothing. The God the Bible portrays as resolved to intervene and save is also the God portrayed as full of wrath because of our sustained idolatry. As much as he intervenes to save us, he stands over against us as Judge, an offended Judge with fearsome jealousy.

Nor is this a matter of Old Testament theology alone. When Jesus announced the imminence of the dawning of the kingdom, like John the Baptist he cried, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15). Repentance is necessary, because the coming of the King promises judgment as well as blessing. The Sermon on the Mount, which encourages Jesus' disciples to turn the other cheek, repeatedly warns them to flee the condemnation to the gehenna of fire. The Sermon warns the hearers not to follow the broad road that leads to destruction, and pictures Jesus pronouncing final judgment with the words, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (7:23). The parables are replete with warnings of final judgment; a significant percentage of them demonstrate the essential divisiveness of the dawning of the kingdom. Images of hell—outer darkness, furnace of fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, undying worms, eternal fire—are too ghastly to contemplate long, but we must not avoid the fact that Jesus himself uses all of them. After Jesus' resurrection, when Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, he aims to convince his hearers that Jesus is the promised Messiah, that his death and resurrection are the fulfillment of Scripture, and that God "has made this Jesus, whom you crucified [he tells them], both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). That is every bit as much threat as promise: the hearers are "cut to the heart" and cry, "What shall we do?" (2:37). That is what elicits Peter's "Repent and believe" (3:38). When Peter preaches to Cornelius and his household (10:23-48), the climax of his moving address is that in fulfillment of Scripture God appointed Jesus "as judge of the living and the dead"—and thus not of Jews only. Those who believe in him receive "forgiveness of sins through his name": transparently, that is what is essential if we are to face the judge and emerge unscathed. When he preaches to the Athenian pagan intellectuals (17:16-34), Paul, as we all know, fills in some of the great truths that constitute the matrix in which alone Jesus makes sense: monotheism, creation, who human beings are, God's aseity and providential sovereignty, the wretchedness and danger of idolatry. Before he is interrupted, however, Paul gets to the place in his argument where he insists that God has set a day "when he will judge the world with justice"—and his appointed judge is Jesus, whose authoritative status is established by his resurrection from the dead. When Felix invites the apostle to speak "about faith in Christ Jesus" (Acts 24:24), Paul, we are told, discourses "on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" (24:15): apparently such themes are an irreducible part of faithful gospel preaching. Small wonder, then, that Felix was terrified (24:25). How often when we preach the gospel are people terrified? The Letter to the Romans, which many rightly take to be, at very least, a core summary of the apostle's understanding of the gospel, finds Paul insisting that judgment takes place "on the day when God will judge everyone's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares" (Rom 2:16). Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds us that Jesus "rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thess 1:10). This Jesus will be "revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed” (2 Thess 1:7-10). We await “a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ”—and what this Savior saves us from (the context of Philippians 3:19-20 shows) is the destiny of destruction. “Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (Eph 2:3), for we gratified “the cravings of our sinful nature . . . following its desires and thoughts” (2:3)—but now we have been saved by grace through faith, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Eph 2:8-10). This grace thus saves us both from sins and from their otherwise inevitable result, the wrath to come. Jesus himself is our peace (Eph 2; Acts 10:36). “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1:18). But God “presented Christ as a propitiation in his blood” (3:25), and now “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (5:1-2).

Time and space fail to reflect on how the sacrifice of Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews is what alone enables us to escape the terror of those who fall into the hands of the living God, who is a consuming fire, or on how the Apocalypse presents the Lamb as the slaughtered sacrifice, even while warning of the danger of falling under the wrath of the Lamb.

