

**Another Look at
1 Corinthians 15:3-11**

By Bob Wilkin

I've heard many suggest that 1 Cor 15:3-11 is one of the clearest statements in the Bible of how one is born again. Many feel that Paul is here telling believers precisely what we should say in order to lead people to faith in the Lord Jesus for eternal life.

It's my contention that Paul is not here explaining the saving message he shared with unbelievers. There's too much Paul doesn't say here to make it a statement of his saving message. And there are elements here that clearly are not essential truths a person must believe to be born again.

What people do, when they point to this passage, is to select certain phrases that they feel are important, ignore others they feel aren't, and add in passages from other books which they feel complete the message. I believe this is done with excellent intentions. However, even though they don't realize it, they are actually leaving out most of what Paul said in these verses, and they are adding in much that Paul didn't choose to say.

If the resulting presentation isn't precisely what Paul said in these verses, then we ought to reexamine what Paul actually said here and ask if what he said is intended to give us the way to present the saving message.

Things Which Are Typically Left Out When Using 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

If Paul was stating here the precise way in which we should share our faith, then surely *every word* would be important. Yet what we find is that out of 185 words in verses 3-11, most only cite *part* of the 40 words in verses 3-4. Why do they leave out over 75% of what Paul said in these verses if these are the precise words we should use to share the saving message with someone?

According to the Scriptures. In verses 3-4 Paul twice mentions that Jesus' death and resurrection were "according to the Scriptures." Yet how often have we heard an evangelist use this passage and yet not mention that these were in fulfillment of OT prophecies?

And that He was buried. Between the references to Jesus' death and resurrection is a statement about His burial. Most evangelists consider this helpful, but not essential information, so they often fail to mention it. Yet if this is precisely how Paul wants us to share our faith, how can we leave anything out?

And that He was seen... Also often left out is what Paul said in verses 5-8. Of course there is nearly twice as much in these 4 verses than in the two verses many [partially]

use when sharing their faith. Paul takes great pains to discuss proofs of Jesus' resurrection. Yet people often leave this out since they consider it to be helpful, but not essential, information.

I am the least of the apostles. The closing three verses are almost never mentioned when people use these verses to share their faith. Why? I believe it is because people believe that Paul is giving information here that isn't really important today when we share our faith. Yet if these verses aren't important for us to use when we share our faith, then how can we say this passage is given to us to show us how to share our faith clearly?

Things Which Are Typically Added In When Using 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

Not only do people leave things out, but they also supplement what Paul said with words of their own.

Justification by faith alone apart from works. Try hard but you'll not find a mention of justification by faith apart from works in this passage. You find that in Gal 2:15-16 and in Galatians 3 and Romans 3-4. But it just isn't here. Anywhere.

While Paul does refer to the fact that his readers believed (vv 2, 11), he doesn't say what it is that they believed. He doesn't say that they believed that simply by faith in Jesus they were once and for all justified or given everlasting life that can never be lost.

Surely if Paul were trying to show the believers in Corinth (and all believers of all time) how to share the saving message with people, he would have included this central feature he emphasized in Galatians and Romans.

The perfect humanity of Jesus. Note that Paul didn't say here, as he did in 2 Cor 5:21, that Jesus never sinned. A person could believe all of what Paul says here and yet believe that Jesus was a sinner just like us. Whether that is an essential truth that must be believed for one to be born again is open to question. But, if it is, then clearly this passage isn't giving us all the essential truths that must be believed. (Note: Paul doesn't even say in 2 Cor 5:21 that we must believe this truth to be born again. He merely reminds the believing readers that this is true.)

The full deity of Jesus. Also not found here is a clear statement of the deity of Christ. The Trinity is not discussed. The Father is not specifically mentioned (though *God* in v 10 may refer to Him, or to the Godhead). Nor is the Holy Spirit. The

equality of Jesus with the other members of the Godhead is not mentioned. Jesus is not called *God* in this passage. *In fact, the actual name of Jesus nowhere appears in this passage.* Except for one reference to *the Christ* in verse 3, all other references to the Lord Jesus in verses 3-11 use the third person singular pronoun, *He*.

Whether these are essential truths that a person must believe to be born again is beyond the scope of this article. But, if they are, clearly this passage isn't giving us the saving message.

The cross and the blood. While Paul does say, "Christ died *for our sins*," he fails to specifically mention the cross or the blood of Christ in these verses. Many feel that it is important to point out to people where and how Jesus died. Yet Paul doesn't do that here.

