

First Corinthians

August 17, 2025

Chapter 15

The Matters of Worship Services – Part 5

“The Purpose of Worship in the Church”

Chapter 15:1 - 19

In Chapter 14, Paul focused on various aspects of the time of worship in the Church. First, he addressed the issue of using multiple languages during the service. The conclusion was that the language understood by most people should be used. If anyone attending the service wished to share a word or testimony, it needed to be in the language spoken by the majority of the congregation, or it should be interpreted into that language. Otherwise, the individual would not be permitted to speak.

Second, Paul discusses the purpose of preaching: to enhance the knowledge of the saints, exhort the Savior, and comfort non-believers.

Third, Paul instructs that the worship of the saints is restricted to those who are trained and knowledgeable, such as visiting preachers.

H. The Gospel Matters (15:1)

As Chapter 15 begins, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the purpose of service is to preach the Gospel, the same Gospel he preached when he was with them. If they have forgotten the Gospel message, he presents it to them once more because the Gospel is important. Verse 1.

¹ Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand,

Let's paraphrase this verse. Paul is saying, “Here is what I preached to you. It is what you heard. It is what you accepted. It is your footing as a saint.”

1. Salvation Through the Gospel (15:2)

Continuing, Paul states that the saints have salvation through the Gospel in verse 2.

² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

We must pause to consider Paul's “if” statement. What does Paul mean by this? “... *if you hold fast to the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.*” Some interpret “if” as suggesting that a person can lose their salvation. A more accurate English translation would be, “if you keep in memory what I preached to you.” This clarifies the meaning. To paraphrase these first two verses, Paul states, “Here is what I preached to you. It is what you heard. It is what you accepted. It is your foundation as a saint. Through hearing this Gospel message, you were saved. Do you remember this?” In other words, Paul is informing the saints that because they have heard the Gospel, they are now in a state of safety, similar to those saints who were added to the Church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:47).

But then there is the phrase at the end, “*unless you believed in vain.*” What does that mean? “Vain” refers to *emptiness, lacking purpose, evidence, or substance.*

Paul asks, “Did your belief mean nothing to you?” Jesus illustrated this concept in Matthew 13:20-21 when He spoke of those who received the seed in rocky places, yet it never took root. Are there individuals who have heard the Gospel, but it hasn't taken root in them, even though they have carelessly claimed it with their mouths instead of their hearts? Tragically, the Church is

filled with those who have not allowed the Gospel to take root within them. The Gospel message is swept away at the first brisk wind of trouble because it was never anchored in them. There is no Gospel in them to “*hold fast*.” They are “so-called” saints, but they are not saints at all.

2. Paul’s Gospel (15:3-4)

Therefore, Paul will write the Gospel message on paper in case they haven’t heard it or did not accept it when they first encountered it. Here is Paul’s Gospel message.

³ *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,* ⁴ *and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*

Among all the teachings conveyed by the Apostles, especially those of Jesus, three things should always take precedence in every worship service: “*Christ died for our sins... He was buried... He was raised.*” Paul preached these three essentials in Corinth and shared them with everyone he encountered. In order of significance, these three messages must be proclaimed each time the Church gathers together.

“*According to Scripture...*” Which Scripture is that? The answer is found in Isaiah 53. Once again, Paul hints at who he is addressing regarding the issues in Corinth. Some Gentile believers may have become familiar with the Old Testament after their salvation, but every Jewish believer should have known it by heart.

a) Eyewitnesses to the Resurrection (15:5-7)

Paul will now demonstrate the truth of the three essential points that should be conveyed in every message during each worship service.

⁵ *and that He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve.* ⁶ *After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;* ⁷ *then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;*

Here, Paul organizes the appearances of the resurrected Jesus in chronological order. The first was Peter (Cephas). However, in 57 AD, when this letter was written, Peter remained the chief leader of the Apostles.

“... *then to the twelve...*” refers to the group of Apostles. It does not indicate the number he appeared to. They were called the twelve, even though Apostle Jude had already taken his own life for betraying Jesus. Although Thomas was not present during the meeting with the twelve, he would attend a week later. At that time, Paul was not counted among the Apostles. “...*Then to the twelve...*” is simply a title used for the original Apostles.

Afterward, Jesus appeared to “*more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, but some have fallen asleep.*” We do not know whether this appearance took place in Jerusalem or Galilee, but there is good reason to believe it was in Galilee. There, the Sermon on the Mount attracted over 5,000 attendees, and Jesus sent the Apostles there to meet Him (Matthew 26:32; 28:10). Believers could gather there safely and securely. Some argue it must have been in Galilee because Jerusalem would have been too hostile for believers to assemble. However, this argument lacks merit. At the time of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, Jerusalem was predominantly Jewish.

