

Exegetical Paper: 1 Corinthians 15:1-5

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Introduction

The following paper will exegete the Greek of 1 Cor 15:1-5 in order to determine its original meaning. The first half of the paper will analyse the logical progression of the pericope with some clause-level and grammatical discussion to clarify its meaning, touching upon any text-critical difficulties as and when they arrive. The second half of the paper will then explore what exactly Paul meant to convey by *ἐν πρώτοις*, a phrase translated as “of first importance” by the ESV, NIV, NRSV, and NASB, and as “first of all” by the KJV.¹ The purpose of this latter section is to make the case that *ἐν πρώτοις* could be fairly understood as “*among* the prominent or most important things” based on both the immediate context and larger theological considerations. This understanding would allow Paul to claim the death and resurrection of Christ are both important and focal aspects of the gospel as well as allowing for the nuance that these elements of Christian Truth are not exclusively important to the detriment of other truths that he elsewhere highlights as significant and foundational to the faith.²

Analysis of 1 Corinthians 15:1-5

In 1 Cor Paul is responding to a number of reports brought to him about and from the Corinthian Church.³ In 1 Cor 15:1-5 Paul introduces a new section of the letter and turns to questions the Church had concerning the resurrection to come. The big idea of this pericope concerns the centrality of the events of Christ’s death and resurrection to Paul’s gospel specifically and to the

¹ The NLT has “what was most important” while The Message understands it as “The first thing I did.”

² Discussion on this nuance is strangely limited in most Commentaries with most scholarship concerned with whether or not Paul is best understood as explaining what *he first told* the Church before he told them other truths or whether he means to highlight *the prime importance* of these events to the Christian faith. See Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 251 as an example of the former and Peter Naylor, *1 Corinthians*, EP Study Commentary (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2000), 417 for the latter. Their views will be discussed later in this paper.

³ In the first six chapters he addressed verbal reports brought to him about the church and from the seventh chapter through to the sixteenth Paul addresses issues the Corinthians themselves had written to him about.

Scriptures more generally; with a particular emphasis on Christ's resurrection. There are two main sections: (v1-2) concern the Corinthians' reception and belief in the gospel and (v3-5) concerns matters of prime importance in the gospel. Each section contains four dependent clauses: in (v1-2) they outline how the gospel first came to the Corinthians and in (v3-5) they detail what came first in the gospel when it was preached to them.

1a. *Γνωρίζω δὲ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*: The postpositive *δὲ* functions here as an Initial Marker, signifying the start of a new discourse and introducing a new independent clause.⁴ It indicates Paul is moving to address another question asked of him by the Corinthian Church.⁵ The sense of the word here is “now concerning” the next question.⁶ Paul is now making known (*γνωρίζω*: Pres. Act. Ind. 1st. Sg.) to the Corinthian Church (*ὑμῖν*: ‘to you all’ dat. 2nd. Pl.) the good news (*τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*: Acc. Sg. Neut.). This is not in the sense of telling them for the first time something they did not already know but a ‘making known’ by way of reminder.⁷ *Ἀδελφοί* here is in the vocative case as a simple address identifying the Corinthians as Paul’s brethren in the Lord.⁸ Despite the ethical and doctrinal difficulties in the Corinthian Church Paul continues to speak to them as fellow Christians. Before he moves to state the content of this good news (v3), Paul states four equally dependent clauses that describe both the origin and nature of the gospel he is about to remind them of.

⁴ Andreas J Köstenberger, Benjamin L Merkle, and Robert L Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2020), 465. This indicates that what follows is both thematically unconnected to the previous section but also follows on naturally as the next part of the letter.

⁵ Paul uses *δὲ* the same way each time he moves onto a new question, see 1 Cor 7:1, 8:1, 12:1, 15:1, 16:1.

⁶ BDAG, s.v. “*δὲ*,” 215.

⁷ The rest of the verse makes it clear Paul is talking about previously transmitted information. Nevertheless, it is odd Paul uses *γνωρίζω* instead of a verb like *μνησκόμαι* as *γνωρίζω* would seem to suggest the introduction of something new whereas *μνησκόμαι* more directly concerns recollection and remembrance but Paul’s usage of *γνωρίζω* is easily explained as correct and appropriate by the immediate context of Paul introducing a new unit of thought as mentioned in the last paragraph. See discussion in BDAG, s.v. “*γνωρίζω*,” 203.

⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 39.

