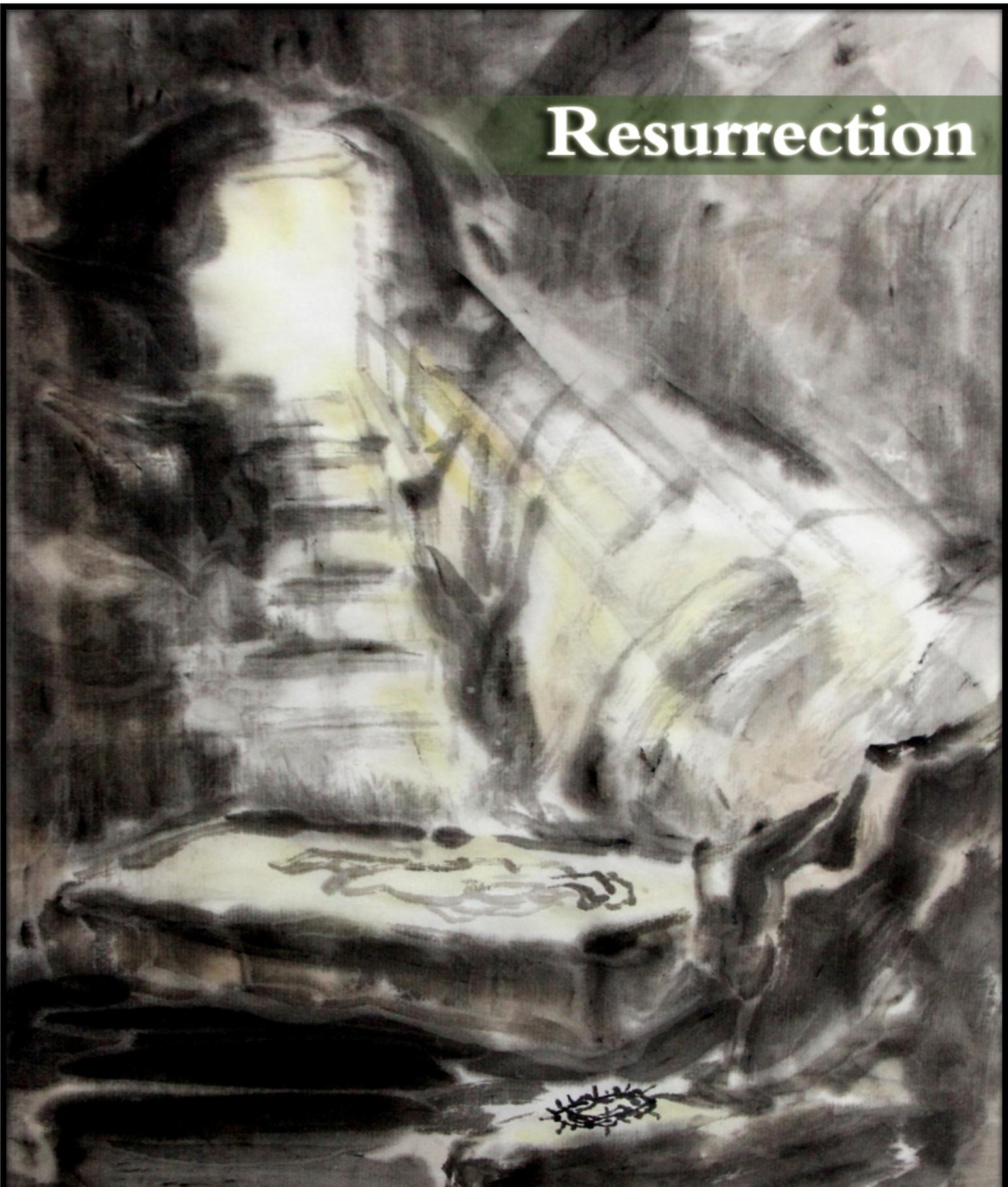


# Resurrection



**EUCON Beacon**

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# Remolding the Cross: How the Postmodern Hermeneutic Is Changing Christianity

By Sean Sartler

Anyone who spends time studying church history is aware of the conundrum that early Christians presented when they spoke of Jesus. They spoke of Jesus as the one who ruled from the cross. This way of speaking was such an oddity considering the nature of the cross, the criminal's death, the one rejected, yet this same cross became a symbol of Christ's victory over sin and death and a symbol of our redemption. By the cross and the sacrifice made upon it, we are saved. Few symbols in Christianity are as central to the message of the Gospel as the cross, yet it is this very symbol and the understanding of what happened on the cross that is under siege in the modern church. With the advent of postmodernism and the establishment of the emergent church, traditional theologies are being called into question. It is only fitting that as we turn our eyes to the cross in this Easter season, we take a moment to discuss the debate that is raging within the church.