Additionally, everyone was aware of the crucifixion of Jesus, and news of His resurrection spread rapidly. By that time, Pentecost had not yet occurred. Once it did, in Jerusalem, 40 days after Jesus’ ascension, over 3,000 were saved. Therefore, claiming that a large gathering of believers could not have assembled to witness Jesus alive from the dead is inaccurate. Nevertheless, we have

evidence that this assembly of 500 did take place in Jerusalem. The LORD's resurrection was not done in secret; it was not an event hidden away. It was real, and all of Jerusalem was aware of it, with most of the town having seen Him resurrected. In my opinion, Paul noted this appearance in Jerusalem. Let us not forget that Paul was Saul the Pharisee, who witnessed the persecution and crucifixion of Jesus firsthand in Jerusalem. Undoubtedly, this appearance to the 500 was part of his personal testimony when he saw Jesus risen from the dead amidst the crowds in Jerusalem. When Paul stood before Festus and King Agrippa in Acts 26, he shared his Damascus Road experience. Then he explained what he knew about the resurrection of the LORD in Jerusalem. In Acts 26:26, Paul says to King Agrippa,

"For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner" (Acts 26:26).

When Paul states, *"for this [resurrection] has not been done in a corner,"* he is informing King Agrippa and all of us today that the entire city of Jerusalem was aware of the resurrection of the LORD. It was no secret to anyone!

"...most of whom are still alive, but some have fallen asleep," indicates that most of the witnesses to the resurrected Lord Jesus were still living when Paul wrote this letter, which was 27 years after the resurrection and ascension. Once again, Paul, formerly known as Saul the Pharisee, personally knew many of those who saw the resurrected Jesus. He was familiar with those who were still alive and could testify to the Lord's resurrection.

"... but some have fallen asleep." The phrase "fallen asleep" is a beautiful way to express that someone has died in the New Testament. It appears in Matthew 27:52, John 11:11, and Acts 7:60. The Greek term for "fallen asleep" originates from a word meaning to lie down or be laid down. In 1 Corinthians 7:39, Paul uses the same Greek word when he tells the wife that if her husband has died, she is free to marry again.

"... then He appeared to James." At the time of Jesus's resurrection, there were two individuals named James. One was James, the brother of John, the son of Zebedee, a cousin of Jesus and one of the twelve apostles. Jesus had already met with the twelve apostles, so this James must be the Lord's brother instead. He would later become the pastor of the Church in Jerusalem, the author of the Book of James, and the writer of the letter found in Acts 15, which addressed the decision that Gentiles did not need to become fully Jewish to be Christians (Galatians 2:9, Acts 15:13, Acts 21:18). This James did not believe in his brother as the Christ until after the resurrection, and neither did the rest of Jesus' brothers believe until after the resurrection (Acts 1:14). They were in the upper room. Since we do not know which James it was, it is most likely that it was the Lord's brother.

The sentence in the timeline states, *"...then to all the apostles."* Paul purposefully includes the word "all" here. By the time he writes this sentence, he is aware of the story from 27 years earlier, when Thomas, the doubter, was absent the first time but present a week later. This establishes a timeline order based on what Paul says next.

b) Paul's Personal Encounter with Christ (15:8)

Next, Paul discusses his personal encounter with Christ in verse 8.

⁸ *and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.*

After the LORD's ascension to heaven, Scripture notes only two more appearances to humans. The next is the appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus. The last will be the appearance to John the Apostle, revealing the Revelation that leads to the LORD's Second Coming. Paul would not have been aware of the vision of the Revelation, which will occur 38 years after he writes this letter.

Paul refers to himself as *"last of all."* At that time, he was the last person the LORD had appeared to. The purpose of that appearance was to lead Paul to become a believer and to call him to be His Apostle. He describes this calling as being *"like one untimely born."* Paul could not have humbled himself further. He makes this statement in light of what he expresses next.

c) Paul's Unworthiness and Humility (15:9)

Paul has already addressed his apostleship in Chapter 9. In this section, he is not discussing the validity of his apostleship but rather his humility and unworthiness as an apostle.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. "For I am the least of the apostles."

Twice, Paul asserts that he is *"the least of the apostles."* Through his humility and modesty, Paul does not believe he deserves to be an apostle. This feeling does not stem from any flaw in the commission, nor does it arise from a lack of qualifications to bear witness to Jesus as the Christ. However, Paul can never forget what he did to the Church before the Lord blinded him on the road to Damascus. He feels unworthy. His humility does not disqualify him from serving as an apostle; rather, it offers him a unique perspective on Christ. He is eager to share his testimony about the resurrection. Given Paul's history, his testimony carries significant weight in the Church. Additionally, his account reveals that Paul struggles to forgive himself, even though the Lord has fully forgiven him. Following this, Paul shares more.

d) The Transforming Power of God's Grace (Verse 10)

After experiencing the LORD's forgiveness, Paul discusses the transformative power of God's grace.