1b-2a. *ὁ εὐηγγελισάμεν ὑμῖν*: The relative pronoun here and in the next clause, the accusative *ὁ*, along with the dative *ᾧ* and genitive *οὗ* in the subsequent two clauses connect grammatically to their antecedent, *τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*, at the start of verse 1 as indicated by their concord of gender and number; neuter and singular respectively.⁹ The construction of each clause as having a relative pronoun matching their antecedent along with a verb in the indicative mood highlights that these four dependent clauses can be classified as definite relative clauses.¹⁰ The four clauses make up two pairs, with each clause in each pair interpreting the other. The first explains the gospel is that which Paul had already preached (*εὐηγγελισάμεν*: Aor. Act. Ind. 1st. Sg.) to them (*ὑμῖν*: Dat. 2nd. Pl.).¹¹ The next clause adds that the gospel is that which the Corinthian Church also (*καὶ*) received (*παρέλαβετε*: Aor. Act. Ind. 2nd. Pl.). Paul is emphasising that what he preached, they heard and accepted; they didn't ignore him but took his words to heart. *Παρέλαβετε* indicates they personally and meaningfully accepted it for themselves, specifically for its spiritual benefit.¹² This first pair of dependent clauses reminds the Corinthians how the gospel came to them; the next pair focus instead on how the gospel has been and is at work among them.

In the third clause Paul explains it is in (*ἐν*; here being used as a locative preposition) this gospel they also (*καὶ*) have stood (*ἐστήκατε*: Perf. Act. Ind. 2nd. Pl.). The perfect tense of *ἵστημι* communicates that the action of standing was completed in the past but its effects continue to be felt in the present.¹³ They put their faith in the gospel and continue to believe the gospel. Paul is saying in rhetorical fashion that the Corinthians became Christians and indeed remain Christians; their current status or state of being is as those who are defined by the gospel they received from

⁹ The difference in case in the latter clauses are to be accounted for by their relationship to the prepositions that accompany them.

¹⁰ Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, 288.

¹¹ This was during his second missionary journey, see Acts 18.

¹² Moisés Silva, s.v. “λαμβάνω,” *NIDNTTE*, 3:84.

¹³ William Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, Fourth edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, MI, 2019), 276.

Paul.¹⁴ The final dependent clause elaborates that it is through this gospel (*δι' οὗ*) the Corinthians are also (*καί*) being saved (*σώζεσθε*: Pre. Pass. Ind. 2nd. Pl.). The gospel is the means or instrument used by God through which the Corinthians are presently being saved. The ongoing and incomplete nature of salvation suggested in the present tense of *σώζω* raises a question concerning whether or not the Corinthians can already describe themselves as saved. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians the word also suggests salvation is either a present process or a future possibility.¹⁵ However, to conclude this would be to be guilty of the word fallacy that equates and confuses the specific use of a *word* in a specific context with the overall *concept*.¹⁶ Generally in the NT 'salvation' can rightly refer to three distinct but interrelated aspects of the work of Christ; justification (the Christian is/has been saved), sanctification (the Christian is being saved), and glorification (the Christian is not yet but will be saved).¹⁷ Given the rest of the chapter concerns refuting the idea that the future resurrection will not take place it would seem right to conclude Paul intends to highlight the 'salvation is still in process' aspect. Paul is explaining that the resurrection is still to come and it is by the gospel the faithful are on a course for glory.

2b. Introduces a conditional clause grammatically dependent on the previous clause. Their being saved depends on whether or not they are holding fast (*ὅμῃν εἰ κατέχετε*) to the specific (*τίνι*) word Paul preached to them (*λόγῳ εὐηγγελισάμην*). The idea of holding fast (*κατέχετε*) communicates the the idea of personal apprehension and genuine belief which is confirmed by the complimentary phrase that follows, unless you believed in vain (*ἐκτὸς εἰ μὴ*

¹⁴ BDAG, s.v. “ἵστημι,” 482.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 1:18 “but to us who are being saved” (*τοῖς δὲ σωζομένοις*); 1 Cor 3:15 “he himself will be saved” (*αὐτὸς δὲ σωθήσεται*); 1 Cor 5:5 “his spirit may be saved” (*τὸ πνεῦμα σωθῇ*); 1 Cor 10:33 “they may be saved” (*ἵνα σωθῶσιν*).

¹⁶ Köstenberger, Merkle, Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek*, 488. It would be to ignore the immediate context of the surrounding verses in which Paul had already stated the Corinthians are standing (have stood) in the gospel; not to mention the context of the chapter, the book itself, and the New Testament more broadly all of which deny that salvation is solely an incomplete process. For a selection of examples of past, present, and future expressions of salvation in 1 Cor see 1:7-8, 30; 6:2-3, 11, 14, 19-20; 7:23, 9:23-27; 13:12; 15; 20-23, 35-58.

