BUILT DIFFERENT

LESSON SIXTEEN

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1–6

Thomas Schreiner, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, expounds on the gospel of first importance:

1. Perhaps the topic of the resurrection is inserted as the last major discussion in the letter so that the gospel receives the emphasis both at the beginning (1:18–2:5) and at the end of the letter, since it is imperative that the Corinthians do not forget the gospel. The word *gospel* (*euangelion* and the verb *euangelizomai* translated as *preached*; see also Gal. 1:11) reaches back to the promise of return from exile in the Old Testament (Isa. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1). In Isaiah 40–66 the return from exile is linked with the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel and the coming of the new creation (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). Paul sees this gospel—the fulfilment of God's saving promises—as realized in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The forgiveness of sins accomplished at the cross represents the fulfilment of God's eschatological promises and of the new exodus prophesied in Isaiah (11:11–15; 40:3–11; 42:16; 43:2, 5–7, 16–19; 48:20–21; 49:6–11; 51:10) since Israel was in exile because of its sin. When Paul proclaimed the gospel, the Corinthians received and welcomed it (cf. Gal. 1:9; Col. 2:6; 1 Thess. 2:13), entering into a saving relationship with God. The Corinthians also stand in the gospel, which accords with the claim that believers stand in grace (Rom. 5:2) and stand in faith (Rom. 11:20; 2 Cor. 1:24). Believers begin by means of the gospel and continue to stand in the gospel.

2. Believers *are saved* by the gospel—that is, they are rescued from the wrath of God which will be poured out on the last day (cf. Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). Final salvation, however, will not come without perseverance. Believers must *hold firmly* (*katechete*) to the good news they received, and this verb is used elsewhere to designate perseverance (see Luke 8:15; Heb. 3:6, 14; 10:23). If the believers do not remain in the faith, then their initial faith was *in vain*. We are reminded of the parable of the soils, where it is said that the seed falling on rocky ground represents those who 'believe for a while, but in the time of testing … fall away' (Luke 8:13). The demand to persevere is not unusual in Paul, for he often summons his readers to continue in faith until the end (cf. Rom. 11:22; Gal. 3:4; Col. 1:23; 1 Thess. 3:1–5; 2 Thess. 2:15).

3. The gospel the Corinthians received is explicated. Paul *passed on* (*paradidomi*) the tradition of the gospel he also *received* (*paralambano*). In one sense, the gospel Paul proclaimed was independently given to him (Gal. 1:11–17), but Paul does not deny that he received the fundamental tenets of the gospel from others. The gospel handed down is of *first importance*, representing the fundamentals of the Christian faith—the baseline and touchstone for all that is taught. Paul proceeds to focus on the death and resurrection of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. The phrase *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures* may represent a confessional statement cited by Paul. The foundation of the gospel is that Christ died to secure the forgiveness of sins for believers. As Galatians 1:4 says, Christ 'gave himself for our sins'. Paul almost certainly means that *Christ died in the place of sinners* and took their sins upon himself in his death, and he expresses this truth in different ways (see Rom. 3:24–26). We read in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us'. Or, as Galatians 3:13 says, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.' Other ways of expressing the same truth are that believers 'have now been justified by his blood' (Rom. 5:9); 'Christ died for the ungodly' (Rom. 5:6); 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8); and 'He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification' (Rom. 4:25).

The reading here is supported by the reference to the Scriptures. Paul almost certainly has Isaiah 53 in mind:

> But he was pierced for our transgressions,
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
> and by his wounds we are healed.
> (Isa. 53:5)

Perhaps Isaiah 53:12 is also specifically in mind:

> he poured out his life unto death,
> and was numbered with the transgressors.
> For he bore the sin of many,
> and made intercession for the transgressors.

The death of Christ for sins was planned by God beforehand, and Paul believes those who read the Old Testament Scriptures rightly will see this.

4. In saying that Christ's death was found in the Scriptures, Paul is probably not including the statement that *he was buried*. Instead, Christ's burial verified that he had truly died. The second element of the gospel, then, is that the Christ *was raised on the third day*. Jesus often predicted his death and resurrection during his ministry (Matt. 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:18–20 par.). The resurrection is also traced to the Old Testament Scriptures and texts such as Psalm 16:9–11 (cf. Acts 2:24–28). The sudden change in Psalm 22 from suffering to victory was also probably read as an indication of resurrection (Ps. 22:22). So, too, in Isaiah 53 the suffering servant 'will see his offspring and prolong his days' (Isa. 53:10), and 'After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied' (53:11). Similarly, God promises to give the servant 'a portion among the great' (53:12). Some maintain that the reference *to the third day* is not part of the scriptural prophecy. On the other hand, New Testament writers may have seen a pattern in God delivering or manifesting himself to his people on the third day (cf. Gen. 22:4; Exod. 19:11, 15, 16; Josh. 1:11; Judg. 20:30; Hos. 6:2; Jon. 1:17). There is a recognition that forgiveness comes through both the death *and* the resurrection of Christ (cf. Rom. 4:25; 5:9–10; 1 Tim. 3:16).