This nexus of themes—God, sin, wrath, death, judgment—is what makes the simple words of 1 Corinthians 15:3 so profoundly theological: as a matter of first importance, “Christ died for our sins.” Parallel texts instantly leap to mind: “[Christ] was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom 4:25). “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6). The Lord Jesus Christ “gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4). “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Pet 3:18). Or, as Paul puts it here in 1 Corinthians 15:2, “By this gospel you are saved.” To be saved from our sins is to be saved not only from their chaining power but from their consequences—and the consequences are profoundly bound up with God’s solemn sentence, with God’s holy wrath. Once you see this, you cannot fail to see that whatever else the cross achieves, it must rightly set aside God’s sentence, it must rightly satisfy God’s wrath, or it achieves nothing. The gospel is theological.

(3) The gospel is biblical. “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, . . . he was buried, . . . he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:3-4). What biblical texts Paul has in mind, he does not say. He may have had the kind of thing Jesus himself taught, after his resurrection, when “he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27; cf. vv. 44-46). Perhaps he was thinking of texts such as Psalm 16 and Isaiah 53, used by Peter on the day of Pentecost, or Ps 2, used by Paul himself in Pisidian Antioch, whose interpretation depends on a deeply evocative but quite traceable typology. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians Paul alludes to Christ as “our Passover . . . sacrificed for us” (5:5)—so perhaps he could have replicated the reasoning of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who elegantly traces out some of the ways in which the Old Testament Scriptures, laid out in a salvation-historical grid, announce the obsolescence of the old covenant and the dawning of the new covenant, complete with a better tabernacle, a better priesthood, and a better sacrifice. What is in any case very striking is that the apostle grounds the gospel, the matters of first importance, in the Scriptures—and of course he has what we call the Old Testament in mind—and then in the witness of the apostles—and thus what we call the New Testament. The gospel is biblical.

(4) The gospel is thus apostolic. Of course, Paul cheerfully insists that there were more than five hundred eyewitnesses to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Nevertheless he repeatedly draws attention to the apostles: Jesus “appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve” (15:5); “he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me” (15:8), “the least of the apostles”

(15:9). Listen carefully to the sequence of pronouns in 15:11: “Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed” (15:11). The sequence of pronouns, I, they, we, you, becomes a powerful way of connecting the witness and teaching of the apostles with the faith of all subsequent Christians. The gospel is apostolic.

(5) The gospel is historical. Here four things must be said.

First, 1 Corinthians 15 specifies both Jesus’ burial and his resurrection. The burial testifies to Jesus’ death, since (normally!) we bury only those who have died; the appearances testify to Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ death and his resurrection are tied together in history: the one who was crucified is the one who was resurrected; the body that came out of the tomb, as Thomas wanted to have demonstrated, had the wounds of the body that went into the tomb. This resurrection took place on the third day: it is in datable sequence from the death. The cross and the resurrection are irrefragably tied together. Any approach, theological or evangelistic, that attempts to pit Jesus’ death and Jesus’ resurrection against each other, is not much more than silly. Perhaps one or the other might have to be especially emphasized to combat some particular denial or need, but to sacrifice one on the altar of the other is to step away from the manner in which both the cross and resurrection are historically tied together.

Second, the manner by which we have access to the historical events of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, is exactly the same as that by which we have access to almost any historical event: through the witness and remains of those who were there, by means of the records they left behind. That is why Paul enumerates the witnesses, mentions that many of them are still alive at his time of writing and therefore could still be checked out, and recognizes the importance of their reliability. In God’s mercy, this Bible is, among many other things, a written record, an inscription, of those first witnesses.

