

The Earliest Witnesses

Creeds older than the Gospels, the 1 Corinthians 15 tradition, and the facts even skeptics grant

When we open a New Testament, the Gospels come first, and it is easy to assume that they are where the story of Jesus begins. But the written Gospels are not our earliest Christian witnesses. Before a single Gospel was put to papyrus, the believers were already *saying things* — short, rhythmic, memorized confessions that summed up who Jesus was and what God had done in him. These fixed formulas were recited in worship, taught to new converts, and passed hand to hand across the Mediterranean. Embedded in letters written in the AD 50s, they preserve language older than the documents that carry them — testimony reaching back, in places, to AD 30–35, the very years of the events themselves.

This week we listen to those earliest witnesses. We will look at creeds older than the books that quote them, sit with the most important of them all — the tradition Paul "received" in 1 Corinthians 15 — and ask what it means that even scholars who reject the supernatural still grant a short list of historical facts as bedrock. The point is not to win an argument but to stand, for a moment, very close to the source.

THE SERIES

Week 2 of a six-week study engaging the historical evidence assembled in Gary Habermas's *The Historical Jesus*. Week 1 surveyed the sources; this week reaches the earliest layer of all.

WHY IT MATTERS

If the core claims about Jesus can be traced to within a few years of his death — and to named eyewitnesses — then they cannot be dismissed as slow-growing legend. The dating is the whole game.

Scholars across the theological spectrum recognize that the New Testament letters contain older material — pre-formed confessions the authors quote rather than compose. The tell-tale signs are stylized parallel lines, a rhythm built for memory, vocabulary the surrounding author does not otherwise use, and the seams where a quotation has been stitched into the flowing argument. Three examples are widely cited.

Philippians 2:6ff. — a soaring hymn that moves from Christ "in the form of God," through his humbling "to the point of death, even death on a cross," to his exaltation, ending with every knee bowing and every tongue confessing him Lord. The closing lines draw directly on Isaiah 45:23, where it is *God the Father* who receives that universal worship — a staggering thing to say of Jesus, and said in poetry already old when Paul cited it.

1 Timothy 3:16 — six tight, balanced clauses, plainly meant to be sung or recited: "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory." A confession in miniature, from incarnation to ascension.

Romans 1:3–4 — marked as a pre-Pauline creed by the parallelism of its clauses, and especially by the contrast it draws: Jesus "descended from David according to the flesh" and "declared to be the Son of God in power... by his resurrection from the dead." The same Jesus born in space and time was raised and vindicated. Packed into two verses are three of the great titles — Son of God, Christ, Lord — all anchored to the resurrection as the event that proved them true.

Note. These are not Paul's private theology. They are the shared confession of a movement that already had a settled, portable summary of its faith — incarnation, death, resurrection, exaltation — within a generation of the cross. Paul is quoting the church, not founding it.

The most important single creed in the New Testament sits in Paul's first letter to Corinth, written about AD 55. Paul does not present it as his own insight. He hands on what was handed to him — a fixed summary of the gospel, with a list of named witnesses to the risen Christ.

GREEK NEW TESTAMENT · 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3–7

3 ...ὅτι Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν κατὰ τὰς γραφάς, 4 καὶ ὅτι ἐτάφη, καὶ ὅτι ἐγήγερται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ κατὰ τὰς γραφάς, 5 καὶ ὅτι ὤφθη Κηφᾶ, εἶτα τοῖς δώδεκα· 6 ἔπειτα ὤφθη ἐπάνω πεντακοσίοις ἀδελφοῖς ἐφάπαξ... 7 ἔπειτα ὤφθη Ἰακώβῳ, εἶτα τοῖς ἀποστόλοις πᾶσιν·

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION · 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3–7

3 ...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time... 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Note. Verse 8 continues, "Last of all... he appeared also to me" — Paul adding his own name to the witness list. He had personally checked his message against the apostles (Galatians 2:1–10), and his account of the facts matched theirs.

HOW EARLY IS IT?

Several features mark this passage as a creed Paul inherited rather than wrote. The words translated "**delivered**" and "**received**" are technical terms for the careful passing on of oral tradition — Paul is openly saying this material was not his own. A number of the phrases are non-Pauline ("for our sins," "according to the Scriptures," "the third day," "he was seen," "the twelve"), and the lines fall into a stylized, parallel shape built for recitation. The Aramaic

"Cephas" for Peter and the Hebraic threefold "and that" point back through Paul's Greek to an even earlier Semitic source.

