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New Perspectives on Paul

December 6, 2012

Resurrection and Apostolicity: Exploring Paul's Agenda in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

¹ *But I am making known to you, brothers, the good news that I preached to you, which you also received, in which you have come to stand, ² through which you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word by which I proclaimed it to you—unless you came to believe for nothing.*

³ *For I handed over to you first and foremost what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was entombed, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve; ⁶ and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; ⁷ and then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; ⁸ but last of all, as if to a miscarried fetus, he appeared also to me.*

⁹ *For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, since I persecuted the church of God; ¹⁰ but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me did not come to be empty, but even more than all of them I have labored; but not I, but the grace of God [that is] with me.*

¹¹ *So whether I or they, so we proclaim and so you came to believe.¹*

Introduction

In 1 Cor. 15:1-11, Paul begins to articulate the final major argument of his letter: a passionate insistence that believers in Christ who have died will be raised from death just as Christ himself was. He will go on to make this argument in detail in the remainder of the chapter; here, however, he lays a foundation by reminding the Corinthian Christians of the tradition he taught them “first and foremost.” Paul cites a creedal formula that precedes his own ministry and which he taught to the Corinthians during his time with them. In citing this tradition, Paul

¹ This translation is my own, as are other translations throughout this paper. Where I refer to published translations I use the conventional abbreviations for the Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New International Version (NIV), and King James Version (KJV).

presumes the Corinthians will agree with him that Christ's resurrection from the dead is foundational to their belief in the gospel. It is based on this agreement that he will argue that there is a wider resurrection of the dead still to come.²

While resurrection is a key focus of this passage, there is also an important secondary theme at work: Paul's concern with demonstrating the legitimacy of his claim to the status of an apostle. The rhetorical structure of the passage is carefully chosen. Paul applies a number of belittling qualifiers to his apostleship—likely echoing the arguments of opponents who claimed that he was not an apostle—in order to portray himself as “the least of the apostles.” The least of the apostles is, of course, by definition still an apostle. Even while qualifying his status in these rhetorical ways, Paul carefully portrays his experience as an eyewitness to the risen Jesus as functionally equivalent to those of “all the apostles”—and particularly to those of the only individuals he mentions by name, Peter and James.

In tying his own teaching to these key “pillars” of the early Jerusalem church—who were likely known by the Corinthians to represent points of view significantly different from Paul's on the crucial question of the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian community—Paul makes an even stronger claim for his understanding of resurrection. He, Peter, and James have serious differences on important questions of the gospel—questions Paul considered central. Yet on the issue of Christ's resurrection from the dead, Paul is able to say, “Whether I or they, so we proclaim and so you came to believe.”

² Anders Eriksson has clearly shown, in contrast to the interpretations of Bultmann and others, that the thrust of Paul's citation of the tradition in this passage is not to prove the resurrection of Jesus, but to presuppose the Corinthians' belief in that resurrection and use it to argue for the nature of the resurrection of Christian believers. *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof: Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corinthians*, Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 29 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998), 243.

Background to the Passage

The first epistle to the Corinthians dates to approximately 53-55 CE. Its Pauline authenticity is not seriously questioned, and it is generally considered to be a unitary document.³ Paul writes from Ephesus (16:8), addressing the predominantly Gentile church at Corinth which he founded about two years earlier during a lengthy residential stay. A plausible reconstruction of Pauline chronology suggests that Paul was in Corinth during the time that he wrote 1 Thessalonians and Galatians. He then moved to Ephesus.⁴

At some point after leaving Corinth Paul received one letter from the church there, and responded in a letter that has not survived; all we know about this letter is that he dealt in it with the topic of relationships with sexually immoral persons (1 Cor. 5:10). Now he has received another letter from the Corinthian church inquiring for his pastoral direction on a number of topics. Others, including “Chloe’s people” (1:11; these may or may not be the same group of people as Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, who have brought the Corinthians’ letter to Paul, 16:17) have let him know firsthand about other issues in the life of the congregation, such as the problem of divisions.