¹⁷ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 613.

εἰκῇ ἐπιστεύσατε). Ἐκτὸς by itself would normally convey the idea of ‘outside’ or ‘apart from’ but on occasion is used redundantly with εἰ μὴ to simply mean ‘unless.’¹⁸ Paul is qualifying *genuine* faith as faith that lasts, faith that holds on to the gospel; vain belief on the other hand moves away from or abandons the gospel.¹⁹

3a. The post-positive γὰρ simply marks the continuity of thought this clause bears to the previous verses rather than its logical dependence on the previous one (contrast to how δὲ is used in verse 1).²⁰ Paul now describes the gospel he preached (εὐηγγελισάμην) as what he has handed over or entrusted (παρέδωκα; Aor. Act. Ind. 1st. Sg.) to the Corinthians. This verb indicates both his strong personal interest in the gospel and the intention that it’s content be preserved; this latter nuance is particularly evident when παραδίδωμι is used with a dative object (ὕμῖν; to you all).²¹ The portion of the gospel Paul wishes to focus concerns, literally, the first things (ἐν πρώτοις); an adverbial prepositional phrase certainly referring to what Paul preached to them at first but more likely focusing on the importance of the elements he is about to outline. A deeper discussion as to how exactly ἐν πρώτοις should be understood will be left to the latter half of this paper. For now it will simply be noted Paul clearly means to highlight the significance of what he is about to mention as a faithful summary of the gospel. Paul uses the same verb to describe his reception of the gospel (παρέλαβον; Aor. Act. Ind. 1st. Sg.) as he did to describe how the Corinthians received it (παρελάβετε) which may be a deliberate way of suggesting their mutual stake in the gospel. The next two and a half verses contain a series of four dependent creed-like

¹⁸ C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 83; Due to its redundant use Moule lists ἐκτὸς as an “‘Improper’ Preposition.”

¹⁹ In other words Paul is not suggesting the truly saved might truly believe and then later fall away.

²⁰ Warren C. Trenchard, *Complete Vocabulary Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 290; See also Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 649.

²¹ BDAG, s.v. “παραδίδωμι,” 761.

clauses that elaborate on what was handed over to them. Each is marked as a separate clause by the word *ὅτι* (or *καὶ ὅτι*).²²

3b. The first important element is that Christ (*ὅτι χριστός*) died (*ἀπέθανεν*; Aor. Act. Ind. 3rd. Sg.) on account of (*ὕπερ*) their sins (*τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν*). Paul not only points to a historical reality, Christ's death, but the significance of that event and its harmony with what the Scriptures had foretold. Paul notes briefly the significance of Christ's death as being on account of his and their sins. The precise meaning of *ὕπερ* with the genitive here is hard to determine but it is hard to avoid the at least the association with substitution.²³ Surprisingly, Paul doesn't go into detail as to what exactly he means here. This is in part because his intention in this clause is simply to remind the Corinthians that Christ's death has provided a "comprehensive" solution to the problem of sin.²⁴ Additionally, as will be indicated below Paul has a focus in these creedal verses and it is not the crucifixion, but the resurrection. Christ's death was according to (*κατὰ*) the Scriptures (*τὰς γραφάς*).²⁵ *Τὰς γραφάς* in the accusative case with the preposition *κατὰ* functions

²² Although Paul's list of clauses continues beyond verse five through to verse eight it's notable *ὅτι* is replaced by *ἔπειτα* suggesting these latter clauses form a unit with the final *ὅτι* clause of verse five. In other words, although the remaining clauses are individually important, they don't necessarily add new essential information to the pericope but can, for the purposes of this paper, be treated as 'more of the same.' This is mentioned partly to justify why the present study terminates at verse 5. A significant number of scholars understand the structure of these verses to indicate Paul is specifically employing some sort of early creedal statement either of his own making or from those from whom Paul himself received the gospel.

²³ Despite resistance by some that it may convey the idea of substitution (the idea of being on behalf of) it has been persuasively demonstrated the preposition could and did carry that meaning in Koine Greek. See Chapter 2 in A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), on page 38, he asserts that in Koine Greek *ὕπερ* was the preferred idiom to express the idea of substitution. For a fuller discussion see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 9th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 383-89.

²⁴ Guy Waters, "1-2 Corinthians," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Michael Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 208. To develop this point not even the immediate context spells out in what sense Christ died for sins; did he die to suffer the penalty for our sins, to break the power of sin over our lives, or to free us from the presence of sin; all of the above? Paul's lack of specificity was probably intentional, rather than single out one implication of Christ's death Paul could include many with a broader description. This would fit with the 'summary' nature of these creedal statements; Paul is including lots of meaning in a deliberately vague phrase rather than excluding it.

