

PAUL AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS:  
A CASE STUDY IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

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*Introduction*

How well did the Apostle Paul know the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth? Did Paul know anything of the life and ministry of Jesus or was he only interested in the theological implications of the crucifixion and resurrection? These questions have divided New Testament scholars for many years. The classic contrast is that of W.D. Davies who argued that “Paul is steeped in the mind and words of his Lord”<sup>1</sup> and R. Bultmann who claimed that “the teaching of the historical Jesus plays no role, or practically none, in Paul”.<sup>2</sup> This debate has expanded beyond the disputes of the academic world, as seen by the recent claim of one former New Testament professor writing for a popular audience:

What is absolutely striking about [the writings of Paul] is their virtual silence on the whole subject of a historical Jesus of Nazareth. There is no question that this is the datum that ultimately stares down the proponents of historicity.<sup>3</sup>

Is it true that the teachings and life of the historical Jesus was at best unimportant and at worst unknown to Paul?

There is, in fact, evidence to support that the earthly life of Jesus was both known and used by Paul in his Epistles. This paper will focus on 1 Corinthians as a case study on Paul’s knowledge and use of the Jesus story. It is helpful to focus on one letter, in order to obtain a clear

1. W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 140.

2. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1951), vol. I, p. 35.

3. Tom Harpur, *Pagan Christ* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004), pp. 166-67.

understanding of the possible uses of the Jesus tradition and how that fits with Paul's overall argument for the particular situation. While there are some important references in other epistles, 1 Corinthians is one of the most important sources for our understanding of Paul's knowledge of Jesus. S. Kim, in his generous list of references, allusions and echoes of Jesus' sayings, offers four certain or probable references and eight possible echoes in 1 Corinthians, a frequency comparable only to that found in Romans.<sup>4</sup> What is also helpful about focusing on 1 Corinthians is the fact that Paul uses the Jesus story in a number of different ways, which clarifies how he understood this material. This paper will look at (1) Paul's explicit citation of Jesus' sayings, (2) Paul's use of liturgical traditions of the Jesus story and (3) Paul's echoing of imagery or statements known to us from the Gospel narratives.

### *1. Explicit Citation of Jesus' Sayings*

In Paul's writings, there are six explicit references to the "words of the Lord". When those that are words of the risen Lord or prophetic teachings by Paul are removed from the list, there are only three references in 1 Corinthians and one in 1 Thessalonians. One of the references in 1 Corinthians is the liturgical tradition found in 1 Cor. 11:23-25, which will be dealt with below. The remaining two references in 1 Corinthians are seen by some—known as "minimalists"—as the only two explicit references to sayings of Jesus in Paul.<sup>5</sup>

#### *1 Corinthians 7:10-11*

And to the ones having married, not I but the Lord commands that a wife should not be separated from her husband. But if she is indeed separated, let her remain unmarried or let her be reconciled to her husband and a husband is not to leave his wife.<sup>6</sup>

This passage takes place in the context of a lengthy answer by Paul to a particular question concerning marriage, which was asked by the

4. S. Kim, "Jesus, Sayings of," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 475-81.

5. Kim, "Jesus, Sayings of," p. 475.

6. Scripture passages are the author's translation.

Corinthians. The length of the reply gives some indication of both the importance of this subject for Paul and the level of misunderstanding by the Corinthians. Within this argument, Paul takes the rare action of quoting a saying of Jesus to support his position. There is no reason to presume that this was a direct revelation from the risen Christ rather than a reference to a well-known teaching.<sup>7</sup>

The teaching of Jesus found here is from Mk 10:2-12 and parallels, where Jesus taught that divorce was only a temporary concession, that divorce was contrary to God's will and that remarriage after divorce was adultery. C.K. Barrett sees Paul's use of Jesus' teaching on divorce as evidence that Mark gives the original form of the teaching rather than Matthew who gives an option of divorce in cases of fornication.<sup>8</sup>

The divorce sayings appear both in Mark (Mk 10:11 // Mt. 19:9) and in Q (Lk. 16:16 // Mt. 5:32). Mark and Paul apply the saying to wives and husbands. In both Mark and Q, the form is of casuistic law. However, Paul remolds the saying into its apodictic form to fit with the Corinthian situation.<sup>9</sup>