Paul’s relationship with the church at Corinth at this point is still largely positive. The tone of 1 Corinthians makes it clear that Paul expects the Corinthian believers to see him as having significant pastoral authority (e.g. 4:21, 5:3-4, 11:2). Yet there is at least some opposition to Paul in the congregation, to the extent that Paul feels it necessary at times to defend his own authoritative status (e.g. 4:14-16, 9:1-2). Gerd Lüdemann’s analysis of 1 Cor. 4 and 9 suggests what opposition to Paul existed at Corinth may have been less radical than that in Galatia. Where

³ For an overview of some partition theories and the generally convincing case for the epistle’s integrity, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 36–41.

⁴ Here I follow the chronology in Eung Chun Park, *Either Jew or Gentile: Paul’s Unfolding Theology of Inclusivity*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 26.

Paul's opponents in Galatia were concerned with imposing circumcision on Gentile believers and may have had connections with James's wing of the Jerusalem church, Lüdemann sees the Corinthian opposition as connected more to a Petrine wing and less concerned with imposing circumcision per se than with critiquing Paul's claim to the status of apostleship.⁵ However, this opposition has not reached the height that it later will, causing Paul's "painful visit" and then his "letter of tears" followed by his eventual reconciliation with the Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:1, 2:4, 7:8-11).

While it is not always clear which topics come from the Corinthians' letter and which come from the firsthand information Paul received from their messengers, it is chiefly from these two sources that the agenda for 1 Corinthians arises. The important topics in the letter include divisions in the congregation; questions of sexual morality and marriage; the contentious issue of food sacrificed to idols; women's head-coverings; the Lord's Supper and the problem of the rich eating first; spiritual gifts and tongues; and the nature of the resurrection. 1 Cor. 15:1-11 marks a transition into this final constructive topic; the letter concludes in ch. 16 with Paul's remarks about the collection, his travel plans, final instructions, and greetings. (A full outline of the letter is provided as an Appendix.)

Commentary

¹ *But I am making known to you, brothers, the good news that I preached to you, which you also received, in which you have come to stand,* ² *through which you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word by which I proclaimed it to you—unless you came to believe for nothing.*

The opening verses of this pericope mark a significant transition from what has gone before. Whereas for three chapters Paul's focus has been on spiritual gifts (particularly on

⁵ Gerd Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 112, 115.

deemphasizing the importance of tongues), he now moves into the topic of resurrection, which he has saved for the final position in his letter. The importance of this topic is signaled by what Fitzmyer calls an “abrupt beginning,” as well as by the formal and repetitive character of Paul’s language in these opening verses.⁶

The first phrase (γνωρίζω δε ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) is indeed abrupt after the instructions about tongues that have immediately preceded it. After fourteen chapters of detailed theological argument and parenthesis, Paul now suddenly claims to be “making known the good news” as if this were his first-ever sermon to the Corinthians. The connotations of γνωρίζω clearly have to do with disclosing, or making known—not “reminding,” as in both the NRSV and NIV translations. To be sure, Paul assumes the Corinthians have already received this information, but here he is asserting the importance of what he is about to say by linking it to his initial proclamation (perhaps with a note of disingenuous astonishment that he should have to do so: Fitzmyer sees this as “politely chiding”).⁷

Paul uses formal terminology to describe his teaching and the Corinthians’ reception of it. “You received” (παρελάβετε) is scholarly language, reflecting the careful transmission of an authoritative tradition—a practice of both Hellenistic philosophers and Jewish rabbis. Rabbinic literature from a few centuries later uses the verbs *qibbēl* and *masar* as equivalents to Paul’s παραλαμβάνω and παραδίδωμι.⁸ The emphasis is on the chain of transmission from those who preached the gospel before Paul to Paul himself and then to the Corinthians.

⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible v. 32 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 540.

⁷ Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 544; see also Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof*, 252. For a reading that favors “reminding,” see Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina vol. 7 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 533.

⁸ Collins, *First Corinthians*, 426. For παραδίδωμι, see v. 3.