²⁵ *Κατὰ* with the accusative has a variety of shades of meaning but here the sense is 'according to.' In Man Wallace the use of *κατὰ* in these verses are highlighted as significant examples of the prepositions used with the genitive, see Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 377.

here as an “Adverbial Accusative of Reference,” and so signifies what the action of the verb refers to; in other words Christ’s death for sins refers to the content of the Scriptures.²⁶ Paul is highlighting the significance of this event by explaining it as a major theme of the OT.²⁷

4a. The second important element was that Christ was buried (ἐτάφη; Aor. Pass. Ind. 3rd. Sg.). It would be easy to pass over this element, seeing it as a superfluous addition to the creedal formula and hardly worthy of inclusion among the most prominent truths of the faith. Why is this worthy of inclusion?²⁸ At the very least it must surely demonstrate two things: first that Christ really did die and second Paul’s concern to stick closely to the actual events surrounding that crucial weekend; the Christian faith was grounded on real life events, on actual human history.²⁹ Christ really did die and he really was buried. As Paul would argue only a few verses later, if the church loses its historical foundation, it loses its faith.³⁰ That this element along with the fourth lacks κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς indicates these elements, although important in themselves, are more auxiliary and supportive of the clauses that precede them, vindicating them.³¹

4b. The third important element was that Christ had been raised (ἐγήγερται; Perf. Pass. Ind. 3rd. Sg.) on the third day (τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ). Christ did not stay dead nor did He remain in the tomb but on the third day was raised from the dead to die no more. Although Paul doesn’t go into the details he is clearly alluding to the work of one or both the other members of the Trinity.³² Paul is

²⁶ James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979), 56.

²⁷ “Paul cites no supporting scriptural texts, because he does not have to. His presumption is that Christ’s death and resurrection are the eschatological fulfilment of God’s promise to Israel, and that the Scriptures contained texts that corroborate this claim.” John M. Scholer, “Between Text and Sermon: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 70.4 (2016): 476.

²⁸ This might have made a fascinating digression...

²⁹ Hans Conzelmann, “On the Analysis of the Confessional Formula in I Corinthians 15:3-5,” *Evangelische Theologie* 25.January/February (1965): 23. Conzelmann however is unwilling to see in these verses a Christian interpretation of history, simply a creedal allusion to historical events.

³⁰ See 1 Cor 15:12-19.

³¹ Waters, “1-2 Corinthians,” 209.

³² Whereas on occasion Christ is said to have raised Himself (See John 2:19) it is more common for the resurrection to be ascribed to God the Father or to the Holy Spirit (See Gal 1:1 and Rom 1:4 respectively).

both assuming other important truths and assuming his hearers would assume them too.

Ἐγγέρεται stands out in the creedal formula for being in the perfect tense. It functions as a true perfect verb setting “forth with the utmost emphasis the abiding results of the event” in question.³³ It’s notable that the other verbs in the creedal section are all aorist verbs; Paul means to draw attention to this event over and above the other events, not because it is more significant in and of itself but because the resurrection and its abiding significance will be the focus of the discussion that occupies the remainder of the chapter from verse 12 onwards.³⁴ Again this is, as with the death of Christ on account of sins, according to the scriptures (*κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς*).

5. The fourth important element was that Christ was seen (*ὤφθη*; Aor. Pass. Ind. 3rd. Sg.) by Cephas (*Κηφᾶ*, that is Peter) and then by all of the remaining apostles, the twelve (*εἶτα τοῖς δώδεκα*). Again in this verse and the subsequent verses which list the various witnesses to the resurrected Christ Paul is displaying a concern for the historicity of the gospel.³⁵ That Paul starts with Peter and the twelve is a nod to their unique apostolic role as founders of the church.

Δώδεκα raises a potential problem on two levels. First, the twelve were actually eleven following Judas’ departure and suicide. Second, a number of manuscripts indicate Paul may have written eleven (*ἐνδεκα*). However, on the latter the textual tradition for *δῶδεκα* is stronger than for *ἐνδεκα* and on the former *δῶδεκα* could simply be referring to the eleven disciples as the group identified as *The Twelve*.³⁶ In this light Paul could simply be referring to the eleven by their

³³ Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 15.

³⁴ Jan Lambrecht, “Line of Thought in 1 Cor 15,1-11,” *Gregorianum* 72.4 (1991): 664.