While it is likely that Paul did remold this teaching to fit the Corinthian context, there are some who have seen greater changes. Nikolaus Walter sees Paul's divorce teaching as

an expansion of older tradition on the basis of Hellenistic laws regarding marriage. So it is beyond question that here we have a saying of Jesus which has been expanded and "applied" after Easter and in an "alien" environment and that furthermore this new version has been attributed to Jesus...<sup>10</sup>

However, this interpretation is not necessary, since Paul's use of the divorce teaching is faithful to Jesus' teaching as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. There is nothing to indicate that this passage is anything more than Jesus' teaching applied to the Corinthian situation. As Traugott Holtz states, "In form its presentation is fitted to the present

7. Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), p. 140.

8. C.K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1968), p. 163.

9. Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 292-93.

10. Nikolaus Walter, "Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition," in A.J.M. Wedderburn (ed.), *Paul and Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), p. 69.

text and its situation, although it is closely dependent on the instructions of the Lord received in the tradition.”<sup>11</sup>

Although Paul considers his teaching to be authoritative, even when not quoting Jesus, it is clear that he sees Jesus’ authority as higher than his own. When Paul speaks on his own authority, he “speaks,” not “commands.”<sup>12</sup> F.W. Grosheide worded it this way: “The apostle may recommend, the Saviour commands.”<sup>13</sup> While, most likely Paul saw his teaching as more than recommendations, his regret at not having a word of the Lord in 1 Cor. 7:12 demonstrates his esteem for Jesus’ teaching: “It is not Paul’s practice to quote dominical sayings, but he evidently takes Jesus’ instruction...as absolutely binding on the church.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast to this, J. Murphy-O’Connor sees Paul’s apparent allowance for divorce in 1 Cor. 7:15 as questioning Jesus’ absolute authority: “We are forced to the conclusion that Paul considered Jesus’ prohibition of divorce, not as a binding precept, but as a significant directive whose relevance to a particular situation had to be evaluated by the pastor responsible for the community.”<sup>15</sup> However, Paul’s teaching about divorce in 1 Cor. 7:15 may simply be explicative of the radical prohibition for dealing with mixed marriages.<sup>16</sup>

Why does Paul explicitly use a teaching of Jesus at this point when most often he does not? Fee sees the reason for Paul’s usual lack of explicit reference to Jesus as the result of (1) Paul seeing all his ethical commands as coming from the Lord as Paul models himself after Jesus and (2) that many of the situations faced by the Gentile churches were not addressed by Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Barrett sees one reason for Paul’s use of Jesus in this case as the difference between this teaching on divorce and that of the current Jewish teaching and even the Old Testament allowance

11. Traugott Holtz, “Paul and the Oral Gospel Tradition,” in Henry Wansbrough (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 383.

12. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 140.

13. F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 163.

14. William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *1 Corinthians* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 212.

15. Quoted by Frans Neiryck, “Paul and the Sayings of Jesus,” in A. Vanhoye (ed.), *L’Apôtre Paul: Personnalité, style et conception du ministère* (BETL, 73; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986), p. 317.

16. Neiryck, “Paul and the Sayings of Jesus,” p. 320.

17. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 291-92.

for divorce. As a result, Paul needed to rely on the additional authority of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

*1 Corinthians 9:14*

So also the Lord ordained those announcing the Gospel to live from the Gospel.

This verse takes place in the context of an argument that was very close to Paul's heart: his status as an apostle. In every Epistle, excluding Philippians, Paul, to some degree, has to fight for his acceptance as an apostle. Although on the surface, Paul is using his example of not receiving all of his rights as an example to the Corinthians to voluntarily restrict their freedom, it is clear that Paul is also attempting to assert his identity as an apostle with the Corinthians.