Put together, these signs let scholars date the formula remarkably early. Critical theologians commonly place it in the mid-AD 30s — and more specifically, many date its origin to just three to eight years after the crucifixion. This is not preaching that grew up over decades; it is the church's confession from its opening phase.

How did Paul come to hold it? The most likely answer runs through Jerusalem. Dating the crucifixion around AD 30 and Paul's conversion to roughly AD 33–35, Paul tells us that three years after his conversion he went up to Jerusalem and stayed with Peter, also seeing James the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:18–19). The gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection would have been the natural center of that conversation — and both Peter and James appear by name in the creed's list of appearances. The reasonable conclusion is that Paul received this tradition from these very eyewitnesses, in Jerusalem, around five to seven years after the cross. And the creed itself, of course, was already in circulation before Paul ever heard it.

"This account meets all the demands of historical reliability that could possibly be made of such a text."

— **Hans von Campenhausen**, German historian, on 1 Corinthians 15:3ff.

"The passage therefore preserves uniquely early and verifiable testimony. It meets every reasonable demand of historical reliability."

— **A.M. Hunter**, New Testament scholar

3–8 yrs

how soon after the crucifixion many critical scholars date the 1 Corinthians 15 creed

THE MINIMAL FACTS

Because of these early creeds and other data, even contemporary critical scholars — treating the New Testament as nothing more than ancient literature — recognize a core of historical facts surrounding Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. At least twelve are considered knowable history by virtually all who study the question, whatever their school of thought.

- 1 Jesus died by crucifixion.
- 2 He was buried.
- 3 His death drove the disciples to despair and the loss of hope.
- 4 The tomb was found empty a few days later (held by many scholars, though somewhat less universally than the rest).
- 5 The disciples had experiences they believed were literal appearances of the risen Jesus.
- 6 They were transformed from frightened doubters into bold proclaimers of his death and resurrection.
- 7 This message was the very center of the earliest Christian preaching.
- 8 It was preached especially in Jerusalem, where Jesus had just died and been buried.
- 9 Out of that preaching the church was born and grew.
- 10 Sunday became the primary day of worship.
- 11 James, the skeptical brother of Jesus, was converted when he too believed he saw the risen Jesus.
- 12 Paul, the persecutor, was converted by an experience he likewise believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.

With the partial exception of the empty tomb, virtually every critical scholar who engages this subject grants these as the minimum of known history. Any honest account of what happened after the crucifixion has to reckon with all of them.

Habermas notes that one need not even use all twelve. A sufficient case can be built on just **four "core" facts**, accepted as knowable history by virtually all critical scholars: (1) Jesus' death by crucifixion, (2) the disciples' experiences they were convinced were appearances of the risen Jesus, (3) the corresponding transformation of the disciples — men who became willing to die for what they proclaimed — and (4) the conversion of Paul through what he too believed was such an appearance. These four are even more widely conceded than the rest, and they already carry the weight of the argument. The question this series will keep pressing is simply this: what best explains them?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does it matter so much that 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 is a creed Paul "received" rather than composed? What does that change about how early the claims are?
2. Look again at the markers of an embedded creed — parallel lines, non-Pauline wording, the Aramaic "Cephas." How do small details like these help historians reach back behind a written text?
3. Of the twelve minimal facts, which one do you find most striking, and why? Which would be hardest to explain on purely natural grounds?
4. The conversions of James the skeptic and Paul the persecutor make the list. Why might the change in two opponents count as especially weighty evidence?
5. It is easy to treat the resurrection as a matter of feeling or private faith. How does it affect you to hear that named eyewitnesses stood behind the claim within a few years of the cross?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we thank you that the gospel did not begin as legend whispered over generations, but as the bold confession of those who were there — who had despaired, and then could not stop

proclaiming that Jesus was raised. Thank you for the witnesses who delivered to us what they themselves received. As we weigh the evidence honestly, let it lead us not merely to agree, but to worship; not only to know that Christ died for our sins and was raised on the third day, but to entrust our whole lives to the risen Lord. We pray in the name of Jesus, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Amen.

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