³⁵ This is not to deny or raise doubts concerning Jesus’ appearing to Mary (John 20:15); although the order of sightings is important there is no reason to think Paul is trying to provide an exhaustive list of sightings but a list of significant sightings.

³⁶ True one of their members had fallen but he would be replaced; their number was not merely a numerical value but a theological statement about their role as founders of the church, one that mirrored the twelve tribes of Israel. See also in John 20:24 Thomas is identified as one of the Twelve even though Judas was no longer among their number and so left the number of the disciples as eleven.

‘official name.’³⁷ Metzger opts for δώδεκα being used in this instance as an official designation, in line with the former suggestion; and explains ἔνδεκα was a “pedantic correction” inserted into the textual tradition by later, predominantly Western copyists.³⁸

A reflection on “ἐν πρώτοις”

The phrase ἐν πρώτοις occupies a prime place in the logic of these verses and so has a significant impact on Paul’s overall understanding of the gospel yet scholars provide little space to discuss or justify how they understand it. Is Paul referring to the very first or earliest truths? Or more broadly to truths among the first he mentioned? Alternatively is he referring to the prime or most important truths? If so, are they exclusively important? Or is he referring to a specific number of significant truths that belong to a wider class of most prominent truths?

BDAG lists the possible meanings of the adjective πρῶτος as either first in a sequential order or first in prominence, specifically highlighting ἐν πρώτοις in I Cor 15:3 as an example of the latter; “among the first = most important things, i.e. as of first importance.”³⁹ However, it isn’t obvious from this entry why “among the first” becomes “as of first importance.” Taken at face value these two phrases, although similar, do convey different thoughts; the former that the events Paul mentions are some of a number of vitally important truths, the latter that these events occupy *the* place of prime significance in the Christian gospel. From a basic grammatical point of view ἐν πρώτοις functions as an adverbial prepositional phrase that modifies the verb παρέδωκα; that which was entrusted to the Corinthians was ἐν πρώτοις. Within that prepositional

³⁷ It may also be that Paul is alluding to the fact that Matthias, who replaced Judas, was among one of the first witnesses to the resurrection along with the eleven disciples and so technically Jesus was indeed seen by the twelve. In Acts 1:21-26 Matthias was qualified to be an Apostle on the basis he had been a witness to the resurrection. Luke 24:33 also indicates that the eleven (notably referred to here as the eleven) were not alone when Jesus appeared to them, further bolstering the idea Matthias was present at this sighting.

³⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament* (3d Ed.) (London, UK: United Bible Societies, 1971), 567. For the manuscript information see the appendix.

³⁹ BDAG, s.v., “πρῶτος,” 892.

phrase *πρώτοις* might justly function as a substantive adjective; so therefore that which was entrusted to the Corinthians concerned could be understood as being in or among the firsts or first things. It's a question between 'part of the most important things' or 'the most important things.' Louw-Nida list a number of possible meanings for *πρῶτος* but doesn't use 1 Cor 15:3 as an example for any of them but does distinguish between it's possible use as 'prominent' on the one hand or exclusively 'most important' on the other.⁴⁰

Part of the answer may be found in how exactly *ἐν* modifies the meaning of *πρώτοις*; is it describing what follows as *among* the first things or *as of* the first things? *Ἐν* is known as the "workhorse of the prepositions" as it occurs more frequently than any other preposition in the NT and is used in a wide range of scenarios.⁴¹ BDAG states that "the uses of this preposition are so many-sided, and oft. So easily confused, that a strictly systematic treatment is impossible."⁴² Despite its extensive discussion of *ἐν* no mention is made of 1 Cor 15 under it's entry; although the brief mention of 1 Cor 15 under the entry on *πρώτοις* above would indicate *ἐν* should be considered as a marker of position "among the first."⁴³ Silva notes how the word from antiquity has taken "on a wide variety of nuances, incl. 'Foremost, outermost, especially, primary, primitive, highest,'" but has no discussion of how the word is used in 1 Cor 15 nor that *ἐν πρώτοις* qualifies as specific idiomatic expression.⁴⁴ In light of the wide semantic range of the words involved the meaning of "among the prominent" cannot be excluded.

The views of critical scholars are varied. Barrett notes the phrase is ambiguous in the Greek either indicating priority in time or importance but rightly notes "naturally the two may

⁴⁰ Louw-Nida, s.v. "*πρῶτος*," 87.45 and 65.52 respectively.

⁴¹ Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax*, 167.

⁴² BDAG, s.v. "*ἐν*," 326.

⁴³ BDAG, s.v. "*ἐν*" & "*πρῶτος*," 326 & 892.