The syntax of *τῖνι λόγῳ εὐηγγελισάμην ὑμῖν* is difficult; here *λόγος* (word) appears to function as a synonym for *εὐαγγέλιον* (good news), repeated here in the dative case because it is that to which the Corinthians are to hold fast. Yet the dative also suggests the idea that it was “by” this word that Paul proclaimed the good news, perhaps alluding to a specific creed or formula—which Paul is about to cite below. Scholarly opinion is split on this: Anthony Thiselton prefers to interpret *λόγος* simply as the “substance” of Paul’s message, while Joseph Fitzmyer disagrees and sees a reference to the form of words.⁹ While Fitzmyer’s interpretation is attractive, little is actually at stake in this particular question, as the fact that Paul cites a creedal tradition predating his own ministry in vv. 3-8 is almost universally accepted.

³ *For I handed over to you first and foremost what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures,* ⁴ *and that he was entombed, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures,* ⁵ *and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve;* ⁶ *and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;* ⁷ *and then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles;* ⁸ *but last of all, as if to a miscarried fetus, he appeared also to me.*

Paul now prepares to cite the tradition itself by continuing to use technical language of transmission: “I handed over . . . what I also received.” “First and foremost” is the RSV’s rendering of *ἐν πρώτοις*, which I have followed for the way it elegantly holds together the Greek idiom’s two meanings: chronological priority and priority of importance. The NRSV translation (“as of first importance”) forces Paul into the second meaning when he likely means both.¹⁰

In 1922 Adolf von Harnack published a seminal study of the “creed” in which he attempted to identify which elements predate Paul and which Paul has added himself. Harnack’s conclusion was that only vv. 3b-5 are authentically pre-Pauline: Christ died and was entombed,

⁹ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1185; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 545.

¹⁰ Thiselton uses the RSV wording here as well: *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1186.

was raised and appeared, creating a compact 2 x 2 structure. For Harnack the string of appearances of ὅτι marks the original phrases; Paul has added everything from v. 6 onward.

The scholarly consensus has for the most part followed Harnack's reconstruction. However, in a fascinating recent article, David M. Moffitt has suggested on the basis of stylistic considerations that the creed extends to v. 7. Moffitt notes that v. 6b and v. 8 demonstrate a rhetorical style characteristic of Paul, including postpositives and relative clauses, but that the remainder holds together very coherently. For Moffitt the εἶτα . . . ἔπειτα sequence of vv. 4b-7 (rendered "then . . . and then" in my translation) takes over the repetitive function played by earlier in the creed.¹¹ Moffitt further points out that Paul's addition of "most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep" is not, as is often suggested, meant to buttress the Corinthians' belief in Jesus' resurrection (by emphasizing that some eyewitnesses still remain). Paul is emphasizing not those who remain but those who have died: he is about to argue that his proclamation of the gospel is in vain if those who have died are not raised. Paul refers again to "those who have fallen asleep" (οἱ κοιμηθέντες) in v. 18. As Moffitt notes, if the appearance to "more than five hundred" was part of the preexisting tradition, Paul's insertion of v. 6b would have caught the Corinthians' attention in a way that would effectively prepare the ground for his continuing argument.¹²

A few other elements in the "creed" are of particular interest for those who seek historical data about earliest Christianity. "For our sins" is expiatory language that likely confirms the early, pre-Pauline provenance of this formula: "Apart from biblical citations (Rom 4:7-8) and traditional formulae (cf. Gal 1:4; Col 1:14) Paul rarely uses sin (*hamartia*) in the plural."¹³ E. P.

¹¹ David M. Moffitt, "Affirming the 'Creed': The Extent of Paul's Citation of an Early Christian Formula in 1 Cor 15,3b-7," *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99, no. 1 (2008): 53–57.

¹² Moffitt, "Affirming the 'Creed,'" 69–72.

¹³ Collins, *First Corinthians*, 534.

