



Firwood Church

These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Andy Evans on the morning of the 5 April 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit www.firwoodchurch.com or subscribe through iTunes.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING – WEEK 1, GOSPEL FOUNDATION

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

¹Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ²and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy 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 toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

1. INTRODUCTION – THE GOSPEL FOUNDATION

a. A Call for Believers to Remember

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 is perhaps the most systematic Gospel presentation in the whole of Scripture and is, therefore, of great benefit to non-believers. It is important to note, however, that this passage is addressed, not to unbelievers, but to brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul will begin with a reminder,

1 Corinthians 15:1a

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you...

It would seem, therefore, that there is a need for believers to be reminded of the Gospel we received on coming to faith. Paul has a greater application in mind in calling believers to remembrance. We must first, however, consider the shape and structure of his gospel summary.

b. The Need for Urgent Application

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 presents the would-be preacher with an unusual prospect that appears to defy traditional sermon structures. The revealed wisdom is that sermons should be structured thus: exposition of the text, explanation of the text and then application of the text. When we read this passage of Scripture, however, we find that Paul peculiarly chooses to begin this section with the application up front.

A number of years ago I was living with some student friends in rented accommodation. One day I was working from home as the landlord was undertaking some electrical repairs. There was a switch not too far from the front door that had been causing minor electrical shocks and the landlord had disconnected this until he had opportunity to repair the faulty wiring. This was his opportunity.

I remember him shouting me part way through the job and telling me that he was nipping home to get some tools, he warned me not to touch the switch as it was now live and dangerous. Shortly after this one of my housemates arrived home unexpectedly early. I remember shouting like some lunatic from upstairs, 'Don't touch the switch'.

You see what I did there? I led straight off with the application.

A couple of months ago when my now 19 month old son, Gideon Thomas, was just beginning to toddle, I arrived home from work as Caroline, my wife, was preparing dinner. The oven was on and I stupidly left the gate between the living room and the kitchen open. As Caroline was asking me about my day, I caught movement in my peripheral vision and looked just in time to see Gideon toddling towards the oven, water steaming away in pans on the hob.

Can you guess what I did? Yes, I moved straight to the application: 'Caroline, watch Gideon!'

Now, I could have handled both of these incidents somewhat differently. I could have begun with explanation, 'You will never guess what happened today', or even outline the implications behind my intended application, 'Do you know what, electricity can be very dangerous, deadly even'. The problem with this is that the situation poses immediate danger. Immediate action and application is required in order to prevent serious injury or even death.

c. The Reason for the Need for Urgent Application

i. In Corinth

The situation in Corinth *circa* AD 50 is similarly dangerous.

Picture the scene, Paul arrives in Corinth in either 48 or 49 AD and spends 18 months preaching the Gospel, discipling new converts and establishing the church. He then embarks on a third missionary journey and arrives in Ephesus around 53 AD. He writes this letter from Ephesus between 53 and 55 AD.

The question we must ask is what happened in the intervening period that should require an intervention as stark and even harsh as this letter to the Corinthian church.

In reading 1 Corinthians, a number of themes reoccur. Paul addresses their apparent confidence in their own wisdom and knowledge and in their social superiority and writes,

1 Corinthians 1:18

²⁶For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

It seems that in Paul's absence an arrogant spirit has infiltrated the church and that this has manifested itself in rival camps ('I follow Paul or I follow Apollos or I follow Cephas', 1 Corinthians 3), hyper-spirituality fed by an over-realised eschatology and outright immorality.

ii. Today

Fundamentally, things do not change: Evangelicalism in 2009 feels very much like Corinth in the middle of the First Century. Similarly, the church is under attack from high profile distortions of the gospel resulting in the health, wealth and prosperity gospel, the self-help gospel and charismania.

All of this results from an over-realised eschatology and an unhealthy fixation on the now. I want prosperity, health, comfort, solutions, influence and authority NOW.

d. Application Explained: Received/Stand/Hold Fast

1 Corinthians 15:1-3

¹Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ²and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

The object is the gospel, Paul will return to this and define the fundamental of the gospel in a moment, but he leads off by instructing the Corinthian believers in terms of the application of this lesson.

The application of the gospel as set forth in these two verses forcefully resist any gospel-distorting emphasis on the now.

i. The Gospel must be received

Paul begins with the truth that the gospel must be received. If you are a believer in Christ you will know this to be the case as you will have experienced this receiving of the gospel in your own life. Someone somewhere proclaims the gospel and, as you hear, it becomes more than an idea that is out there, it becomes a reality which takes root in your soul. This is more than believing it is receiving. We do not simply believe that this is propositionally true, but we accept it as *the* truth.

ii. The Gospel is the thing in which we stand

To receive the Gospel inevitably leads to a life that is then grounded upon the Gospel. It is not possible to genuinely receive the Gospel and then continue to live life as before. The Gospel changes everything. We receive Christ as Redeemer to live a life of freedom, hating and fleeing from sin. We receive Christ as merciful Saviour and are called to show forth the mercy and love of Christ. We receive Christ as the light and are called to walk in the light as he is in the light (1 John 1:7).