⁴⁴ Silva, s.v. "*πρῶτος*," *NIDNTE*, 4:175.

well coincide”⁴⁵ Conzelmann takes Paul to be referring to order, “in the first instance,” but his justification is minimal if not potentially contradictory.⁴⁶ Orr and Walther follow Barrett and suggest the phrase may be “deliberately ambiguous” but lean towards Paul’s meaning to be closer to “with top priority.”⁴⁷ Yet, for them both the immediate and wider context makes it plain the “saving career of Christ... culminating in the resurrection had *top priority* in Paul’s message.”⁴⁸

Hays understands Paul’s meaning to be that these events are matters of first importance in the sense they qualify as primary, bedrock teachings but he stops short of suggesting Paul means to say they are exclusively the only matters of first importance; certainly they are foundational truths in both the preaching of the gospel and the establishment of the Church but they are not these things alone.⁴⁹ Robertson and Plummer take Paul’s meaning to be of a different kind, that these truths are “foremost in importance, not in time; the doctrine of the Resurrection is primary and cardinal, central and indispensable.”⁵⁰

Among the more conservative evangelical scholars there is also variety but largely on whether or not any temporal sense should be attached to the phrase as the tendency is to prefer a reading that places the emphasis on the importance of the truths. For instance Naylor states the

⁴⁵ D.D. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC (London, UK: Harper & Row, 1968), 337. Barrett favours the equally ambiguous translation “First of all” for this reason.

⁴⁶ Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 251. He nods to the phrase “ὁ καὶ παντὶ ἐν πρώτοις ἀνάγκη μανθάνειν,” found in Plato’s Republic, but fails to comment much on Plato’s meaning in context; significantly for the purposes of this paper Plato’s translator of this edition rendered ἐν πρώτοις as “among the first things.” Even in this instance the context suggests the phrase may be taken to mean either simple chronological priority, foundational priority, or both. See Plato, *The Republic: Books VI-X*, trans. Paul Shorey, vol. Plato VI of LCL (London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1982), 151.

⁴⁷ William F. Orr and James A. Walther, eds., *1 Corinthians*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible 32 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 317. They also make the observation that Plato’s phrase in the Republic “doesn’t really decide the case either way.”

⁴⁸ Orr and Walther, *1 Corinthians*, 320.

⁴⁹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 255.

⁵⁰ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1994), 332. They do note the phrase is the same phrase as in the LXX in Genesis 33:2 where the word in context means at the front or first in line. A brief survey of the LXX reveals the phrase ἐν πρώτοις occurs around 20 times, largely with a temporal rather than ordinal meaning. However, its use isn’t consistent enough to draw any definitive conclusions.

phrase implies the principality of the matters rather than their early reception.⁵¹ Similarly, Thiselton affirms there is a “logical rather than temporal force... in this context... [Paul] declares the absolute fundamentals of Christian faith and on which Christian identity (and the experience of salvation) is built.”⁵² Yet, why the phrase is taken is specifically declaring the fundamentals and not some of the fundamentals is not spelt out. As for those who recognise the possibility of a temporal sense, Fee explains the phrase generally has the same ambiguity as the english adjective “first” but that the form of the greek phrase and context suggest Paul’s meaning is that “among all the things he proclaimed and taught while he was with them, these are the matters of “first importance.” Here is the “bare bones” content of the gospel that saves.”⁵³ However, despite recognising the significance of the form and context Fee doesn’t actually explain why the form and context demand his reading. Garland makes the same move as BDAG, translating the phrase as “among the first things” but then explaining it means “the most important things” or “things of first importance” without any real explanation.⁵⁴ That ‘among the first things’ is to be taken idiomatically in this manner, without any justification, is a disappointing oversight.

That ἐν πρώτοις clearly implies central significance to these events but doesn’t necessarily imply exclusive significance (as truths among the prominent things) is only alluded

⁵¹ Naylor, *1 Corinthians*, 417.

⁵² Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1186; See also that these “essential matters that are of first importance (“foremost” or “top priority”),” in Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, IVPNTC 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 284; Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 649.

⁵³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Revised Edition., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2014), 722.