Third, we must see that, unlike other religions, the central Christian claims are irreducibly historical. If somehow—I have no idea how—you could prove that Gautama the Buddha never lived, would you destroy the credibility of Buddhism? No, of course not. The plausibility and credibility of Buddhism depends on the internal coherence and attractiveness of Buddhism as a system with all its variations. It depends not a whit on any historical claim. If somehow—I have no idea how—you could prove that the great Hindu god Krishna never existed, would you destroy Hinduism? No, of course not. If the ancient Greeks had thousands of gods, Hindus have millions, and the complex vision of Hinduism in which all reality is enmeshed in one truth with its infinite variations and its karmic system of retribution and cyclic advance and falling away depends in no way on the existence of any one of them. If Krishna were to disappear from the Hindu pantheon, you could always go down the street to a Shiva temple instead. Suppose, then, that you approach your friendly neighborhood mullah and seek to explore how tightly Islam is tied to historical claims. You will discover that history is important in Islam, but not the same way in which it is important in biblically faithful Christianity. You might ask the mullah, “Could Allah, had he chosen to do so, given his final revelation to someone other than Muhammed?” Perhaps the mullah will initially misunderstand your question. He might reply, “We believe that God gave great revelation to his prophet Abraham, and great revelation to his prophet Moses, and great revelation to his prophet Jesus. But we believe Allah gave his greatest and final revelation to Muhammed.” You might reply, “With respect, sir, I understand that that is what Islam teaches; and of course you will understand that I as a Christian do not see things quite that way. But that is not my question. I am not asking if Muslims believe that God gave his greatest and final revelation to Muhammed: of course you believe that. I am asking, rather, a hypothetical question: Could God have given his greatest and final revelation to someone other than Muhammed, had he chosen to do so?” Your thoughtful Mullah will doubtless say, “Of course! Allah, blessed be he, is sovereign. He can do whatever he wishes. The revelation is not Muhammed! Revelation is entirely in

the gift of Allah. Allah could have given it to anyone to whom he chose to give it. But we believe that in fact Allah gave it to Muhammed.”

In other words, although it is important to Muslims to believe and teach that the ultimate revelation of Allah was given, in history, to Muhammed, and Islam’s historical claims regarding Muhammed are part and parcel of its apologetic to justify Muhammed’s crucial place as the final prophet, there is nothing intrinsic to Muhammed himself that is bound up with the theological vision of Islam. Otherwise put, a Muslim must confess that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammed is his prophet, but Muhammed’s historical existence does not, in itself, determine the Muslim’s understanding of God.

But suppose you were to ask a similar question of an informed Christian pastor: “Do you believe that the God of the Bible might have given his final revelation to someone other than Jesus of Nazareth?” The question is not even coherent—for Jesus is the revelation, the revelation that entered history in the incarnation. As John puts it in his first Letter, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared, we have seen it and testify to it” (1 John 1:1-2). This is an historical revelation. Moreover, there are specific historical events in Jesus’ life that are essential to the most elementary grasp of Christianity—and here, pride of place goes to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

A little over two years ago, a reporter put a crucial question to the then Anglican Archbishop of Perth, at the time the Anglican Primate of Australia. The reporter asked, “If we discovered the tomb of Jesus, and could somehow prove that the remains in the tomb were Jesus’ remains, what would that do to your faith?” The Archbishop replied that it wouldn’t do anything to his faith: Jesus Christ has risen in his heart. The apostle Paul understands the issues with much more straightforward clarity: if Christ has not risen, your faith is futile (1 Cor 15:17). In other words, part of the validation of faith is the truthfulness of faith’s object—in this case, Jesus’ resurrection. If Jesus has not risen, they can believe it ‘till the cows come home, but it is still a futile belief that makes them look silly: they “are to be pitied more than all men” (15:17). There is no point getting angry with the former Archbishop of Perth: he and his opinions on this matter are painfully pitiful.

Many in our culture believe that the word “faith” is either a synonym for “religion” (e.g. “there are many faiths” means “there are many religions”), or it refers to a personal, subjective, religious choice. It has nothing to do with truth. But in this passage, Paul insists that if Christ is not risen, then faith that believes Christ is risen is merely futile. Part of the validation of genuine faith is the reliability, the truthfulness, of faith’s object. If you believe something is true when in reality it is not true, your faith is not commendable; rather, it is futile, valueless, worthless, and you yourself are to be pitied. Part of the validation of faith is the truthfulness of faith’s object—and in this case, the object is an historical event, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible never asks us to believe what is not true. By the same token, one of the principal ways the Bible has of increasing and strengthening faith is by articulating and defending the truth.