The thesis of my paper is that while there is credence to some of the arguments that postmodern deconstructionist make, ultimately their methodology, and therefore their conclusions, do not hold up to scrutiny. As we look at this, we are going to examine how this faulty hermeneutic has been used to attack traditional theologies particularly penal substitutionary atonement.

Before we dive into our examination of postmodern deconstructionism, we must first define a few terms. To understand the modern attacks against penal substitutionary atonement, we must first understand what it is. *Penal substitutionary atonement* is basically defined as "Christ's death was 'penal' in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a 'substitution' in that he was a substitute for us when he died."<sup>1</sup>

Vanhoozer succinctly summarizes penal substitutionary atonement in the following statement:

The language of the law court (that also of justification, including the justification of Jesus; 1 Tim. 3:16), with condemnation and curse, and of the legal document that was against us (Col. 2:14) develops that viewpoint. It is dominant in Isa. 53; it is implied in the phrase "to bear sin or iniquity," meaning liability to the corresponding punishment.

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 579.

Christ bore our sins (1 Pet. 2:24), suffered under their condemnation (Rom. 8:3) and the curse we had deserved (Gal. 3:13).<sup>2</sup>

Calvin, one of the first theologians to really develop the idea of penal substitutionary atonement, explained it in the following way:

But again, let [man] be told, as Scripture teaches, that he was estranged from God by sin, and heir of wrath, exposed to the curse of eternal death. Excluded from all hope of salvation ... that then Christ interposed, took the punishment upon himself, and bore what by the just judgment of God was impending over sinners; with his own blood expiated the sins which rendered them hateful to God, by this expiation satisfied and duly propitiated God the Father, by this intercession appeased his anger, on this basis founded peace between God and men, and by this tie secured the Divine benevolence toward them.<sup>3</sup>

So we can see that the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement is not a minor doctrine by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, I do not think it is out of line to say that penal substitutionary atonement is central to our understanding of what happened at the cross. If we do not have penal substitution, then there is no propitiation for our sins. If there is not propitiation, then, sadly, we remain in our sin. To remove penal substitution also leaves us with some very unappetizing and incomplete understandings of what happened upon the cross.

The next vital term we need to look at is *postmodernism* or *postmodern*. This term is used so often that the definition is often times taken for granted. Yet, I believe that many times it is used, it is used incorrectly. The term *postmodernism* or *postmodern* refers to a way of thinking that is highly skeptical of the linear, rationalistic thought of modernity and its metanarratives. It is a direct reaction to the idea that reason can lead to understanding and truth. Vanhoozer in his assessment of the differences between modernity and postmodernity states:

Modernity rejected tradition and religious authority but held on to the hope that reason alone would lead us to truth. Postmoderns have given up on the illusion that reason alone will lead us to truth, but they have not recovered tradition and authority. Instead, they courageously celebrate and play amid our limitations and finitude, in a sort of cheerful nihilism. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century the hubris with which the twentieth century began had been seriously undermined.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London; Grand Rapids, MI.: SPCK; Baker Academic, 2005), 74.

<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2010), 2.16.2

<sup>4</sup>Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 601.

Indeed in grappling with the concept of postmodernism, one must remember that as foreign and unusual as it may seem to cast aside the reason of modernity, the reason of modernity often took an atheistic form. Modernity had “cast off the shackles of religion and tradition” for reason, yet as Christians, we clearly understand that reason cannot bring us to a complete understanding of God or the world around us (Ecc. 1:18). So as Christians, we should neither be sold out to the camp of modernity.

The next term I want to define is *hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics can be defined as, “critical reflection upon processes of interpretation and understanding, especially the interpretation of biblical texts or texts that originate from within other cultures. However, this may include all kinds of communicative processes, from signs and visual art to institutions and literary phenomena.”<sup>5</sup> Or in other words, hermeneutics means, “to explain, interpret; the science of Bible interpretation.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we turn to the term *deconstructionism*. Deconstructionism is in essence a way of taking communication (particularly literary texts), disassembling them, and reassembling them in new and creative ways. The hero and founder of deconstructionism is Jacques Derrida. Geisler defines deconstructionism as

“A form of hermeneutics, of interpreting a text. As such it can be distinguished from other interpretive approaches. [It] is not interested in destroying meaning, but of reconstructing it. It [*deconstructionism*] is not negation that dismantles a text, but criticism that remodels it. It stands against fixed rules of analysis. A deconstructionist reads and rereads a text, looking for new, deeper, forgotten meanings.”<sup>7</sup>

However, it is important to admit that while deconstructionism looks like a game and is often played like a game, it is rather serious business. Furthermore, deconstructionism has rules to the game being played; these rules are highlighted by Derrida’s five central arguments:

1. All Meaning is Complex. No pure and simple meanings stand behind the signs of language. If all language is complex, no essential meaning transcends time and place.
2. All Meaning is Contingent. Every object of language and meaning is contingent upon a changing life reality. There is no objective meaning.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 283.

