

## **The Use and Abuse of 1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

Many evangelicals use 1 Cor 15:1-11 to evangelize the lost. While others may *not* believe Paul wrote this passage to evangelize the lost, some still use it this way since they think it contains all the necessary details for evangelism. On its face it appears that 1 Cor 15:1-11 should be the crux of Paul's message to evangelize the lost. Although well intentioned, could both approaches violate Paul's intent for writing 1 Cor 15:1-11? Could both views allow the original meaning to be held captive to the whims of the interpreter for his or her practical purposes? Upon careful inspection we find three lines of argument that surfaces Paul's intent for writing 1 Cor 15:1-11, which does not involve evangelism. Was this Paul's intent in writing this passage?

### **Recipients in 1 Corinthians 15**

From the very opening of the epistle and throughout, Paul addresses Christians (1:2-9). He uses the term "brother" ten times throughout the letter to refer to his readers, who are believers (1:1; 5:11; 6:6 [twice]; 7:12, 15; 8:11, 13 [twice]; 16:12). How could this passage be used to evangelize the lost if he addresses believers, whose salvation is never questioned by Paul?

### **Resurrection: the Basis for Justification and Sanctification**

Paul addresses a misunderstanding some believers had regarding Christ's resurrection (1 Cor 15:12). Hence, Paul's point here has nothing to do with evangelizing the lost but is rather to clarify the importance of the resurrection's *one-time contribution* as the *basis* to a believer's *justification-salvation* (15:17-21; Heb 9:22; Lev 16) and its *ongoing power* for *sanctification-salvation* (1 Cor 15:2, 25, 30-34, 43-50).

Nowhere does Paul mention in 1 Cor 15:1-11 that one must believe in Jesus for justification or eternal life. Many claim the deity of Christ (along with His sinless humanity and other truths) must be known and believed for anyone to be justified, but where is that here? Paul reminds the Corinthians of the *basis* how believers were able to obtain eternal life (by Christ's death and resurrection vv 3-4), but does not refer to the *condition* (by faith alone in Christ) how believers (and others) can attain eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:40-47; 8:24; Rom 3:21-

4:25; Gal 3), since they are already believers.<sup>1</sup> Both concepts (basis and condition) are related but distinguished. Both form part of the gospel.

Notice the relative pronouns that refer to the gospel message that was able to justify them is also the same message that is able to sanctify them.

First Corinthians 15:1-2 says, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which [ho] I preached to you, which [ho] also you received and in which [ōh] you stand, by which [hou] also you are being saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.”

The gospel Paul had already preached to them is the same truth they presently stand. The word “stand” in Greek grammar is written in the perfect tense (*hestēkate*), which implies a past-completed event with present-ongoing results. This also supports that Paul’s recipients had already believed in Christ. But they desperately needed to believe in the physical resurrection of Christ, since this not only supplied the basis for their justification from the penalty of sin (vv 17-20) but also supplies the power to be delivered from the influence of sin in the believer’s life. To miss this truth is to have believed originally “in vain” (*eikē*). The Greek word *eikē* means these believers had *not though carefully*<sup>2</sup> about the gospel truth regarding the physical resurrection of Christ being the basis for justification and also as being the basis for their sanctification that can deliver them from sin ruining them (cf. Rom 6:11-12).

The term “being saved” (*sōzesthe*, present tense) in 1 Cor 15:2 is contingent (if =*ei*) on them thinking carefully and putting to work the power that’s available due to Christ’s physical resurrection (Rom 6:1-10; 8:10-13). Paul employed the word “being saved” as bookends at the beginning of the book in 1:18 with a similar idea of overcoming the power of sin in a believer’s life but from the standpoint of the cross that broke sin’s grip over anyone who believes (1:18-23; Rom 1:16; 5:9-10; 6:1-3).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Even if Paul reminds these believers of the *condition* how to obtain eternal life that would not be a problem since he does that in other places where he writes to believers (Rom 1:7-8; 3:21-4:25; Galatians; Eph 1:1-3; 2:8-9; 1 Tim 1:16; Titus 3:5).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 282.

<sup>3</sup> David K. Lowery notices how Christ’s “cross” and “resurrection” played an important part in the believer’s sanctification, and how the present tense of the verb “saved focuses on sanctification” (“1 Corinthians,” in *BKC, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983; reprint, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 1996], 542).

What do the Corinthian believers need to be delivered/saved from?

1. Deliverance from schisms in the church (1:10–4:21; 11:18-19)
2. Deliverance from incest among the brethren not heard of in the world (5)
3. Deliverance from contention in legal matters among believers (6:1-11)
4. Deliverance from immorality (6:12-20)
5. Deliverance from marriage problems (7)
6. Deliverance from a legalistic spirit (8–11)
7. Deliverance from abusing spiritual gifts (12–14)
8. Deliverance from denying the physical resurrection of Christ that supplies the power to overcome all other problems (15).

This last one is what concerns us. He’s left the most important of all for last. Since Corinth is steeped in Platonic philosophy that taught death releases the spirit (or *soul*) from the prison of the body (or *flesh*), Paul encountered believers that subscribed to this logic and were claiming that Christ’s resurrection was spiritual rather than physical. Paul corrects this doctrinal error by appealing to logic, doctrine, and physical evidence in order to expose their mistake.<sup>4</sup>

(1) *Logic*. It makes no sense to believe in a dead Savior who can’t provide anyone with current power and hope of a future (15:2, 17-21, 34-57). When the Corinthians became believers, they did not carefully consider how the physical Resurrection affects them in their present walk with the Lord and future rewards.

(2) *Doctrine*. Perhaps Paul thinks in 1 Cor 15:3-4 of well-known OT prophecies as Gen 22:4-5, Heb 11:17-19, Ps 16:10-11, Isa 53:10-12, and Dan 12:2-3. The physical Resurrection was viewed as a physical reality that overturns the curse of Genesis 3 that not only distorted spiritual fellowship between God and man but the physical world (see Gen 3:8-22; cf. Rom 8:20-26; 1 Cor 15:21-26, 35-54).

(3) *Physical Evidence*. He then recalls a historical fact in 1 Cor 15:5-11 that Jesus was “raised on the third day” in such a way that one can verify by calling on witnesses who saw Him that were still alive and physically encountered Him (cf. the Gospel accounts).

## **Resolution to the Corinthian Problem**

Paul addresses the carnality issues that plague this church. The command to overcome carnality depends on whether Christ rose

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<sup>4</sup> Although this passage may be used to help persuade unbelievers that Christ rose physically (if that’s a barrier that prevents them to believe in Him for eternal life), it is wrong to assert that Paul wrote 1 Cor 15:1-11 with that intent or to evangelize the lost.

physically, which endows all believers with the (resurrection) power to depart from sin by dying daily to carnality (1 Cor 1:18; 2:2-5; 3:3; 4:19-21; 15:31-34, 43-48). Hence, Paul commands them to “come to their senses in regards to acting righteous and stop sinning” (v 34). How can they pull this off? Believers can overcome sin since they belong to, and have the resurrection power of, the “heavenly man” who rose physically (15:1-58; cf. Rom 5:12–6:11). If Christ did not rise physically, there is no glorified body in the future (1 Cor 15:35-57). It would also be impossible for the Corinthians (and us) to heed Paul’s demand to overcome carnality and be rewarded by reigning in the future kingdom of God (1 Cor 3:1-3, 10-15; 4:8-21; 5:5; 9:24-27; 15:58). Thus, let’s not override Paul’s intent for writing 1 Cor 15:1-11 by abusing a passage meant for sanctification to evangelize the lost.