Sanders has argued that Paul's use of this language marks a reconfiguration in meaning: where the Christians who predated him understood Christ's death in terms of sacrificial atonement, Paul redeploys this traditional language toward his own theological understanding in which believers *participate* with Christ in his death and resurrection.¹⁴ The mention of Christ's entombment in v. 4 is sometimes seen as evidence that Paul was aware of an empty-tomb tradition—something not otherwise mentioned in his writings. At the very least, it heightens Paul's insistence that Christ genuinely died and was genuinely raised. The mention of an appearance to James (v. 7) is unique in the New Testament; Acts portrays James as the unquestioned leader of the Jerusalem church from ch. 15 onwards but offers no account of how he came to be a follower of Jesus.

This passage is also the site of Paul's only mention of "the twelve"—a category he otherwise ignores. While the Synoptic tradition tends to identify "the twelve" with "the apostles" (Mk. 3:14, Mt. 10:2, Lk. 6:13, Ac. 1:26; see also Rev. 21:14), Paul's own usage of the term "apostle" is significantly wider. His brief reference to "the twelve" here in his citation of the tradition he received indicates that he was aware of this designated group, even though his own theology accords them no specific importance. On the other hand, apostleship is a crucial category for Paul, and it is one within which he emphatically includes himself. (It is worth noting that if v. 7 is an original part of the creed, this would provide evidence that Paul's more expansive definition of "apostles" was inherited by Christians before him. If it is a Pauline addition, this might support the view that Paul's use of "apostle" as a wider category was more idiosyncratic.¹⁵) Paul will go on in the verses that follow to reinforce his apostolic status more

¹⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 463–7.

¹⁵ The Johannine literature is similar to the Pauline corpus in that it downplays the role of the twelve: the term is used only three times in the Gospel of John and not at all in the epistles. However, unlike Paul, the Johannine literature does not use "apostle" as a technical term. (The only possible exception is the relativizing reference in Jn 13:16.)

explicitly. Yet in his inclusion of himself at the end of the “creed,” Paul already presents himself in a position parallel to that of Cephas and James.

A brief diagrammatic exercise may be helpful in illustrating this. Any text can, of course, be diagrammed in many ways. Harnack’s focus on ὅτι and Moffitt’s focus on εἶτα . . . ἔπειτα are useful in noting the structural characteristics of the passage. Here I take a slightly different approach, structuring my own diagram around the word ὤφθη (“he appeared,” “he was seen”). Each time this key word is repeated in vv. 5-7, it creates essentially the same structure: ὤφθη is followed by a noun in the dative case identifying the primary recipient of a resurrection appearance, and then by either εἶτα and a second group of recipients (as in vv. 5 and 7) or by a longer modifying phrase (v. 6).

<u>Time Marker</u>		<u>Primary Recipient (Dative)</u>	<u>Secondary Recipients (Dative)</u>	<u>Other Modifying Phrases</u>
	ὤφθη	to Cephas	then to the twelve	
⁶ and then	ὤφθη	to more than 500 brothers at once		most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep
⁷ and then	ὤφθη	to James	then to all the apostles	
⁸ but last of all,				as if to a miscarried fetus,
	ὤφθη	also to me.		

Verse 8, however, varies the preceding structure in several ways. The time marker is changed from ἔπειτα to ἔσχατον δὲ πάντων (“but last of all”). The modifying phrase (ὥσπερὲ τῷ ἐκτρώματι) appears *before* ὤφθη rather than afterward. Both of these phrases carry minimizing or pejorative connotations (ἐκτρώμα will be explored at further length below). And the dative recipient, in this case Paul himself, is further emphasized by the use of

καὶμοί (rather than simply ἐμοί): “*also* to me.” These alterations to the previously-established structure highlight the differences between Paul and those mentioned earlier; yet at the same time, the recurrence of the basic unit of ὄφθη followed by the dative makes it clear that despite these differences, Paul insists that his resurrection appearance is functionally equivalent to those experienced by Cephas, the five hundred, and James. The two named individuals are particularly important, being “acknowledged pillars” (Gal. 2:9) of the Jerusalem church.¹⁶

(As a side note, it is worth considering the speculative possibility that Paul has added not only 6b but all of v. 6 to a credal formula originally composed of vv. 3b-5 and v. 7. This is certainly plausible in the light of Paul’s desire to introduce a mention of those who have died, and it would leave a compact and parallel-structured basic creed reflecting a stage in which James had risen to prominence and achieved a status as one of “the apostles” despite not being among “the twelve.”)