¹⁰ 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.

We might even say that the other side of appropriate humility is the tendency to turn to God and His grace. Notice how Paul's character now stands in stark contrast to the arrogant Pharisee he once was. Paul understands that the LORD's forgiving grace was neither vain, empty, nor worthless. Nor was it Paul's grace; it was a gift from the LORD. With that gift of grace, Paul lacked nothing and was enriched in the LORD. He has already conveyed this same thought to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:4-8). Now, Paul applies it to himself.

Yet, in his humility and by the grace of God, Paul makes a compelling statement about the work he has accomplished as an Apostle: *"I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."* Is it true that Paul views his contributions to the LORD as surpassing those of all the other Apostles combined? How does he measure this in his mind? Is he referring to the distance traveled or the number of salvations counted?

When Paul wrote these words, all the Apostles except Judas Iscariot and James, the brother of John, were still alive and spread throughout various parts of the Roman Empire, overseeing the development of the Church. The New Testament does not provide details about the Apostles'

work in the world, but Church history does. It chronicles the locations of the Apostles' ministries in the following general regions until their deaths.

- **Andrew, Matthew, and Bartholomew** spread the Gospel in the regions of the Black Sea, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia.
- **Thomas, Thaddeus, and Simeon** spread the gospel in Armenia, Syria, Assyria, Parthia, Iran, and India.
- **John, Philip, and Paul** spread their teachings in Turkey, Macedonia, and Greece.
- **Peter** spread his message in Babylon, Syria, Northern Turkey, and Italy.
- **James, John's brother**, evangelized in Spain before his death.
- **James, the son of Alphaeus**, evangelized Lower Egypt.

If this church history is accurate, Paul's statement cannot refer to miles traveled. A quick glance at a map shows that the area Paul evangelized was one of the smallest among all the apostles.

Luke's account in the Book of Acts details every stop on Paul's three missionary journeys. We lack similar information for others, aside from Peter's visits to the Babylon area in present-day Iraq. None of the records indicate how many souls were saved.

What does Paul mean by the statement, "*I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me*"? This cannot refer to a count of Gentiles versus Jews. However, a brief look at the ministry areas of the other Apostles reveals that they were equally committed to ministering among Gentiles. In fact, Peter evangelized more Jews than the others. Let's focus on two words in this sentence: "*labored*" and "*grace*."

The word "labored" often leads Western minds to conclude that Paul worked harder and longer than the other Apostles. However, the Greek term Paul employs, *kopiaio*, is more accurately translated as "toil." Hebrew has a similar word, *amal*. Both terms are defined similarly, conveying the idea of working while experiencing weariness or difficulty, even to the point of exhaustion or fatigue.

We do not know the health issues of any of the other Apostles, but we know that Paul was blind and depended on his doctor and constant, silent companion, Luke, at all times. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that in those days, a blind man in his 60s would have faced more weariness than the other healthy Apostles, assuming they were indeed healthy.

Paul's statement, "*But the grace of God with me*," reflects his response to the weariness he experiences in ministry. The "gift of God's grace" is all he needs; in that grace, he lacks nothing, as Paul has already noted in 1 Corinthians 1:4-8.

e) Unity in the Apostles' Message (15:11)

Despite the challenges presented by Paul's fatigue in serving the LORD, there is unity in the message of the Apostles.

¹¹ *Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

Paul has no issue with anyone who preaches the Gospel, which leads the saints in Corinth to believe in the Lord Jesus. Regardless of who delivers the message, the same Gospel is communicated through their lips. I wish we could say the same today. I wish we could claim that every pulpit in every church proclaims the same Gospel, but we cannot. Some preach the Gospel according to Luther, while others share the Gospel according to Calvin, resulting in differing messages. Then there are those who preach the Gospels of Arminius or Zwingli, as well as the

distorted Gospel promoted by King Henry VIII and King James. They ordered that all ecclesiastical terms in the Scriptures be renamed with new meanings to deter the people of England from leaving the Church of England and returning to the Catholic Church. (You might want to research Henry VIII's "Ecclesiastical Act of 1534" and King James' order of 1609 for the King James Version, which required translators to use ecclesiastical titles as they appeared in Henry's *Great Bible* and the subsequent *Bishops Bible* and NOT TRANSLATE them according to the actual meanings of the Greek words.) What a tragedy this has caused! What divisions have been created in the Church? Surely, Paul's handling of this same issue in 1 Corinthians 1:11-13 should have been enough to prevent the actions of the reformers in the 1500s, but it did not. The lesson in this letter from Paul was not even considered. As a result, the teachings of men have splintered the Church into many divisions.