There is another way of clarifying the relationship between a biblically faithful Christianity and history. Not too long ago, the members of the NT Department here at Trinity were interviewing a possible addition to our Department. The candidate was a fine man with years of fruitful pastoral ministry behind him, and an excellent theological education. A problem came to light, however, when we inquired how he would respond to students raising questions about a variety of perceived historical difficulties in the Gospels. In every case, he thought the way forward was to talk about the theological themes of Matthew, or the biblical theology of Mark, or the literary structure of Luke, and so forth. He simply set aside the historical questions; he ignored them, preferring to talk exclusively in terms of literary and theological themes. In due course we told him that he did not have a ghost of a chance of

joining our Department as long as he held to such an approach. For although it is entirely right to work out the theology of Matthew's Gospel, that must not be at the expense of refusing to talk about the historical person of Jesus Christ. The candidate's procedure gives the impression we are saved by theological ideas about Christ; it is an intellectualist approach, almost a gnostic approach, to salvation. But we are not saved by theological ideas about Christ; we are saved by Christ himself. The Christ who saves us is certainly characterized by the theological realities embraced by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but this Christ is extra-textual; he is the historical God-man to whom the text bears witness.

Fourth, we must face the fact that in contemporary discussion the word "historical" is sometimes invested with a number of slippery assumptions. For some who are heavily invested in philosophical naturalism, the word "historical" can be applied only to those events that have causes and effects entirely located in the ordinary or "natural" or time-based stream of sequence of events. If that is the definition of "historical," then Jesus' resurrection was not historical, for such a definition excludes the miraculous, the spectacular intervention of the power of God. But it is far better to think that "historical" rightly refers to events that take place within the continuum of space and time, regardless of whether God has brought about those events by ordinary causes, or by a supernatural explosion of power. We insist that in this sense, the resurrection is historical: it takes place in history, even if it was caused by God's spectacular power when he raised the man Christ Jesus from the dead, giving him a resurrection body that had genuine continuity with the body that went into the tomb. This resurrection body could be seen, touched, handled; it could eat ordinary food. Nevertheless, it is a body that could suddenly appear in a locked room, a body that Paul finds hard to describe, ultimately calling it a spiritual body or a heavenly body (1 Cor 15:35-44). And that body was raised from the tomb by the spectacular, supernatural, power of God—operating in history.

In short, the gospel is historical.

(6) The gospel is personal. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not merely historical events; the gospel is not merely theological in the sense that it organizes a lot of theological precepts. It sets out the way of individual salvation, of personal salvation. "Now, brothers," Paul writes at the beginning of this chapter, "I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved" (1 Cor 15:1-2). An historical gospel that is not personal and powerful is merely antiquarian; a theological gospel that is not received by faith and found to be transforming is merely abstract. In reality, the gospel is personal.

(7) The gospel is universal. If we step farther into 1 Corinthians 15, we find Paul demonstrating that Christ is the new Adam (vv. 22, 47-50). In this context, Paul does not develop the move from Jew to Gentile, or from the Israelites as a national locus of the people of God to the church as in international community of the elect. Nevertheless, Christ as the new Adam alludes to a comprehensive vision. The new humanity in him draws in people from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. The gospel is universal in this sense. It is not universal in the sense that it transforms and saves everyone without exception, for in reality, those whose existence is connected exclusively to the old Adam are not included. Yet this gospel is gloriously universal in its comprehensive sweep. There is not a trace of racism here. The gospel is universal.

(8) The gospel is eschatological. This could be teased out in many ways, for the gospel is eschatological in more ways than one. For instance, some of the blessings Christians receive today are essentially eschatological blessings, blessings belonging to the end, even if they have been brought back into time and are already ours. Already God declares his blood-bought, Spirit-regenerated people to be justified: the final declarative sentence from the end of the age has already been pronounced on Christ's people, because of what Jesus Christ has done. We are already

justified—and so the gospel is in that sense eschatological. Yet there is another sense in which this gospel is eschatological. In the chapter before us, Paul focuses on the final transformation: “I declare to you, brothers,” he says in vv. 50 and following, “that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ It is not enough to focus narrowly on the blessings Christians enjoy in Christ in this age: the gospel is eschatological.