⁵⁴ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 683. Hodge appears to make the same move as Garland, “ἐν πρώτοις means, among the first, or principal things. The death of Christ for our sins and his resurrection were therefore the great facts on which Paul insisted as the foundation of the gospel.” His comment is brief and lacks the nuance to settle the matter. What exactly he means by ‘foundation’ and includes under the banner of ‘the gospel’ is not spelt out. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1969), 312.

to by a few. Dan Liroy argues this “portion of the gospel... was *a* truth of foremost importance.”⁵⁵ Similarly in Matthew Henry’s classic work it’s observed these events are “among the first, the principal” doctrines of the faith, doctrines “of the first rank, a most necessary truth... [they] are the very sum and substance of evangelical truth.”⁵⁶ The reason this nuance is probably never teased out fully is likely in order to emphasise Paul’s intention to indicate these events have a *central* significance, certainly to Christian doctrine more generally, but in context specifically to Christian views concerning the resurrection to come. Yet, even the idea of *centrality* might miss the nuance “of the first things” conveys better that “of first importance.”

The potential problem with “of first importance” is that it lacks nuance and suggests the unimportance of other important doctrines. Of course it is true there is a hierarchy of importance when it comes to Christian beliefs but how this applies to these events needs more discussion than most commentators provide, especially as Paul’s word might justly be taken as “I entrusted to you among the prominent matters.” Waters puts it well when talking of this phrase, “to be sure, Paul’s gospel is broader than what he will proceed to outline in verses 3b-4. At the same time, Paul insists that what he is about to describe sits not at the periphery but at the core of his preaching and teaching.”⁵⁷ As has already been noted in the comments section above on the phrase “ὅτι χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν” Paul is using language and terms that captures and assumes wider theological implications.⁵⁸ For instance absent from the matters of 1 Cor 15:1-5 is any discussion as to the nature of the person of Christ and one could hardly claim

⁵⁵ Dan Liroy, “Jesus’ Resurrection and the Nature of the Believer’s Resurrection Body (1 Cor 15:1-58),” *Conspectus* (2011): 97, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. VI: Acts to Revelation (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 586.

⁵⁷ Waters, “1-2 Corinthians,” 208.

⁵⁸ The same can be said of how he describes Christ as being passively raised which assumes some understanding of God and maybe even the Trinity (again see comments above), and his inclusion of κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς also indicates wider theological assumptions about the role and authority of Scripture that surely cannot be relegated to a matter of secondary importance.

Paul considers such matters of secondary importance.⁵⁹ Paul's earlier claim in 1 Cor 2:2 to have known nothing among the Corinthians except "Jesus Christ and Him Crucified" plainly states as much.⁶⁰

Looking at other creedal statements Paul makes, in Philippians 2 the same themes are present but more focus is placed on Christ's *humiliation* in the incarnation and his death and then his *exaltation*, without any explicit reference to his resurrection although it is surely assumed as part of the latter.⁶¹ Missing from Colossians 1:15-20 is any mention of the resurrection but the focus is instead on Christ's role as divine creator, sustainer, and head of the Church. In 1 Timothy 3:16 what Paul calls 'the truth' or 'mystery of godliness' doesn't even explicitly mention Christ's death or resurrection but has more of a focus on Christ's incarnation and ascension to glory.⁶² None of this is to say Paul's purpose is always the same but simply that Paul recognised certain truths as top-tier and would bring some to the fore rather than others when the context demanded it.⁶³

John Murray wrote, "the accomplishment of redemption, or as it has been called, the atonement, is central to our Christisn faith."⁶⁴ Is saying that something is *central* the same as saying it is the *most important*? Ciampa and Rosner help when they say "Paul's recounting of the gospel message reflects the fact that it is first and foremost a message about Jesus Christ and what He has done for us."⁶⁵ Note that it is to the *preaching of the gospel* that *ἐν πρώτοις* is

⁵⁹ The Early Church Fathers & Creeds might have something to say to those who would argue otherwise...

⁶⁰ An observation I owe to the sharper mind of Dr Robert Cara...

⁶¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 353–55.

⁶² The former two ideas are however implicit in these verses.

⁶³ Going back to 1 Cor 1 Paul describes the gospel simply as the "word of the cross," with no mention of the resurrection, not to exclude it but because "the word of the cross" is an appropriate summary of the gospel, inclusive of doctrines such as the resurrection.

⁶⁴ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2015), X; it must be noted that Murray ascribes centrality to more than simply the events of the Cross, Tomb, and Resurrection but to the work of redemption in its entirety.