Everything changes.

We received the Gospel and we stand in the Gospel. It is the thing that keeps us secure, that enables us to live the life Christ calls us to live.

The Gospel is more than just a prayer, more than just a momentary – even emotional – response. It is a decision that results in a life change and the evidence of this life change is seen in fruit in keeping with righteousness. And so, this standing in the Gospel is evidenced in a love of Christ, a love of Scripture, a love of our brothers and sisters in Christ and the fruit of the Spirit made manifest in increasing measure.

iii. The Gospel must be held fast

The outworking of the Gospel is salvation for those who believe. In this sense, the Gospel is conditional, believers are exhorted to ‘hold fast to the word I preached to you’. All Christians are called to hold faithfully to the Gospel, indeed more than this, Jude urges us to ‘to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3).

Those who stand firm to the end will be saved.

2. THE GOSPEL DEFINED

1 Corinthians 15:3-7

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

a. The Origin of the Gospel

The Gospel did not originate with Paul. Paul, like us, received the Gospel. Paul, unlike us, received the Gospel from the risen and exalted Christ.

This is important in that it elevates Paul to the same position as the Old Testament Prophets; he speaks on behalf of God. Indeed, in the previous chapter, Paul defines true spirituality as recognition of his apostolic authority,

1 Corinthians 14:37

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

This is an important moment in understanding the authority of Scripture. Paul is able to say, in effect, 'Thus says the Lord', because he is a messenger passing on what he has himself received.

Paul elsewhere will describe his ministry in the following terms, 'we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us' (1 Corinthians 5:20).

b. Of First Importance

Paul sets forth the fundamentals of the Gospel as the most important thing. If these things truly are 'of first importance' they should be central preoccupation for the church and believers everywhere. We can disagree on minor and peripheral issues, but if something is of 'first importance' there can be no disagreement or disunity.

Paul sets forth the following as of 'first importance':

i. Christ – that God became flesh

Theologians believe that Paul reworked this entire section from a Christian creed. Whether Paul coined the creed himself or borrowed a formula already in usage does not matter. It is clear, however, that Paul returns to this construction time and time again. We should, therefore, pay close attention to any variations. Elsewhere Paul writes that 'we believe that Jesus died and rose again' (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Here, however, Paul uses the Messianic title, 'Christ',

1 Corinthians 15:3

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures

We see then that the first Gospel foundation is that a historical person with a prophetic significance came into history. The Gospel depends, therefore, on the truth that Jesus lived, but more than this, that this same Jesus is the God-Man, the Word made flesh.

ii. Christ died

The second Gospel foundation is that this God-Man died a genuine, irrefutable death. This is the significance of the following assurance that Christ 'was buried' (v. 4). Theories that question the literal death of Christ are simply incompatible with the Gospel. Paul reminds us that Christ died and was buried.

iii. A purposeful death – Christ died for our sins

But more than this, the purpose of Christ's death is important. Christ was unjustly slaughtered by wicked men. This does not mean that his death was purposeless, however, Paul assures us that Christ died for a reason: he died for sin. Again, the construction of this passage is significant and it is likely that Paul is at least alluding to (and possibly quoting from) Isaiah 53 in the Septuagint,

Isaiah 53:5-6

⁴ Surely *he has borne our griefs*
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
⁵ But *he was wounded for our transgressions;*
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and *the LORD has laid on him*
the iniquity of us all.

Note also the personal application: Christ did not simply die for sin, he died for our sin – for the sin of those who receive, stand and hold fast to the Gospel.

iv. A planned death – according to the Scriptures

The cross and resurrection were not an accident. It was not a weak moment in which God became distracted and things span out of control. The cross and resurrection *were* the plan. This is why Paul emphasises that the death and resurrection of the Son of God were in complete accordance with Scripture. Elsewhere Peter preaches that Jesus was ‘delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God’ (Acts 2:23).

When Christians look to the cross they see the commencement of God’s plan for salvation. In the empty tomb Christians see the consummation of God’s plan for salvation.

v. Christ was raised

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

As we move through 1 Corinthians 15 over the next three weeks, it will become abundantly clear that the resurrection is fundamental to the very Gospel. Paul will say that, without the resurrection our faith is futile (v. 17).

For this reason Paul then goes to some length to cement the historicity of the resurrection.

vi. Christ appeared

Paul then presents us with a list of some of those who Christ appeared to:

- Cephas (v. 5a);
- ‘then to the twelve’ (v. 5b);
- ‘Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time...’ (v. 6);

- ‘Then he appeared to James...’ (v. 7a);
- ‘...then to all the apostles’ (7b);
- and then ‘Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me [Paul]’.

Why is this list of witnesses included in Paul summation of the Gospel fundamentals? Firstly we must understand that what is being described is not simply a visual appearance. The Gospel accounts are clear on this matter. Jesus ate while he was with the disciples, Thomas places his hands inside the wounds of the resurrected Christ. Consider the physicality of John’s description of this encountering of the resurrected Jesus,

1 John 1:1

¹That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life

The resurrected Jesus was not an apparition and he was not a ghost. These people witnessed, interacted with and touch a bodily resurrected Jesus. Paul will, in the remainder of the chapter, expand upon the importance of a bodily resurrection, but for now we must recognise that it simply will not do to say that the resurrection was a ‘spiritual’ event only. Paul is clear. Scripture is clear. Jesus was physically raised from dead.