In the midst of this discussion, Paul brings up another saying of Jesus. This passage comes from Lk. 10:7 in which Jesus gives instructions to the seventy-two (twelve in the parallel in Mt. 10:10) missionary disciples as they were about to prepare the way for Jesus. One of the instructions was to "Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages." While Paul is known to use Old Testament passages out of context for his purposes, Paul does make an appropriate connection between his own ministry and that of the seventy-two. Paul had been sent out to prepare the way for Jesus and therefore Paul deserved the same rights given to the first missionaries. The use of ἀπέστειλεν in Lk. 10:1 introducing a section that Paul uses to defend the rights of apostleship is additional evidence of Paul's reference to Jesus.<sup>19</sup>

B. Fjärstedt has developed an interesting theory concerning clusters of theme words that function as allusions to traditional material. Fjärstedt focused specifically on 1 Corinthians 1–4 and 9. There has been much criticism of Fjärstedt's work, as his proposed allusions have proved to be too allusive.<sup>20</sup> However, Dale Allison believes that Fjärstedt has demonstrated his case with 1 Corinthians 9. When the vocabulary of 1 Corinthians 9 and Luke 10 are compared, the parallels

18. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 162.

19. David Wenham, *Paul and Jesus: The True Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 157.

20. Dale C. Allison, Jr., "The Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels: The Pattern of the Parallels," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982), p. 9.

are extensive and the thoughts are similar.<sup>21</sup> It seems clear that Paul had Luke 10 (or the tradition behind it) in mind when he wrote 1 Corinthians 9, with 1 Cor. 9:14 only being the most obvious example.

The actual saying of Jesus was originally a proverb and not a command. However, within the tradition, Jesus' authority makes it a command.<sup>22</sup> Although it is unknown if the Corinthians were aware of the missionary discourse, Paul's casual use of it suggests that it was known to them.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of Paul's use of a Jesus saying at this point is that he was trying to build up a particularly strong case by combining reason and common experience, the Old Testament, universal religious practice and finally the teachings of Jesus.<sup>24</sup> The fact that 1 Tim. 5:18 explicitly quotes Lk. 10:7 is significant. If 1 Timothy was written by Paul, this is proof that Paul was very familiar with this particular Jesus tradition. If 1 Timothy was written by someone else, he was being true to Paul in identifying 1 Cor. 9:14 with Lk. 10:7.<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:14 is very important for helping us to understand Paul's pattern of using the Jesus tradition. As Holtz states, "Paul appeals to an instruction of Jesus, gives its factual content in so far as it is necessary for the context of his argument, but does not quote the saying of Jesus which he envisages, although he surely had it in mind in a fixed form of words."<sup>26</sup>

## 2. *Liturgical Traditions of Jesus*

Although 1 Cor. 11:23-25 clearly is an example of Paul's quotation of Jesus, it is often treated differently because it belongs to a liturgical tradition.<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is introduced by Paul in a similar way and also most likely belongs to a liturgical tradition. Both passages are very important for revealing Paul's knowledge of the historical Jesus.

21. Allison, "Pauline Epistles," p. 9.

22. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 413.

23. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 413.

24. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 208.

25. Holtz, "Paul and the Oral Gospel Tradition," p. 384.

26. Holtz, "Paul and the Oral Gospel Tradition," p. 384.

27. Walter, "Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition," p. 60.

*1 Corinthians 11:23-25*

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you that the Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread and having given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body on behalf of you, do this for my remembrance.” Likewise also the cup, after the meal, saying, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, do this as often as you drink in my remembrance.”

This passage is introduced by Paul with the technical language of tradition: “received” (παρέλαβον) and “delivered” (παρέδωκα), as established in both Jewish and Greek usage.<sup>28</sup> The question that arises is: how did Paul receive this tradition from the Lord? Was it a direct revelation from the risen Christ? Or was this tradition passed on to Paul by others, such as Peter or James? What complicates matters is Paul’s comment in Gal. 1:11-12, “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.” Fee explains how Paul could receive this tradition from other Christians without contradicting Gal. 1:11-12: “In Galatians Paul is not referring to the teachings and narratives about Jesus, but to the message of redemption through Christ’s death and resurrection, offered freely by God to those who believe.”<sup>29</sup> Barrett offers a good compromise between direct revelation and human tradition when he suggests that this is an example of “the authority of the Lord operating with, and through, the human tradition.”<sup>30</sup> This tradition need not have been in written form when Paul received it.<sup>31</sup> The fact that this tradition was in a fixed state does not contradict its oral nature.<sup>32</sup>