ἐκτρόμα unambiguously refers to a stillbirth or miscarriage, though it is often translated in ways that soften the visceral impact of its meaning: the NRSV gives “one untimely born,” following the tradition of the KJV’s “one born out of due time.” Unfortunately, these translations open the way to a common misreading in which Paul is seen as having been born *too late*, harmonizing this passage with a Lukan chronology not found elsewhere in the New Testament to characterize his resurrection appearance as an anomaly that took place after the ascension. While Paul certainly portrays his own experience as the “last of all,” he shows no awareness of an ascension tradition like that depicted in Acts. ἐκτρόμα means not one born *too late* but one born *too early*. There are a variety of reasonable interpretations of Paul’s use of this disturbing and

¹⁶ Moffitt touches on this in a footnote: “Paul’s atypical use of ὄφθη here shows how eager he is to connect his own appearance with that of the other apostles. His use of ὄφθη here clearly serves to describe his encounter as qualitatively on par with those mentioned in the formula even if he was commissioned after all the others.” “Affirming the ‘Creed,’” 73n66.

evocative term; among the most convincing are Anthony Thiselton's and J. D. G. Dunn's.

Thiselton emphasizes the way in which it emphasizes Paul's lack of ability or inherent worth and his consequent entire dependence on God's grace.¹⁷ Dunn acknowledges the merits of this interpretation but points out that it ignores the chronological aspect of the image of too-early birth: "in the context of 1 Cor. 15.3-8 the time element cannot be unimportant." Dunn prefers the explanation that

instead of becoming a Christian by gradual development, after the due period of gestation, his coming to faith in Jesus was unexpectedly premature, when he was hardly ready for it. . . . He was privileged with a resurrection appearance and so can be counted an apostle only because his birth into faith in Christ was unnaturally hastened before he was ready.¹⁸

Dunn's viewpoint helps make sense of the ways throughout this passage in which Paul portrays his apostleship as both different from and the same as that of others. Yet Thiselton's focus on the pejorative connotations of ἐκτρόμα is also valid. Here it seems unnecessary to insist on a single interpretation given that Paul's rhetoric readily conjures up both associations in his readers' minds.¹⁹

⁹ *For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, since I persecuted the church of God;* ¹⁰ *but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me did not come to be empty, but even more than all of them I have labored; but not I, but the grace of God [that is] with me.* ¹¹ *So whether I or they, so we proclaim and so you came to believe.*

¹⁷ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1208–10.

¹⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 101–2.

¹⁹ This is a good example of how multiple models of hermeneutics can illuminate scriptural exegesis. Eung-Chun Park has reviewed three models: (1) author-oriented, striving for objectivity in reconstructing the original author's intent; (2) text-oriented, taking the text as it stands on its own while still seeking objectivity in interpreting it; (3) reader-oriented, acknowledging the postmodern principle that the reader's own experience brings meaning to the text (although even in this model the reader may be more or less informed, as Stanley Fish posits). Park suggests all three models are important and can be integrated for biblical exegesis. Here, too narrow a focus on authorial intent may tend to reduce ektrōma to a single meaning, while a reader-response orientation allows the multiple connotations of this multivalent and disturbing image to coexist simultaneously. "Hermeneutics of Integration: A Proposal for a Model of Biblical Interpretation," in *From Biblical Interpretation to Human Transformation: Reopening the Past to Actualize New Possibilities for the Future: Essays Honoring Herman C. Waetjen*, ed. Douglas R. McGaughey and Cornelia Cyss Crocker (Salem, OR: Chora Strangers, 2006), 64–75.