5. Just as the burial verified Christ's death, so too the appearances demonstrated that he was risen from the dead. The appearances are emphasized since the Corinthians were particularly doubting the resurrection of believers; thus Paul wants to secure in their minds the factual truth of Christ's resurrection and the evidence supporting such. The resurrection appearances to so many have a cumulative effect; so many different people at so many different times were not deceived. Even though the Gospels begin with the appearances to the women, Paul skips these—perhaps because he wants to appeal to witnesses accepted by contemporary Roman society. He begins with the appearance to *Cephas*, and this individual appearance is also noted in Luke (24:34). It seems that the order is chronological with the repeated use of temporal words: *then* (v. 5); 'After that' (v. 6); 'Then' and 'then' (v. 7); and 'last of all' (v. 8). The appearance to *the Twelve* is difficult to nail down. Perhaps the reference to the Twelve is another way of talking about the apostolic group and should not be pressed. If so, the appearance to the disciples recorded in John 20:19–23 could be in view. But Thomas was not with them (though perhaps Matthias was!); thus the next appearance could be intended (John 20:24–29), or perhaps another appearance that is not recorded in the Gospels is in mind. The number twelve could be used to refer to the apostles without there needing to be twelve men literally present since Judas was no longer part of the group.

6. The next appearance is quite remarkable, for Jesus *appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time*. Perhaps the account for an appearance to so many is found in Matthew 28:16–20. What is striking, in any case, is the high number of people who saw Jesus appear to them, and they all saw him *at the same time*. It is highly doubtful that over 500 people all had a hallucination simultaneously, and the reference to the same time indicates that Paul was not referring to individual private experiences. Since many of the 500-plus people who saw the risen Christ were still alive, they could attest to the credibility of the event. We notice, as was discussed in 11:30, that believers who have died are said to *have fallen asleep*, which indicates that since they had died their day of resurrection was coming.

7. Jesus Christ also appeared to *James*, and the James in view here is the son of Mary and Joseph (Matt. 13:55). In the history of the church some have maintained that James and his brothers and sisters were the children of Joseph from a previous marriage or that they were Jesus' cousins. It is

most likely they were the actual children of Joseph and Mary (cf. Matt. 1:25). James was an unbeliever during Jesus' ministry (cf. Mark 3:31–35; John 7:2–4). Presumably Jesus' appearance to James brought him to faith. James also seems to be counted among the apostles (Gal. 1:19), and he functioned as the leader in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13–21; 21:18–25). He was the probable author of the epistle of James, and was stoned to death in ad 62 (Josephus, *Ant*. 20.199–200). James is mentioned because he was, like Peter, one of the most respected leaders in the early Christian church. The only individuals named in the list are Peter, James and Paul. Certainly Paul is not trying to be comprehensive, especially since he leaves out John. Paul follows this up by mentioning an appearance *to all the apostles*. If the reference to the Twelve is conventional in verse 5, then perhaps *all the apostles* refers to the incident when Thomas was present (John 20:26–29). Another possibility is the account in Luke 24:36–53, or perhaps the reference is to an appearance not recorded in the Gospels. The apostles may be a wider circle than the Twelve; thus it is impossible to decipher when the appearance occurred. Whatever the details, Paul furnishes further evidence for the historical resurrection of Jesus.[1]

1 CORINTHIANS 15:8–11

Roy Ciampia, In the *Pillar New Testament Commentary*, shows how Paul received the same gospel that he is preaching to the Corinthians:

15:8 Paul places himself at the end of the list of Christ's appearances to apostles. Although neither Paul nor any other New Testament author ever suggested that Paul took Judas's place or became one of the Twelve, he clearly saw himself as an apostle as fully authorized as any other and of strategic importance similar to that of Peter himself (cf. Gal. 2:7–9). He is the only person listed who was not a believer at the moment of Christ's appearance. The list starts and ends with the two people who serve as God's apostolic "point men" for the ministry to Jews and Gentiles respectively (Cephas/Peter and Paul). That it ends with Paul, to whom Christ appeared *last of all*, reminds the readers that the author of this letter, the founder of their church, is one of an extremely select group of people who were privileged to see the resurrected Lord, an experience that no one in their church could claim for themselves. "The Corinthians had had every kind of spiritual experience imaginable, as the previous chapters have made clear; but they had not seen the risen Jesus, nor did either they or Paul expect that they would do so."

Paul says that Christ appeared to him *as to one abnormally born*. The word translated *abnormally born* usually refers to an abortion or miscarriage, although BDAG gives its meaning as "a birth that violates the normal period of gestation (whether induced as abortion, or natural premature birth or miscarriage …, or birth beyond term)" and proposes a gloss here of "untimely birth." Here the idea of a "birth beyond term" seems to be appropriate since the appearance to Paul was later than that of others (*last of all*) and came only after a period of opposition on Paul's part. It may conjure up the image of Paul as a grotesque infant whose birth experience was far from what might normally be expected. The "for" with which the next verse begins suggests that it provides the explanation for Paul's unusual simile here.