Nonetheless, the Gospel messages preached by the Apostles during Paul's time were unchanged.

f) The Hope of Those Who Deny the Gospel (15:12-13)

As Paul mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, one-third of the three points to address whenever the Church gathers is that Jesus rose from the dead. In verses 5–7, Paul took the time to list those who could testify to the truth of the resurrection, having witnessed the resurrected Lord. However, Paul has been informed by Chloe's messengers that some people in Corinth deny the resurrection. Paul questions the hope of those who reject the Gospel message of the resurrection.

¹² Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised;

The resurrection of Jesus posed a significant challenge to the salvation of many, even during Paul's time (Acts 4:1-2; 5, 17; 23:6-9). For the philosophers of that era, the idea of a resurrected Jesus seemed absurd (Acts 17:32). It's crucial to remember that Corinth is located in Greece, which served as the epicenter of philosophical thought for many centuries before Jesus' birth. This notion was so deeply ingrained in the culture that any belief contradicting the rejection of a resurrected man was considered unacceptable. Nevertheless, the Gnostics were receptive to the idea of eternal life through Christ, as long as their belief excluded the concept of a resurrected body.

Paul's statement, "*But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised...*" implies, "We have a problem. Greek philosophy has infiltrated the Church's theology." Throughout history, philosophy has been a source of many errors in the Church since Paul's time. Denying the resurrection of Christ also undermines Jesus' message prior to His resurrection. Jesus predicted that He would rise on the third day after His death (John 2:18-22). Our faith in the Lord Jesus is grounded in what He promised to do, regardless of how implausible it may seem, and in the fact that He fulfilled that promise, however impossible it might appear. John noted that Jesus declared He would be resurrected on the third day. Matthew 26:61, 27:40, and Mark 14:58, 15:29 recount people affirming His promise of resurrection on the third day.

Then, on the third day after His death, Jesus was resurrected. That said, Paul noted those who could still testify to the LORD's resurrection when this letter was written. Undoubtedly, Paul was also a personal witness.

However, Paul presents an axiom from Greek life in this letter. An axiom is a statement accepted as fact—a truth considered self-evident based on observation, yet it cannot be proven. Paul has already established his position as a witness to the resurrection, along with more than 500 others, most of whom were still alive when this letter was written. How will Paul use that axiom? He will use it to demonstrate the futility of Christian faith without the Resurrection.

g) The Vanity of Christian Faith Without the Resurrection (15:14-15)

Paul makes a bold statement about the vanity or emptiness of preaching a faith without the resurrection.

¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. ¹⁵ Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

Paul pushes the axiom to its limits, revealing its emptiness and leading to unintended consequences, particularly in sharing the Gospel story of His resurrection. If the assertion that Jesus's resurrection is false stands, then preaching the Gospel becomes pointless, and consequently, the faith of those who believe in the resurrection also loses significance.

If the axiom that Jesus's resurrection was false is valid, Paul addresses the deep implications regarding his character and that of the more than 500 witnesses he presented to the Corinthian Church. What is his conclusion? He asserts that both he and they are "*false witnesses of God.*" As false witnesses, they mislead people with their testimony that Jesus was raised from the dead and that they saw the resurrected Jesus. Their testimony would be a lie, and this lie would concern God.

h) The Devastating Consequences of No Resurrection (15:16-18)

What are the serious consequences of no resurrection?

¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; ¹⁷ and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

The consequence, if the axiom holds true, is startling. Those who believe in the Gospel message have not been forgiven for their sins. More importantly, those who have believed the Gospel message and have died have "perished," indicating *they have been destroyed*.

i) Christians to Be Pitied If There Is No Resurrection (15:19)

If the Greek axiom is true, Christians are to be pitied if there is no resurrection.

¹⁹ If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

Notice the word "hoped." This term implies a confident expectation or trust in something or someone. Here, it signifies the believer's hope in the LORD and His promises. It goes beyond wishful thinking; it is grounded in the testimonies of eyewitnesses. We can place our faith in those accounts that affirm Jesus fulfilled His promise with His resurrection. He rose from the dead on the third day. If these testimonies are false, all Christians should be "pitied." The Greek word for "pitied" suggests a state of deserving compassion due to an unfortunate condition that needs mercy. If Paul were speaking today, he might express it this way: "If our hope in Christ is only for this life and not for the next, God help us all."

However, that is not the case. The Lord Jesus has risen from the dead.