Verse 10 contains the only significant textual variant in this pericope. Both the Nestle-Aland and United Bible Society Greek editions consider the bracketed ἦ only slightly more likely than not to be original; there is considerable manuscript support for the alternate reading.²⁰ Removing ἦ may open Paul's phrasing to a slightly higher degree of synergism—if “the grace of God *that is* with me” is the subject of κοπιᾶω, God's grace appears to be the only agent, while if “the grace of God with me” is the subject, Paul seems to be collaborating with the grace of God. In the end the difference is minor: regardless of which reading is chosen, Paul sees his labor as closely linked with that of God. It is God's grace that allows him to accomplish anything; and he can speak of himself doing it and of God doing it. This labor is an important warrant of Paul's apostolic status: “even more than all of them I have labored.” Indeed, the very existence of the Corinthian church is the result of Paul's labor, as he has pointed out earlier in the letter: “you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (9:2).

As we have seen, Paul's concern to describe himself as the least of the apostles and all the rhetorical flourishes he uses to demonstrate this are, paradoxically, indicators of how concerned he is to demonstrate that he *is* one. By co-opting the arguments of his opponents (he did not know the historical Jesus; his resurrection appearance came too late; he is an ἐκτρόμα; he persecuted the church of God), Paul achieves a sort of rhetorical jujitsu. Instead of proving that he is no apostle at all, these arguments now prove that he is the *least* of them—thus allowing him to demonstrate his humility and make a point about his reliance on God's grace while implicitly reinforcing his apostolic status nonetheless.

The last line of the pericope sums up Paul's citation of the tradition with the telling phrase “whether I or they.” While Paul's “they” may refer to a broad group including the five

²⁰ Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, and Johannes Karavidopoulos, eds., *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th revised (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006); *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, United Bible Societies, 2008).

hundred and “all the apostles,” it is still important to remember that the only individuals he has mentioned by name are Cephas and James. Paul’s own relationship with these two “pillars” was tumultuous at best—a fact that was almost certainly not lost on his Corinthian audience. Indeed, earlier in this very letter Paul has already leveled a “veiled polemic” at Cephas (ch. 3), who was the leader most honored by at least one faction of the Corinthian church.²¹ As for James, he was probably connected with the intervention of Jewish Christian missionaries into Paul’s church in Galatia—the episode which resulted in the writing of Galatians. This incident likely took place during Paul’s stay at Corinth and would thus have been known to at least some of the Corinthians.²² In insisting that “whether it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you came to believe,” Paul thus maintains that the core message about Christ’s resurrection which he proclaims is the same as that proclaimed by Peter and James, despite their serious disagreements on many important aspects of what that message means. Here Paul reaches across the aisle, so to speak, to enlist even his most prominent theological opponents as allies. This strategy creates a firm rhetorical foundation for Paul’s argument that those who have fallen asleep in Christ will likewise be raised in him.

Conclusions

1 Cor. 15:1-11 is one of the most-studied passages in the Pauline literature, since Paul’s use of a formal tradition predating his own ministry offers valuable historical data about early Christianity. Yet the creedal formula is not meant to stand on its own. Paul cites the tradition about Jesus as part of his overall argument about the coming resurrection of Christians who have

²¹ Lüdemann’s analysis of 1 Cor. 3 is convincing in demonstrating this. *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*, 75–78.

²² Whether James was directly involved in the Galatian incident cannot be known, but it is very likely that he was at least held in high regard by the preachers of circumcision in Galatia. Eung-Chun Park sees Gal 5:10 as a possible “elliptical allusion” to James: *Either Jew or Gentile*, 48.

died. It is of significance to note that nothing about the *life and ministry* of Jesus is included in this tradition. Instead, Paul's entire gospel (remember that he can say γνωρίζω δὲ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον about this formula alone!) is based on the *death and resurrection* of Jesus the Messiah. It is this resurrection that provides for Paul the key to understanding what will happen for Christian believers, who are "in Christ." Jesus is the firstfruits (v. 23); Christians too will be raised from the dead with bodies continuous with and yet also distinct from their earthly bodies, as Paul will go on to argue in the remainder of this chapter.

E. P. Sanders' focus on Paul's category of "participation" may be useful for understanding Paul's theology here.²³ This passage presents a prime example of the way Paul uses juridical language ("Christ died for our sins") but extends it in a context that has less to do with the believer's specific sins being atoned for and more to do with the believer dying to sin and rising to new life with Christ. Sanders may understate the extent to which categories of juridical atonement remain important elsewhere in Paul's writings, but here in 1 Cor. 15 Paul moves quickly past these categories and into those of participation: "for just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be brought to life" (15:22).