Again, if it is essential for someone to believe that Jesus died *on the cross* and that He *shed His blood* for our sins, then Paul isn't giving enough information here.

Further Evidence That 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 Is Intended for Sanctification, Not Justification

Paul is talking here about his *gospel*, his good news message (15:1). Paul's gospel message included more than simply what we must believe to be born again (1 Cor 4:15). It also included fulfilled prophecies, the Rapture, Jesus' soon return, future judgment at the Bema (believers) and Great White Throne (unbelievers), Paul's own apostleship, the church, and Jesus' ultimate victory over wickedness and His establishment of righteousness on earth (see Rom 2:16; 15:16, 29; 16:25; 1 Cor 9:14; 2 Cor 11:7-8; Phil 1:5; 2:22; 4:3, 15; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 3:2; 2 Thess 2:13-14; 1 Tim 1:11; 2 Tim 1:8, 10; 2:8-13). Paul's gospel was a message that he regularly proclaimed to believers for their sanctification (see Rom 1:15; Gal 2:14-21, noting especially v 20).

Anyone familiar with the NT knows that 1 Corinthians 15 is the resurrection chapter. Paul's discussion of the resurrection doesn't begin at v 12 where Paul says, "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?" It begins in vv 1-11.

There's the point. In this chapter Paul is countering heresy among the believers in Corinth. Verses 1-11 lead into verses 12-58. The good news Paul preached to the believers in Corinth while among them centered on Jesus' resurrection. Take away the resurrection and then believers "are of all men the most pitiable" (v 19).

How Can We Decide What Are Essential Truths That Must Be Believed to Be Born Again If No Passage Lists Them All?

Recently a pastor harangued me because I said that the saving message is found in John 3:16; 5:24; and 6:47. He felt I was leaving things out.

As I spoke with him, I realized that he was quite extreme in what he felt must be included. He told me that there's no single passage in the Bible that tells us all we must believe to be born again. Indeed, when I pressed him, he said there was no single *book* in the Bible that includes everything we must believe to be born again.

While many would find fault with that last statement, many agree with his contention that there is no single passage in the Bible where God tells us precisely what we must believe to be born again. (This is born out by the fact that they never use just one passage, including 1 Cor 15:3-11, when they share their faith.) But if this is so, then how anyone could be sure that he believed enough to be born again? And how anyone would know precisely what to say when sharing his faith?

If there isn't any guidance from God on precisely what we must believe, then how do we decide? How do we know which truths are essential, which are helpful, and which are discipleship truths?

That people supplement 1 Cor 15:3-11 with other texts should tell us that they do not believe that it contains all we must believe to be born again. If there is no definitive passage, then seemingly there could be scores of different passages one would have to understand and believe to be born again.

John's Gospel Repeatedly Tells Us the Saving Message

God has indeed given us the answer clearly and simply. There is a book, John's Gospel, that tells us over and over again what we must believe to be saved (cf. John 20:30-31). But a person need not believe the whole Gospel of John to be born again. We know this because John gives us examples of people who came to faith simply by hearing a few sentences from Jesus. A person can be born again by believing just a part of a paragraph like John 3:14-18, 6:35-40, or 11:25-27.

Indeed, someone is born again if he merely believes *one key verse*, like John 3:16; 4:14; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:26.

It grieves me that some Free Grace people are abandoning the evangelistic purpose of John's Gospel. When they do so, they no longer know what the saving message is. They pick and choose verses and doctrines here and there and make up what they think a person must believe to be born again. *The result is a well-intentioned message. But it is man-made.*

Years ago a pastor friend ("Zeke") rebuked me after I spoke at his church. I had said in my message that the cross of Christ tells us *how* Jesus fulfills His promise of everlasting life to the believer, but that the Lord said that He Himself and His promise of eternal life to the believer is the object of saving faith, not His cross per se. Zeke said that the object of faith *is* Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and His bodily resurrection from the dead on the third day. Zeke said that 1 Cor 15:3-11 proves that.

Zeke and I were having lunch the next day and he told me about a speaking opportunity he had had a year earlier in an orphanage. He told me he preached the cross and resurrection. He said you could have heard a pin drop. Zeke reported that there was great power in his preaching.

Then he got a wistful look in his eyes and said, "You know, I hope I shared enough so that maybe some of those boys and girls could have been saved that day."

Why did he say that? Because he didn't know precisely what a person must believe to be born again. And why didn't he know that? Because he didn't have a verse or a passage that told him.

Do you?