What is more, Paul insists that this truth, along with the cross, is of ‘first importance’.

3. THE GOSPEL EFFECTS

Paul then addresses his part and position in the unfolding of the Gospel and arrives at four curious conclusions,

1 Corinthians 15:8-11

⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy 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 toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

a. Paul embraces opposition

When Paul writes, ‘Last of all, as *to one untimely born*, he appeared also to me.’, he uses a most curious expression not found anywhere else in Scripture. The word here translated ‘untimely born’, *ektroma*, is preceded by the definite article and literally means ‘the abortion’ or ‘the miscarriage’. This phrase causes some difficulty for translators as, strictly speaking, it does not make sense and it is difficult to understand what Paul means. We know that Paul’s conversion and commission was late and unique and one can understand why Paul imagined that this made him somehow a lesser apostle, but this sense is not quite captured in the phrase ‘miscarriage’ or ‘abortion’.

It is helpful to understand that some theologians believe this term was used by Paul’s opponents to denigrate his authority and ministry. If this is the case, and I believe the arguments are persuasive, then Paul’s response is as shocking as the slander of the opposition. Paul is, in

effect, embracing the most shocking of terms and, in effect, saying, 'Yes, I am the abortion, I am as one abnormally born, in fact, I am the least of all the apostles'.

But to what end does Paul make such a shocking admission, the answer is found in verse 10, 'But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.'

The effect of the Gospel is this, Paul understands that in his weakness Christ is made most glorious and in his ignominy Christ is seen as most gracious,

2 Corinthians 12:9b-10

...Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In this there is a harsh lesson for believers faced with opposition. It may be that you have been faced with cruel and unjust criticism and slander. It may be that in such moments the urge to strike back is almost irresistible. It may be that you respond differently and each blow crushes your spirit. It seems that the secret to resisting such attacks is to understand the dynamic behind our instinctive response to such circumstances.

The truth is we want to be respected, highly regarded and loved. The truth is that we want to be recognised for our achievements. If our priority were as Paul's priority, the glory of Christ, then we would see in such insults an opportunity to make ourselves small and Christ great.

b. Paul celebrates grace

This, then, changes the way we understand the following statement, 'But by the grace of God I am what I am' (v. 10). Paul's point is this: because he was a persecutor of the church, there is little danger that he will become tempted to believe that his apostolic calling is a result of his own righteousness. On the contrary, Paul understands that his calling, his ministry and the effectiveness of his ministry is a result of the sheer grace of God at work in his life.

This is why it is crucially important that believers see themselves as they truly are: once a rebellious sinner rescued by sheer grace. This is the natural conclusion of the heart that receives the Gospel-truth that 'Christ died for our sins'. Not just Paul's sins, not just the sins of the criminals and hardcore thugs. Christ died for my sins and through his sheer grace, I am what I am.

c. Paul is motivated by grace

1 Corinthians 15:10

¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Note Paul's response to the recognition of grace at work in his life: the cross drives him to work hard. Now this is an important point which is out of kilter with the popular conception in some areas of Evangelicalism.

There is an old maximum that was popular in churches in the 1980s that read, quite simply, 'Let go, let God'. Now, I am not saying that there is no truth whatsoever in this, but I have seen it understood and applied in a way which is altogether unbiblical.

I have heard Christians counsel other believers to sit back and not feel pressured to take part in ministry, even to the extent where I have heard it said that Christians need not attend bible studies or church services.

Now this is utterly at odds with Paul's experience of grace and runs contrary to Scripture.

For Paul, grace was not some abstract, airy-fairy, wish-washy feeling but a dynamic, energetic force motivating him to a life of sacrificial Christ-exalting service; he worked harder than any of the other Apostles understanding that it was, in fact, the grace of God motivating and enabling him.

Consider the following,

2 Corinthians 5:14-15

¹⁴For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Philippians 2:12-13

¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Receiving, standing and holding fast to the Gospel is evidenced in a life submitted to Christ. This act of submission is hard work, we sweat, we toil and we bleed in the shadow of the cross, knowing that anything we might achieve for Christ's sake is a result of his controlling/compelling love and God at work in us both willing and working his good pleasure.

The truth is that believers to not feel pressured to work hard for the Gospel, rather we feel compelled to work hard for the Gospel. Christians should, however, encourage and stir one another up all the more as we see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

d. Paul rightly understands his position

And so Paul works hard understanding that it is, in fact, Christ working in and through him. Christ is, therefore, the recipient of all the praise and all the glory. But more than this, Paul is led to a natural conclusion,

1 Corinthians 15:11

Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Paul understands that through him, in spite of him and without him the Gospel will advance. Christ is the Risen and Exalt King who reigns and Christ is the Advancing Conqueror. Paul recognises that Christ is the object, the means and the end of the Gospel and wherever the Gospel goes forth, King Jesus is at work.