So what Paul preaches, as a matter of first importance, is that the gospel is Christological, theological, biblical, apostolic, historical, personal, universal, and eschatological.

Now the passage in front of us includes several wonderful truths that further unpack this gospel before our eyes. I can summarize them in . . .

B. FIVE CLARIFYING SENTENCES.

(1) This gospel is normally disseminated in proclamation. This gospel, Paul says, “I preached to you” (1 Cor 15:1), and then adds that it is “the word I preached to you” (15:2). This way of describing the dissemination of the gospel is typical of the New Testament. The gospel that was preached was what the Corinthians believed (15:11). Look up every instance of the word “gospel” and discover how often, how overwhelmingly often, this news of Jesus Christ is made known through proclamation, through preaching. Earlier in this same letter Paul insists that in God’s unfathomable wisdom “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1:21). The content was “what was preached”; the mode of delivery was “what was preached.” There are plenty of texts that talk about the importance of being salt and light, of course, or of doing good to all people, especially those of the household of God, or of seeking the good of the city. Yet when dissemination of the gospel is in view, overwhelmingly the Bible specifies proclamation. The good news must be announced, heralded, explained; God himself visits and revisits human beings through his word. This gospel is normally disseminated in proclamation.

(2) This gospel is fruitfully received in authentic, persevering faith. “[T]his is what we preach,” Paul writes, “and this is what you believed” (1 Cor 15:11). Toward the beginning of the chapter, Paul tells the Corinthians, “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain” (15:2). In other words, their faith in the word Paul preached, in the gospel, must be of the persevering type. Many other passages carry the same emphasis. For instance, Paul tells the Colossians, “[God] has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel” (Col 1:22-23). This gospel is fruitfully received in authentic, persevering faith.

(3) This gospel is properly disclosed in personal self-humiliation. When the gospel is properly understood and received in persevering faith, people properly respond the way the apostle does. Yes, the risen Christ appeared last of all to him (15:8). Yet far from becoming a source of pride, this final resurrection appearance evokes in Paul a sense of his own unworthiness: “For I am the least of the apostles,” he writes, “and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” (15:9-10). How could it be otherwise? Jesus had purchased Paul’s redemption at the cost of his own blood, he had graciously forgiven him of his sins, including the sin of persecuting the church of God, he had confronted the apostle on the Damascus Road and revealed himself to him at the very moment Paul was expanding his efforts to

damage Christ's people! Even if in the wake of his conversion, Paul confesses he has worked harder than the other apostles, he insists that this can only be true because of the grace of God that was with him (15:10). Humility, gratitude, dependence on Christ, contrition—these are the characteristic attitudes of the truly converted, the matrix out of which Christians experience joy and love. When the gospel truly does its work, “proud Christian” is an unthinkable oxymoron. This gospel is properly disclosed in personal self-humiliation.

(4) This gospel is rightly asserted to be the central confession of the whole church. At numerous points in 1 Corinthians Paul reminds his readers that the Corinthian church is not the only church—or, better put, that there are many other churches with common beliefs and practices, such that at some point the independence of the Corinthians, far from being a virtue, is merely evidence that they are out of step. In 4:17, Paul tells them that Timothy will remind the Corinthians of Paul's way of life, “which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” When he is dealing with marriage and divorce, Paul stipulates, “This is the rule I lay down in every church” (7:17). After laying down what believers are to think about headship and relationships between men and women, Paul closes his discussion with the words, “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God” (11:16). However we understand the restriction found in 14:34, Paul introduces it with the words, “As in all the congregations of the saints” (14:33). There is no explicit formula of this sort in 1 Corinthians 15. Nevertheless, Paul repeatedly alludes to what he preaches everywhere, not just in Corinth. Passive expressions like “if it is preached” (15:11) give the impression that this is the common content, not something that was reserved for Corinth—as also Paul's reference to his service in Ephesus for the sake of this same gospel (15:32), and his many earlier references to his common practices in preaching the gospel (esp. chaps. 1-2).