⁶⁵ Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2010), 745.

attributed, not the sum total of Christian Doctrine; apart from faith in the news of Christ's work for sins and His resurrection there is no salvation; accomplished, ongoing, or to come. Ridderbos helpfully elaborates that for the death and resurrection of Christ to be considered *ἐν πρώτοις* means that it has its "starting point and centre in the death and resurrection of Christ, and that only from thence does the proper light fall on the whole of the fulfilling and consummating activity of God, both "retrospectively" in the incarnation and pre-existence of Christ and "prospectively" in his continuing exaltation and anticipated parousia."⁶⁶ The prominence of these events should best be understood as the climatic fulfilment of God's promises and revelation that both underpins and is underpinned by a whole host of other doctrines.⁶⁷ So when it is said these events are "of first importance" or "among the prominent things" it is perhaps better to understand Paul as affirming the climatic events of Christ's life occupy a place of prominence in Christian Doctrine as well as primacy in Gospel Proclamation.⁶⁸ Not because they are more important than other significant truths such as the nature of God, the incarnation, Christ's lordship, and intercession, but because they function as the central focus of the story that assumes, depends upon, and reaffirms these other prime teachings.⁶⁹

Conclusion

"For Paul, then, Christ's death and resurrection are the heart, centre, or core of his gospel... They represent the consummation of redemptive history."⁷⁰ That this events are *ἐν πρώτοις* in the gospel Paul entrusted to the Corinthians is not simply to say they were part of Paul's first sermon, which is undoubtedly true. Neither is Paul rashly claiming these events constitute the

⁶⁶ Herman N Ridderbos, *Paul an Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 54.

⁶⁷ William R. Edwards, John C. A. Ferguson, and Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, eds., *Theology for Ministry: How Doctrine Affects Pastoral Life and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2022), xxiii.

⁶⁸ Mark Dever, ed., *Preaching the Cross* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2007), 18.

⁶⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1976), 367.

⁷⁰ Waters, "1-2 Corinthians," 209.

only important elements of the faith; his immediate language and wider writings mitigate against such a reading. Christ's death and resurrection are among the prominent things, in the highest class of truths to be believed. In one sense they may be the unique occupiers of this class, for apart from Christ's death and Resurrection the story of the Scripture is incomplete and salvation is out of the believers' reach. As important, foundational, and vital as other doctrines are, those of Paul's Corinthian Creed have a unique role in the proclamation of the gospel. Christians should perhaps be clearer as to their meaning when they describe things as primary, foundational or central. The specific phrase *ἐν πρώτοις* leaves the door open to acknowledge other elements. But in 1 Cor 15 it is the cross and resurrection Paul wishes to emphasise. For apart from these events, vital, foundational truths can surely be declared, but the *gospel* is not.

Appendix:
Logical Progression, Translation and Textual Apparatus

- 1⁷¹ Γνωρίζω δὲ ὑμῖν,
Now I am making known to you,
- ἀδελφοί,
brothers,
- τὸ εὐαγγέλιον
the gospel
- ὃ εὐηγγελισάμην ὑμῖν,
which I preached to you all,
- ὃ καὶ παρελάβετε,
which you all also received,
- ἐν ᾧ καὶ ἐστήκατε
in which also you all have stood
- 2 δι' οὗ καὶ σώζεσθε,
through which also you are all being saved,
- τίνι λόγῳ εὐηγγελισάμην ὑμῖν ᾧ εἰ κατέχετε⁷²,
If you all are holding fast to the specific word we preached to you
- all,*
- ἐκτὸς εἰ μὴ εἰκῇ ἐπιστεύσατε.
Unless you believed in vain.

⁷¹ Text taken from the *THNT* and Apparatus from the *NA28*.

⁷² ᾧ οφειλετε κατεχειν¹ D*.c F G ar b t vgms; Ambst.

- 3 παρέδωκα γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐν πρώτοις
For I have entrusted to you among the prominent things
- ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον
what I also received
- ὅτι χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν
That Christ died on account of our sins
- κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς
according to the Scriptures
- 4 καὶ ὅτι ἐτάφη
And that he was buried
- καὶ ὅτι ἐγήγερται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ
And that he had been raised at day three
- κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς
according to the scriptures
- 5 καὶ ὅτι ὤφθη Κηφᾷ,
And that he was seen by Cephas
- ἔπειτα τοῖς ἑδώδεκα.⁷³
next by the twelve.

⁷³ Γ εἶτα κ Α Κ 33. 81. 614. 1175 | καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα D* F G lat | txt 346 B D2 L P Ψ 0243. 104. 365. 630. 1241. 1505. 1739. 1881. 2464 m; Or F (Mt 28,16) ἐνδεκά D* F G latt syhmg; Metzger says “Instead of recognising that δώδεκα is used here as an official designation, several witnesses, chiefly Western, have introduced the pedantic correction ἑνδεκά (D* F G 330 464* it vg syr^{hmg} goth Archelaus Eusebius Ambrosiaster Jerome Pelagius mss^{acc} to Augustine John-Damascus).” in Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 567.