Despite some differences, 1 Cor. 11:23-25 is clearly describing the same event recorded in Mt. 26:26-28, Mk 14:22-24 and Lk. 22:19-20. When examined together, it can be seen that not only are there differences between Paul and the Synoptic Gospels, there are also differences among the various Gospel accounts. Closer examination reveals that the tradition of the institution of the Lord’s Supper was passed down in two forms: one represented by Mark and Matthew and the other

28. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 264-65.

29. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 548.

30. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 266.

31. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 243.

32. Holtz, “Paul and the Oral Gospel Tradition,” p. 383.

represented by Paul and Luke.<sup>33</sup> Even after this classification, there remain some differences between Paul and Luke, the most significant difference being that Paul replaces Luke's "which is poured out for you" with "do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." It is likely that Luke represents the more primitive form of the common tradition with Paul adjusting the citation for the Corinthian situation. Fee writes,

Paul repeats the command "do this in my remembrance" precisely because this is where his concern lay—not in the repetition of the words per se, but in their eating the Lord's Supper truly in "Christ's honor," that is, in "remembrance" of the salvation that his death had procured for them.<sup>34</sup>

This passage may have been used liturgically within the churches, but it still is an example of a Jesus tradition known by Paul and used for teaching purposes. Paul writes assuming that the Corinthians know the Passion story.<sup>35</sup> This knowledge may have originated with Paul's passing on of the tradition or it may have been common knowledge in the Church. It is possible that this passage reveals further knowledge of the Passion. David Wenham comments, "The way Paul begins his reminder—'on the night that he was betrayed'—suggests that they knew the story of how Jesus was betrayed as well as the story of the Last Supper."<sup>36</sup> Dale Allison suggests the possibility that the institution was found in a wider context, not quoted by Paul.<sup>37</sup> E. Earle Ellis claims that "the tradition of Jesus' teaching at the Last Supper, which Paul had previously transmitted to the Corinthians, concerned not only the passion of Messiah but also the nature of the church as his body, that is, the body of Christ."<sup>38</sup> What is important is that a significant event in the life of Jesus, an event described in essential agreement with the Gospel accounts, was well known by Paul and the early Church.

33. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 546.

34. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 555-56.

35. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 243.

36. Wenham, *Paul and Jesus*, p. 148.

37. Allison, "Pauline Epistles," p. 16.

38. E. Earle Ellis, "Traditions in 1 Corinthians," *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986), pp. 481-502 (487).

*1 Corinthians 15:3-5*<sup>39</sup>

For I delivered to you as first things, that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried and that he rose on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve.

The present passage is quite different from previous examples. The previous passages all refer to actual words of Jesus, while this passage contains no sayings. Also, the other passages clearly refer to the historical Jesus, while this passage describes Jesus after the resurrection. While to some, the risen Jesus belongs to faith and not to history, it is evident that Paul is describing something different than his usual theological reflections on the cross and the resurrection. Paul seems to be grounding belief in the resurrection in historical facts. As Stanley Porter states, this passage is “one of the most important passages with regard to Paul’s knowledge of the earthly Jesus.”<sup>40</sup>

This passage begins similarly to 1 Cor. 11:23-25 with the language of tradition, but with the omission of the phrase, “received from the Lord.” This undoubtedly was another fixed liturgical tradition that Paul had received from others and had passed on to the Corinthians. Again, with 1 Cor. 11:23-25, this was not received by direct revelation from the risen Christ.<sup>41</sup> That is not to deny Paul’s belief of revelation within the tradition. As Robertson and Plummer remind, “He received the facts from the Apostles and others; the import of the facts was made known to him by Christ.”<sup>42</sup>

Paul does not attempt to prove that God raised Jesus from the dead, since historical evidence cannot prove or disprove the existence of God. What Paul does do is ground the resurrection in its historical context. The resurrection “is not unrelated to history, for the affirmation began to be made at a particular point in time, which can be dated by

39. Barrett suggests that the primitive tradition ends at v. 5; see *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 342.