Of course, what “the whole church” or “all the churches” are doing is not necessarily right: just ask Athanasius or Luther. One must test everything by Scripture. Moreover, one must grimly admit that there is a kind of traditionalism that loses its way, that preserves form while sacrificing authenticity and power. In Corinth, however, that does not seem to have been the problem. Corinth speaks to the lust for endless innovation that casually cuts a swath away from the practices and beliefs of other churches, while quietly side-stepping the careful instruction of the apostle. Paul insists that the gospel is rightly asserted to be the central confession of the whole church. Always be suspicious of churches that proudly flaunt how different they are from what has gone before.

(5) The gospel is boldly advancing under the contested reign and inevitable victory of Jesus the king. This side of Jesus' death and resurrection, all of God's sovereignty is mediated exclusively through King Jesus. That is amply taught elsewhere in the New Testament, of course. Matthew concludes with Jesus' claim, “All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:20). Philippians rejoices that “the name that is above every name” has been given to him (Phil 2:9-11). So also—and dramatically—here: Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (15:25). That presupposes the reign is still contested, and still advances. This is of a piece with Jesus' claim, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18). But one day, the final enemy, death itself, will die, and Jesus' mediatorial kingship will end. God will be all in all (15:28).

It is in the light of this gospel—all that the death and resurrection of Jesus have achieved, all that the advancing kingdom of King Jesus is accomplishing, all that we will inherit in resurrection existence on the last day—that Paul writes to these Corinthian believers, and to us, and says, “Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (15:58). The gospel is boldly advancing under the contested reign and inevitable victory of Jesus the king.

It is time to take stock. One of the striking results of this summary of the gospel—eight defining words and five clarifying sentences, all emerging from one New Testament chapter—is how cognitive the gospel is. Here is what is to be understood, believed, obeyed; here is what is promised, taught, explained. All of this must be said, loudly and repeatedly, in a generation that feels slightly embarrassed when it has to deal with the cognitive and the propositional.

Yet something else must also be said. This chapter comes at the end of a book that repeatedly shows how the gospel rightly works out in the massive transformation of attitudes, morals, relationships, and cultural interactions. As everyone knows, Calvin insists that justification is by faith alone, but genuine faith is never alone; we might add that the gospel focuses on a message of what God has done and is doing, and must be cast in cognitive truths to be believed and obeyed, but this gospel never properly remains exclusively cognitive.