Paul's apostolic authority is not the central focus of this passage, but it is an important subtext—and a topic of considerable importance for those interested in the "new perspective on Paul," since one of the gifts this perspective has brought to Pauline studies is an enhanced awareness of the role of conflicts in the early church on the development of Paul's theology. Paul's understanding of his gospel did not develop in a vacuum; it was in considerable measure the product of his commitment to the commission he believed he had been given by the risen

²³ Sanders' emphasis on "participation" has been rightly critiqued as failing sufficiently to explain Paul's turn away from requiring Torah-observance for the people of God, as in James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective: Whence, What and Whither?," in *The New Perspective on Paul*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 7ff. Participation in Christ, per se, was not Paul's only reason for rejecting circumcision for Gentile Christians. Still, the motif of "participation" remains a major dimension of Paul's overall theology and is clearly at work in 1 Cor. 15.

Christ. This commission was to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and Paul developed his major theological categories (such as justification by faith) through conflicts with leaders like Peter and James over the extent of Gentiles' inclusion in the covenant people of God in Christ.

Paul's finely balanced rhetoric in 1 Cor. 15:1-11 demonstrates his concern to reinforce his apostolic status in the face of opposition. Some of this opposition looked to Peter as an authoritative leader (1:12). They were undoubtedly also aware of James as another, likely even more conservative, authority in the Jerusalem church. By means of devices like his parallel repetitions of ὄφθῆ, his minimization of his apostleship which paradoxically establishes it, and his reminder that it was his own labor that produced the Corinthian church, Paul carefully presents himself as every bit as much an apostle as these others. He then lays the groundwork for the theological *tour de force* on the resurrected body that forms the remainder of 1 Cor. 15 by insisting that, despite his well-known differences from these pillars on critical issues, on the question of the resurrection he and they teach the same thing. In this way he reinforces his premise that this is a non-negotiable element of the Christian gospel: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has Christ been raised; but if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is empty, and your faith is empty. . . . But now Christ *has* been raised, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (vv. 13-14, 20).

For Paul the resurrection is at the heart of the gospel: more central than righteousness apart from the Law, more central than justification by faith, more central even than his own call as apostle to the Gentiles. All these elements of Paul's thinking flow from the resurrection of the one he has come to call Christ, and from his conviction that his own life in God and that of the entire world are now inextricably bound up in that resurrection. Even today, Christians of drastically different theological convictions are united—if by little else—by a shared conviction

that the risen Christ is Lord. Paul's rhetorical presentation of the resurrection tradition and his earnest contention for his own apostolicity in 1 Cor. 15 offer a microcosm of both the fragmentation and the common ground in the earliest church. Perhaps Christians today might find inspiration both in Paul's willingness to contend vigorously for his own principled understanding of the gospel and in his readiness to acknowledge common ground with those with whom he differs.

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Appendix: The Structure of 1 Corinthians

The structure of 1 Corinthians is fairly straightforward. While commentators vary slightly in how they choose to categorize various topics and subtopics, there is practically universal agreement on the major “hinges” of the letter. Below is my own summary outline.

1:1-9: Opening

1:10-4:21: Divisions in the congregation

Paul, Apollos, Cephas; Paul’s defense of his own role as an apostle; foolishness as the wisdom of God

5:1-7:40: Questions of marriage and sexual morality

Incest; lawsuits against fellow believers; sinning against the body; marriage and celibacy (including the principle “remain as you were called,” touching on circumcision and slavery)

8:1-11:1: On idolatry and eating food sacrificed to idols

Includes excursus on Paul’s freedom and his choice not to use it, 9:1-27

11:2-14:40: On the gathering for worship and the Lord’s Supper

Women’s hair; waiting for one another in the Lord’s Supper; spiritual gifts and the deemphasis of tongues, with excursus on love in 13:1-13

15:1-58: On the resurrection of the dead

16:1-24: On the collection, travel plans, final instructions and greetings