40. Stanley E. Porter, “Images of Christ in Paul’s Letters,” in Stanley E. Porter, David Tombs and Michael A. Hayes (eds.), *Images of Christ: Ancient and Modern* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 95-112 (99).

41. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 333.

42. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 333.

historical means, and it was motivated by occurrences which can be described in historical terms.”<sup>43</sup>

Some of the historical context that Paul provides is regarding the witnesses to the resurrection. It is worth noting that this tradition does not include the appearances to Mary Magdalene or the two traveling to Emmaus. However the Gospel of John does not include these appearances either in the summary in 21:14, assuming that they could be considered disciples.<sup>44</sup> Most likely, this tradition was crafted to provide the strongest support for the testimony of the resurrection.

The tradition does state that Jesus appeared to Cephas. There is a suggestion that this special appearance took place in Lk. 24:34, which says, “The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” A special appearance to Peter would be expected considering Peter’s denial before the crucifixion and his later rise to leadership in the Church. It should be noted that “Cephas” rather than “Peter” or “Simon” is used in this tradition. “Cephas” is Paul’s usual name for Peter, and it is quite possible that Paul inserted “Cephas” into this tradition.<sup>45</sup> Paul also describes an appearance to the “Twelve.” The absence of Judas is not a contradiction to this description as “the Twelve” refers to the group and not just the number of people. This early mention of “the Twelve” demonstrates that this was not just an early invention of the Church. Fee puts in context the place of “the Twelve” among Jesus’ followers:

This designation for Jesus’ disciples, plus the fact that Paul will later refer to another appearance to “all the apostles” (v. 7), suggests most strongly that the joining of these two terms into the title “the twelve apostles” had not yet taken place in the church. That is, in Paul’s view “the Twelve” were a distinct entity, no doubt considered apostles, but the latter designation covered a much larger group.<sup>46</sup>

It is quite clear that Paul was aware of traditions of some of the historical context for Jesus’ resurrection and that he used those traditions for teaching purposes.

43. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 341.

44. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 336.

45. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 729.

46. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 729.

### 3. *Echoes of Jesus' Teachings*

There are a number of passages in 1 Corinthians that could possibly be echoes of Jesus' teaching. S. Kim lists eight possible echoes of Jesus in 1 Corinthians.<sup>47</sup> For this discussion, two of these will be examined.

#### *1 Corinthians 4:11-13*

Until the present hour, we hunger and thirst and are naked and are buffeted and are unsettled and labour working with our own hand. Being reviled, we bless, being persecuted, we endure, being defamed, we beseech. As refuse of the world we have become scum of all things even until now.

At first glance, Paul does not seem to be quoting Jesus or anyone else. However, Kim lists this passage under "certain or probable references" rather than "possible echoes."<sup>48</sup> The reason for this is that some of the language in this passage is quite close to that found in the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain. Fee sees, "Being reviled we bless," as a direct echo of Jesus' teaching (Lk. 6:28) and Jesus' life (Lk. 23:34).<sup>49</sup> Robertson and Plummer are not sure that Paul is definitely alluding to Jesus' commands, but admit that he is under their influence.<sup>50</sup> Barrett sees both the continuity with Jesus' teaching, as well as the ambiguity of Paul's source:

His behaviour as he describes it recalls clearly the teaching of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount...of which there are fairly clear echoes; Paul, however, characteristically gives no indication that he is aware that he is using the language of Jesus, or acting in obedience to his precepts.<sup>51</sup>

It seems clear that Jesus is using imagery from the Jesus tradition. The question is: Did Paul know he was quoting Jesus? Holtz sees evidence from the use of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain tradition in *Did.* 1:3 to suggest that in this passage, "Paul was conscious that he was adopting

47. Kim, "Jesus, Sayings of," p. 481.

48. Kim, "Jesus, Sayings of," p. 477.

49. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 179.

50. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 87.

51. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 112.

sayings of Jesus into his own speech.”<sup>52</sup> Based on evidence in Romans and 1 Cor. 4:12, Allison believes, “It is not easy to avoid the inference that Paul knew the cluster now preserved in Luke 6:27-38.”<sup>53</sup> When 1 Cor. 4:11-13 is compared to Lk. 6:20-22, 27-31, many of the images overlap. It is likely that Paul had the Sermon on the Mount/ Plain in mind when he wrote this passage, but chose not to offer Jesus as the source. Perhaps the Corinthians were already aware of this material and knew that it came from Jesus.

### *1 Corinthians 13:2-3*

And if I have prophecies and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions and if I deliver my body in order that I might be burned, but if I have not love, I am profited nothing.

This is another passage where Paul is not explicitly quoting Jesus, but where the language is very close to that of Jesus’ teaching. The first part of this passage sounds like Jesus’ promise to his disciples: “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them” (Mt. 13:11). This could be discounted as coincidence, if not for what follows. Paul’s comment about faith that can move mountains also is very close to Jesus’ teaching: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move” (Mt. 17:20). There is some disagreement as to the relevance of this similarity. Robertson and Plummer suggest that both Jesus and Paul used the same proverbial expression.<sup>54</sup> Barrett agrees, believing that Paul is not quoting Jesus but sharing a proverb.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Fee believes that “This qualifier is another sure evidence of Paul’s acquaintance with the teaching of Jesus.”<sup>56</sup> William Orr and James Walther see this as evidence that “Paul proclaimed not only the death and resurrection of Jesus but also his moral teaching.”<sup>57</sup> The probability that Paul is thinking of Jesus’ teaching increases in the next verse where Paul speaks of giving away

52. Holtz, “Paul and the Oral Gospel Tradition,” p. 392.

53. Allison, “Pauline Epistles,” p. 12.

54. Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 290.

55. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 301.

56. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 632 note.

57. Orr and Walther, *1 Corinthians*, p. 291.

possessions, an action often mentioned by Jesus. Fee believes that “Paul is probably once again reflecting on the teaching of Jesus.”<sup>58</sup>

Each phrase by itself is not strong enough to claim an origin in the Jesus tradition, but together they make a good case for Paul’s use of Jesus’ teachings. It is possible that the Corinthians were aware of some of Jesus’ teachings and felt that they were justified in their knowledge, faith and generosity as commended by Jesus. Paul reminded them (without quoting the passage), that obedience to these teachings of Jesus are meaningless without obedience to Jesus’ central message of love for God and for neighbor (Mt. 22:37-40). It is likely that Paul knew the importance that Jesus placed on love for neighbor, as Paul quotes this Old Testament passage twice—Rom. 13:9 and Gal. 5:14—in a similar way to Jesus. As David Wenham states, “We may conclude that in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul is recalling some of the most important examples of spirituality as taught by Jesus, but insisting on the absolute priority of love, which was, of course, the priority in Jesus’ own teaching.”<sup>59</sup> While we cannot know for sure what Paul intended with this imagery, it does seem probable that Paul was responding to some misunderstandings of Jesus’ teaching in the Corinthian church. Once again, Paul’s knowledge of Jesus’ teaching is demonstrated.

### *Conclusion*

It is well known that Paul does not often quote the teachings or refer to the earthly life of Jesus. However, this should not be taken as evidence that these traditions were unknown to Paul. 1 Corinthians is a good example of Paul’s use of the Jesus tradition in a number of forms. In this letter, Paul explicitly cites Jesus, quotes liturgical traditions concerning Jesus and incorporates echoes of Jesus’ teaching into his own arguments. 1 Corinthians demonstrates that the Jesus tradition, including details of the passion and resurrection, as well as specific teachings, were well known to Paul. It seems as if reference to Jesus’ teachings is a tool that Paul uses only when he wants to make a particularly strong point. The lack of use of the Jesus tradition in many places only strengthens the impact when Paul does bring in Jesus’ authority. In other places, Paul has so absorbed the traditions and teachings of Jesus into his own life that the separation between Paul and Jesus is often difficult

58. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 633.

59. Wenham, *Paul and Jesus*, p. 163.

to determine. It is obvious that the traditions of the life and teachings of Jesus were extremely important to Paul and were used in his teaching where appropriate.