C. ONE EVOCATIVE SUMMARY

Thus in the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians, the gospel, the word of the cross, is not only God's wisdom which the world judges to be folly, but it is God's power which the world judges to be weakness. The first four chapters find Paul pained at the divisions in the Corinthian church, different factions associating themselves exclusively with one hero or another—Peter, Apollos, Paul, and, probably the most sanctimonious of the lot, the "I follow Christ" party. What the apostle works out is how this is a betrayal of the gospel, a misunderstanding of the nature of Christian leadership, a tragic and bitter diminution of the exclusive place of Christ, the crucified Christ who is the focus of the gospel. Chapter four shows in a spectacular way that there is no place for triumphalism in the church of the blood-bought, in the church led by apostles who eat everyone's dirt at the end of the procession. In chapters 5 and 6, the gospel of Christ the Passover lamb prescribes that believers must, in line with Passover, get rid of all "yeast"—and this works out in terms of church discipline where there is grievous sexual sin. Where the gospel triumphs, relationships are transformed, with the result that lawsuits bringing brothers into conflict with each other before pagan courts becomes almost unthinkable, and casual sex is recognized as a massive denial of Christ's lordship. In chap. 7, complex questions about divorce and remarriage are worked out in the context of the priorities of the gospel and the transformed vision brought about by the dawning of the eschatological age and the anticipation of the end. Chapters 8-10 wrestle with how believers must interact with the broader pagan culture over the matter of food offered to idols, with the central example of the apostle Paul himself demonstrating in dramatic fashion what cheerful and voluntary self-restraint for the sake of the advance of the gospel actually looks like—and even how such a stance is tied to a proper understanding of the relationship between the new covenant and the old. Relationships between men and women are tied, in 1 Cor 11:2-16, not only to relationships in the Godhead, but also to what it means to live "in the Lord"—and thus in the gospel. The blistering condemnation of Corinthian practices at the Lord's Supper ("In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good," 11:17) is tied not only to the barbarous insensitivity some Christians were displaying toward other Christians, but also to the massive failure to take the cross seriously and use this Christ-given rite as an occasion for self-examination and repentance. The ways in which the charismata or pneumatika of 1 Cor 12-14 are to be exercised is finally predicated on the fact that all believers confess that Jesus is Lord, all believers have been baptized in one Spirit into one body, and above all that the most excellent "way" mandated of all believers without exception is the way of love. Love is the most important member of the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love—this triplet of virtues that are deeply intrinsic to the working out of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A Christianity where believers are not patient and kind, a Christianity where believers characteristically envy, are proud and boastful, rude, easily angered, and keep a record of wrongs, is no Christianity at all. What does this say, in concrete terms, about the communion of saints, the urgent need to create a Christian community that is profoundly counter-cultural? What will this say about inter-generational

relationships? About race? About how we treat one another in the local church? About how we think of brothers and sisters in highly diverse corners of our heavenly Father's world?

Just as Paul found it necessary to hammer away at the outworking of the gospel in every domain of the lives of the Corinthians, so we must do the same today. Recently at Trinity, a very wise worker on an Ivy League campus told us what, in her experience drives most of the young women whom she disciples every week. She mentioned three things. First, from parents, never get less than an A. Of course, this is an Ivy League campus! Still, even on an Ivy League campus, grades are distributed on a bell curve, so this expectation introduces competition among the students. Second, partly from parents, partly from the ambient culture, be yourself, enjoy yourself, live a rich and full life, and include in this some altruism such as helping victims of Katrina. Third, from peers, from Madison avenue, from the media, be hot—and this, too, is competitive, and affects dress, relationships, what you look for in the opposite sex, what you want them to look for in you. These demands drum away incessantly. There is no margin, no room for letting up; there is only room for failure. The result is that about 80% of women during their undergraduate years will suffer eating disorders; close to the same percentage will at some point be clinically depressed. The world keeps telling them that they can do anything, and soon this is transmuted into the demand that they must do everything, or be a failure both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Even when they become Christians, it is not long before they feel the pressure to become the best Christians, as measured by attendance at Bible studies, leading prayer meetings, faithfully recording their daily devotions.

But where is the human flourishing that springs from the gospel of grace, God's image-bearers happily justified before God on the ground of what Christ has done, powerfully regenerated so that they respond in faith, obedience, joy, and gratitude? The conventions and expectations of the world are pervasive and enslaving. The gospel must be worked out for these women, and demonstrated in the life of the church, so that it issues in liberation from the wretched chains of idolatry too subtle to be named and too intoxicating to escape, apart from the powerful word of the cross.

Of course, I have picked on one small demographic. It does not take much to think through how the gospel must also transform the business practices and priorities of Christians in commerce, the priorities of young men steeped in indecisive but relentless narcissism, the lonely anguish and often the guilty pleasures of single folk who pursue pleasure but who cannot find happiness, the tired despair of those living on the margins, and much more. And this must be done, not by attempting to abstract social principles from the gospel, still less by endless focus on the periphery in a vain effort to sound prophetic, but precisely by preaching and teaching and living out in our churches the glorious gospel of our blessed Redeemer.

“Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (15:58).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-19)

by D. A. Carson • <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/articles.php>