

1 Corinthians 15:6-11

PREFACE

In our last session, three weeks ago, we dealt primarily with the four essential gospel components that Paul lists in vv3-5. Whittled down to their essence they are,

1. Christ died (v3)
2. He was buried (v4)
3. He was raised (v4)
4. He appeared (v5)

The point was made that were we to remove any one of those essentials, in sharing the gospel with an unbeliever, the logic would break down. That is, a reasoning individual could rationally take issue with the gospel message at several points along the way if certain components were missing.

- Christ died—He *really* died
- His burial proves that He really died (not alive and just hidden away somewhere, so as to later fake His resurrection)
- Christ was raised by God the Father
- His appearing to over 500 during His last forty days on earth, along with His burial, proves that He was indeed raised from the dead

Keep in mind that Paul's focus in Chapter Fifteen is *resurrection*: the certainty of Christ's resurrection being the "first fruits" (v20) and guarantee of the believer's resurrection, which is his answer to those in the church who were saying there is no resurrection of the dead (v12). The apostle begins our passage today by extending the appearances narrative beyond just Cephas (Peter) and the rest of the immediate disciples.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-11.

v6

After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time,

While it is true that we do not know why all these people were together in one place at the same time, it is clear from its nature this was not a mystical vision experienced by all these individuals at different times, but an actual, objective event in which a single group of more than five hundred individuals, at once, saw the risen Christ.

The word "brethren" is indeed plural masculine (*adelphois*; feminine singular would be *adelphē*), but it is not wrong for the NIV2011 to translate this "brothers and sisters." We know that there were both men and women who followed Jesus during His ministry—indeed, several of the women supported it financially.

Read Luke 8:1-3.

The word means, literally, from the same womb. *Adelphois* is often used to refer to a group of followers, of both sexes, that are united in one cause or belief. For Christians this is almost literally true to the definition of the word, for we are all born “from the same womb”—born again, by the Holy Spirit, in Christ.

most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;

Why would Paul append this to the statement? Two reasons spring to mind. First, he adds “most of whom remain until now” to make it clear that there are witnesses to this appearance from which one could hear an eye-witness account. Second, he adds “but some have fallen asleep,” a common euphemism for dying, which could serve to remind the Corinthians that even being in the presence of the risen Christ does not preserve one from death. More likely, however, he employs this euphemism to emphasize that for the Christian, death is a temporary state not to be feared. Thiselton writes that the idea of sleep “carries with it the expectation of awaking to a new dawn in a new day” (as quoted by Garland).

David Garland: Their deaths are nothing alarming. Death precedes resurrection, and using the figure of sleep for death implies that it is not a permanent condition but one of waiting.

v7

then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;

Only here in God’s word is this statement that Jesus appeared to his half-brother James. James, along with the rest of Jesus’ siblings, did not initially believe in Him as the Christ ([John 7:5](#)), but quite soon after Christ’s ascension he is identified as an apostle, and became one of the principal leaders in the Jerusalem church ([Acts 15:13-21](#)). Though we cannot say for certain, it is tempting to imagine that Jesus’ visit with James after His resurrection may have had something to do with James’ conversion from unbeliever to leader in the church.

If v6 refers to a large group of common followers of Jesus—“disciples” in the sense that we might call ourselves disciples—then this reference to “apostles” would be those specifically called and commissioned personally by Jesus to carry the gospel to the nations—which would include the twelve. This unnumbered group would include, for example, the seventy (or seventy-two) sent out by Jesus in Luke 10.

Note the progression of the appearances thus far from v5:

- Christ appeared to Cephas
- then He appeared to the rest of His immediate disciples (11 in all at this point)
- next Christ appeared to a very large group of followers—more than 500 men and women
- then to James, Christ’s half-brother
- and to “all the apostles”

It is fair to ask, then, Why? Why offer such a detailed account of all these appearances of the risen Lord? There could be more than one reason:

- The first and most obvious reason would be that the more people Paul can say actually witnessed the resurrected Christ, the harder it would be for the naysayers to reject the historical fact that Christ was raised from the dead.
- Another reason would be that Paul wanted to connect the dots from Peter and the rest of the disciples/apostles to himself, and his claim to apostleship (v8). In so doing Paul is claiming that Christ's appearance to him was not unusual, but in line with Christ's appearance to both larger groups and individuals, such as Peter and James—and himself.
- As noted earlier, Paul's use of the euphemism "fallen asleep" prepares his audience to accept that when a Christian dies, he or she is just, as it were, "asleep," and just waiting to be "awakened" from that sleep—i.e., resurrected.

