

The Corinthian's response to the gospel (15:1b-2)

In the second part of verse 1 through verse 2, Paul chronicles the response and status of the Corinthians believers through a series of relative clauses, the first of which was addressed above.¹ These four clauses revolve around four verbs; “I preached,” “you received,” “you stand,” and “you are saved.”² He writes in v. 1b that regarding the gospel which he preached, “you also received.” The verb “received” is παραλαμβάνω (*paralambanō*), a verb sometimes used in the New Testament synonymously with the verb πιστεύω (*pisteuō*) as in John 1:11-12 and in 1 Thessalonians 2:13. This is the case here in 15:1 given that Paul’s sums up the fact that they “received” his gospel and then equates this response in verse 2 by questioning if perhaps they had “believed” in vain. The Corinthians did “receive” or “believe” the gospel when Paul preached to them. We see evidence of this in the book of Acts when Paul arrived at Corinth and stayed a year and a half (Acts 18:1-17) as well as within the epistle itself (2:1-5).

Paul does not address here how the Corinthians were able to believe the gospel but simply states that they had. There are some clues in the New Testament text however that shed light on their enablement to believe. First, there is a spiritual deadness in men that prevents them from ever moving toward God on their own initiative. When he opened the epistle Paul declared to them that they were saints by calling (1:1). God had called them to salvation. Paul also wrote that man in and of himself views the message of Christ’s work on the cross as foolishness while at the same time man is oblivious to the fact he is perishing (1:18). Man is therefore foolish (1:19-25) and spiritually dead. He is in deep trouble.

Second, Paul reminds the Corinthians that their salvation was the work of God alone. Though man is dead in sin, God is able to save. Paul states in 1:30, “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus.” We are not saved by anything but God’s gospel of grace. It is all his doing. This reality must be kept in mind when heralding the gospel. We proclaim the gospel knowing that because God is sovereign, some will be saved. If not for the knowledge of this great truth, we could not have confidence that any would be saved, for none seek him.

Paul continues his thought by noting that this gospel which was preached to them, which they had received by faith, was a gospel “in which you also stand” (ἐν ᾧ καὶ ἐστήκατε, *en hō kai hestēkate*). The verb “stand” is a perfect tense from ἵστημι (*histēmi*) and is the most marked of the four verbs in these four relative clauses that the apostle wants to emphasize.³ Its use here

¹ The first of these four relative pronouns began in v. 1a with the expression ὃ εὐηγγελισάμην ὑμῖν. Thiselton notes that “The heaping up of relative pronouns required the repetition of **through this gospel** for the Gk. δι’ οὗ” ([*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*], 1185).

² The first two verbs are aorist, 3rd is perfect, and the fourth is present. It would seem that Paul uses the perfect tense “you stand” (ἐστήκατε, *hestēkate*) to highlight it in light of the point he is making in the section. The first two verbs are aorist which he uses to give background: The gospel was *preached* to them and they did in fact *believe*. However since the topic at hand is how some were denying the resurrection, Paul is showing the inconsistency of standing in something which is also being denied.

³ Most commentators see this perfect tense form as denoting contextually their present relationship to the gospel. They are standing in it. See David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 682; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1185; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 720; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC, 331.

is figurative, as to “stand” or “be in” something. The sense here is “being within the scope of the gospel.”⁴ The Corinthian believers were presently standing upon the gospel message they had believed at the preaching of Paul. They were resting or trusting in that message of grace. Paul is making known the gospel, a gospel in which he preached, they received, and they were presently standing in.

Paul is about to unmask them for the logical inconsistency for which some of them were guilty. If they believed a gospel concerning Christ that he died for their sins and rose from the dead, how could any of them deny the doctrine of the resurrection since their eternal destiny is tied to the reality of a resurrection? It makes no sense. One can’t be standing in the gospel which includes the resurrection of Christ and then deny that there is a resurrection!

Paul goes on in verse 2 to complete the string of relative clauses by also declaring that the gospel which was preached, received, and stood upon was in fact a gospel that saved them from their sins. He writes of this gospel, “by which also you are saved.” The verb “saved” is σώζω (sōzō) and means “to rescue” or “deliver,”⁵ and context alone determines whether physical or spiritual deliverance is intended. Here Paul is discussing the saving of the sinner from eternal destruction because of their sin (15:3, 17). The present tense (σώζεσθε, sōzesthe) portrays the action as in process.⁶ Salvation is the rescuing of the sinner out of the penalty for their sins. We are saved from its penalty, power and ultimately one day, its presence.

It is the gospel of Jesus Christ, that good news concerning the person and work of Christ on the cross, which is preached and believed and which saves believing sinners. There is no other message of salvation; there is no other deliverer from sin; there is no other way; there is no other plan; there is no other gospel which can save sinners. The Corinthians who were saved were saved because they had trusted in that gospel concerning Jesus Christ. They believed it and were standing in it. As the context will bear out, the resurrection of the dead is an integral part of the gospel message and it needs to be heralded to a lost world. This gospel is the power of God and it saves believing sinners (Rom 1:16).

In the remaining part of verse 2, Paul adds the expression, “If you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.” The expression “unless you believed in vain” (ἐκτὸς εἰ μὴ εἰκῇ ἐπιστεύσατε) is debated as to the exact meaning. One possible gloss of the adverb εἰκῇ is “without due consideration” or “in a haphazard manner.”⁷ However it is difficult to speak of genuine faith that is also haphazard or lacking coherence. This is a lexical possibility, but another gloss may have better contextual evidence. BDAG also lists as a gloss, “to have no purpose” as well as “without cause.”⁸ A final gloss has better contextual support,

⁴ BDAG, s.v., ἵστημι, 382, II.2c.β.

⁵ BDAG, s.v., σώζω, 798.

⁶ Fee notes calls this a “futuristic nuance of the present tense,” much like the present passive form of the verb in 1 Cor 1:18. In other words, “salvation is now, but it is also in process, to be completed at the Day of the Lord” ([*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*], 720, n. 32).

⁷ BDAG, s.v., εἰκῇ, 222, 4. See also Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1186.

namely “in vain, to no avail.”⁹ Paul seems to be saying that if one has trusted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, such faith is of no avail, empty and without real significance if there is no resurrection of the dead. One’s faith is all for naught if there is no resurrection. Therefore the expression, “unless you believed in vain” speaks of an empty faith, one which is unable to deliver on what it has promised. Such is the gospel of Jesus Christ if there is no resurrection of the dead. Garland notes,

If they do not have faith that holds out, they believed in vain (cf. 15:58; 16:13). If they have faith in something that is untrue, they believed in vain (15:14). The resurrection is the keystone that integrates the incarnation and Christ’s atoning death. If it is removed, the whole gospel will collapse. If there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12), humans remain under the tyranny of sin and death...”¹⁰

What the Corinthian believers needed to demonstrate was that they were “holding fast” (κατέχετε, *katechete*) to a correct gospel that was preached to them by Paul. Paul will next give the content of that gospel as well as a defense of the resurrection of the dead which is critical to the gospel.

⁸ BDAG, s.v., εἰκῆ, 221-22.

⁹ Ibid., 222, 2.

¹⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 683.