15:9 Paul explains what he had in mind in referring to himself in the previous verse as "one abnormally born:" *For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.* In the very act of demonstrating his humility (*least of the apostles*) Paul simultaneously refers to his place of authority over the readers—after all, like the others listed, he is also an apostle, even if he does not feel deserving. It is not a question of whether he—or anyone else—thinks that he is deserving, but of what God has graciously chosen to do. Like the new birth (cf. John 1:13), the office of apostle (and Paul's "untimely birth") is not based on a human decision or human will, but is something given only by God himself. Paul clearly saw that the very thing that served as Paul's *bona fides* as a zealous, committed Jew (cf. Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:4–7) made him the least qualified to be an apostle. Of all the people in his list of those who had seen the resurrected Lord, he is the only one that we know for certain was not a believer at the moment of Christ's

[1] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 302–306.

appearance. He was not merely an unbeliever, but a persecutor of the church. As the following verse makes clear, the fact that Paul does not deserve to be an apostle serves to highlight one of his constant themes: God's surprising and unreasonable grace, in this case that remarkable grace shown particularly to him in his apostolic calling.

15:10 How could one who persecuted the church end up being so critical for the church's prosecution of its mission? The answer is obvious to Paul: the grace of God. *But 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.* Paul is an apostle, and the apostle to the Gentiles in particular. It was not in cooperation with the grace of God, but *by the grace of God* that Paul is what he is (i.e., an apostle). Elsewhere Paul speaks at length on his calling to apostleship and gifting as a special manifestation of God's grace in his life (cf. Gal. 1:15–16; 2:7–9; Eph. 3:2, 7–9; Rom. 1:5; 12:3, 6; 15:15–19; 1 Cor. 3:10). The word translated *without effect* (others, "in vain") appears four times in this chapter (here, twice in v. 14, and one last time in v. 58) and nowhere else in this letter. Here it has to do with something "being without purpose or result" (BDAG). Some translations, like the TNIV, translate it differently in each case, masking Paul's use of the word as a motif in this chapter. Verses 14 and 58 make it clear that in Paul's view everything turns out to be in vain if there is no resurrection. Paul's preaching, the Corinthians' faith, and all labor carried out in obedience to God are for naught if there is no resurrection of the dead. God's grace, of course, should not be expected to be to no purpose or result and was certainly not to no purpose or effect in Paul's life and ministry.

Paul's humble assertion in v. 9 that he was the least of the apostles finds a counterbalancing statement here in Paul's declaration that he *worked harder than all of them*. By *them* Paul means all the apostles listed in vv. 5–7, and he makes it clearer that that list was especially focused on apostolic witnesses to the resurrection. Luke 7:41–47 indicates that the greater the sense of forgiveness received, the greater the love and commitment of the forgiven toward the Lord who has forgiven them. Paul's sense of infinite debt to the God who had showed him such grace fueled a profound passion to spread the fame and glory of that gracious and forgiving God. No sooner has Paul strongly affirmed how hard he worked, however, than he corrected himself and pointed out that it was not to him that his untiring work should be attributed but to the grace of God. And Paul does not describe his hard work as a matter of cooperating with God's grace but entirely as an effect of God's grace. What was on display was not a manifestation of Paul's capabilities or efforts *but* of *the grace of God* that was with him.

15:11 Having spent a moment discussing God' grace in his own life and calling, Paul returns to his main point, the fact that early Christian leaders consistently placed the (cross and) resurrection at the heart of their gospel proclamation; thus it was at the heart of the message that led to the conversion of the Corinthians. *Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.* Paul brings together two different but related issues here. First, he has referred to the other apostles as witnesses to Christ's resurrection as a way of strongly confirming the historical reality of that event. He takes the opportunity here to point out that the gospel message he preached to the Corinthians was no different from that preached by all the other apostles he mentioned. They were witnesses to the resurrection event that was central to the gospel tradition passed on to and through Paul, and it played the same role in their proclamation that it did in his own. In saying *this is what we preach* Paul is making the point that all of the apostolic witnesses are on the same page and that the gospel message received and believed by the Corinthians would have had the same basic content regardless of which apostle had first preached it to them. To reject the message of the resurrection of the dead is not to reject some idiosyncratic pet theme of Paul's but to reject a core plank in the gospel message on which their salvation stood. The very fact that they are now members of the church in Corinth means that they had come to believe the gospel and that the resurrection was an essential part of that message. To walk away from that would be to walk away from the gospel itself. In the following passage Paul will clarify the consequences of a denial of the resurrection since some of the Corinthians have failed to perceive the magnitude of their theological and spiritual error."[2]

[2] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 750–753.

COMMENTARY NOTES

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary
Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (NICNT)
Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC)
Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, IVP New Testament Commentary
David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today
William Baker, *1 Corinthians*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Paul Ellingwroth and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on 1 Corinthians*, UBSH