Sidebar: We may wonder why Paul does not include, first of all, the women at the tomb. The probable reason for this would be that in that time and place "a woman's testimony was not received in law courts... it was not evidence the world of that day would accept, because it came from a woman" (Guzik). This would seem to support the position that the apostle was offering substantial evidence for the historical fact of Christ's resurrection.

v8

and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Speaking of euphemisms, our various translations go to great lengths to soften—even hide—what Paul is really saying when he refers to himself as "one untimely born" (NASB, ESV, TLV).

NIV: one abnormally born

KJVs: one born out of due time

CSB: one born at the wrong time

The word *ektromati*, used only here, means, literally, "a lifeless abortion," stillbirth, or miscarriage. In fact, the word came "to be used figuratively to refer to something horrible or freakish" (Fee). The abhorrent imagery of this term is amplified by Paul's use of the definite article "the" (YLT: "And last of all—as to **the** untimely birth—he appeared also to me"). Many commentators struggle to explain just what Paul means by this, but the man himself answers that in v9.

One final note about v8, What does he mean by "last of all"? No doubt two things: First, Paul has been listing these appearances in chronological order, and his was the last in that order. But, by this, he may also be saying that his was the last and final apostleship. Second, we learn from v9 that he also means that he was the *least* apostle—least worthy to be commissioned by Christ Jesus.

v9

For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

When studying God's word one always wants to glean application for our lives today, and thus far that has been a bit slim in these verses. In vv9-10, however, we turn the corner on that and discover something all of us can write into our own lives. We all know ourselves better than anyone else, and could easily paraphrase this verse, *I am the least of Christians, and not fit to be called a Christian, because I _____.*

The apostle here reveals why he uttered the outrageous statement of v8. From the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, "If [ektromati, translated one 'untimely born'] is thus understood, not as premature birth, but as *still* birth, the significance of Paul's choice of the word lies in his joyful gratitude that God has chosen him to be an apostle despite his utterly reprobate life as a former persecutor." That is, he is the living embodiment of what he wrote to the Ephesian church.

Read Ephesians 2:1-7.

Each of us, like Paul, was stillborn, born dead, without life; we ate, slept, worked in that deadness until, by His grace alone, God saved us and granted us life in Christ. In the case of Paul, his sins in the persecution and murder of followers of the Way (Acts 9:2) were probably more egregious than ours, yet even so, in God's grace he was granted the title of honor, "apostle." He not only saved him, but used him more mightily for His kingdom than anything we might imagine for ourselves.

v10

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

"Paul was unfit for the task God called him to do. God's grace does not remove this obstacle [2 Corinthians 12:7-10] but overcomes it so that it is clear that God, not the messenger, 'is responsible for the message'" (Hollander and van der Hout).

David Garland: He was not worthy, but grace takes persons who are not worthy or sufficient and makes them fit. Grace does not so much require response as it kindles response. It empowers and equips.

It sounds at first as if Paul is bragging when he says "I labored more than all of them," but he immediately declares that none of it was from himself. Another commentator team, Robertson and Plummer, liken this to the child who joyfully gives the parent a birthday present after having spent the parent's own money to buy it.

v11

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

Verses 9-10 are essentially parenthetical, just a bit off-topic for the paragraph. It was logical to add his name to the preceding list of those to whom the risen Christ appeared, but because he modified his entry with “as to one untimely born,” it was necessary for him to flesh that out, so to speak, in vv9-10.

But now, with v11, he is back on-track. He closes this paragraph—as he often does—by both concluding his previous thoughts, and cuing up his thoughts in the next paragraph.

Paraphrasing this verse, *Whether it was any one or more of all the apostles I have just mentioned, or it was I, we preach the same message—the same message you believed.* What was that gospel message? In this context it was the creed he “delivered” to the Corinthians in vv3-5:

Christ died.
He was buried.
He was raised.
He appeared.

Thus, as Gordon Fee puts it,

On the matter of their denial of the resurrection, they are following neither Apollos, nor Cephas, nor Christ [v1:12]; they are simply going off on their own, and in effect abandoning truly Christian faith and discipleship.

Paul has just declared (v10) that the work God is doing in him, by His grace, “did not prove vain.” It was not for naught; it is still at work. He will close this chapter, in v58, with a plea that the lives of the Corinthians—and ours—would prove the same. Let’s close with that.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:58.