<sup>6</sup>Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 207.

<sup>7</sup>Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 192.

3. All Meaning is mixed. No pure experiences exist without reference to transient experience. There is no private mental life that does not presuppose an actual world. We cannot even think about a concept without contaminating it with some reference to our own past or future.

4. There is no such thing as a perception. Deconstructionists do not reject everyday experience. They reject idealized concepts disconnected from the everyday world. The nature of what is signified is not independent of the sign that signifies it.

5. Rhetoric is the basis of all meaning. All written language is dependent on spoken language. It is not dependent on the meaning of spoken signs. It is dependent on the pattern of vocalization (phonemics). Phonemes are parts of sound that can be represented by a letter. Without this difference in phonemes letters are impossible. "Difference" is the key to meaning, since all sounds must be differentiated to be distinct and form meaningful sounds.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps Derrida's most logical argument is that all meaning is mixed. Yet, while it may be true that all meaning is mixed to a certain degree, does that then provide a cogent reason for the loosening of the author from the text? It is true that when I read the text "green car" it conjures an image in my mind that is based upon my experience. Someone else reading (or writing) the same text might conjure a different image in his mind. Thus, we cannot really know exactly what the author meant when he wrote the text "green car." For when the author wrote the text "green car," his mind was conjuring an image that is almost guaranteed to be different from the image in my mind when I read the text. So, yes, we cannot know exactly what the author means in a particular text. Yet, does it follow that if I cannot know exactly what the author is saying, then I cannot know what he is saying at all? No, it does not follow. When I read the text "green car," the image in my mind is going to be different from that of the author, but it will not be completely different. In fact, most likely, it will be only slightly different. Just because I cannot know what the author means *exhaustively* does not mean that I cannot know what the author means *at all*.

Here is where things begin to get messy. Ultimately, like the Humean and Kantian skeptics of the enlightenment, deconstructionism proves to be self-defeating.<sup>9</sup> It becomes impossible for the deconstructionist to meaningfully say anything about deconstructionism without having to submit his own communication to the process of deconstructionism, thereby negating the meaning. When one says all meaning is complex and contingent, one is pushed to ask if that includes the very statement that all meaning is complex and contingent. Eventually, the deconstructionist is required to make metaphysical statements and cannot place those statements above his own system.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 193.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

Now that we have seen that the system that the deconstructionists use is flawed from the onset, we now need to turn our eye to its use and effect in the church. Before we continue, it is important to note that the structure of the church has changed dramatically with the advent of this hermeneutic. Many fractures have arisen within the church and many of them are not so simple. It used to be that the church was divided (for good or for ill) into two main groups: liberals and conservatives. Each side had its own spectrum and each had its own defined beliefs. For years the conservatives battled the liberals and fought to keep the doctrine of the apostles as was delivered to their spiritual forefathers. The liberals for their part fought against conservatives as in what they labeled (and sometimes rightly so) dead orthodoxy. Now, splinters have emerged within each side and dialogue and compromise have followed quickly on its heels. Rarely is it conservative against liberal, instead it is postmodern against modern.

Unfortunately, the fractures within the church are the least of the problems that have begun to emerge from the deconstructionist hermeneutic. There has been an attack on traditional theology and in particular, on penal substitutionary atonement. Oddly, this attack has not come from outside the church, as one might suspect, but instead the attack has originated from within the church and often from so-called evangelical pulpits.

One of the more recent attacks on penal substitutionary atonement comes from Rob Bell's latest book, *Love Wins*. In Bell's book many traditional theologies come under fire, like heaven, hell, soteriology, etc. There is no room for penal substitutionary atonement in Bell's theology: "we do not need to be rescued from God. God is the one who rescues us from death, sin, and destruction. God is the rescuer."<sup>10</sup> Bell is quite clear in his stance. Why then did Jesus die on the cross? Bell would have you believe that the traditional view of the atonement was the *Christus Victor*. However, Bell will also attempt to avoid the whole situation and argue that there are many aspects to the atonement, but none of that is important. "The point then, as it is now, is Jesus. The divine in flesh and blood. He's where the life is."<sup>11</sup> Yet, for all of his theologizing, Bell cannot avoid the Bible. Bell's theology misses several points in the Biblical text and ends up being wildly incomplete. In the words of Kevin DeYoung,

I see no place in Bell's theology for Christ the curse-bearer (Gal. 3:13), or Christ wounded for our transgressions and crushed by God for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5, 10), no place for the Son of Man who gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), no place for the Savior who was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), no place for the sorrowful suffering Servant who drank the bitter cup of God's wrath for our sake (Mark 14:36).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 182

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 129

<sup>12</sup> Kevin DeYoung, "God Is Still Holy and What You Learned in Sunday School Is Still True: A Review of 'Love Wins,'" The Gospel Coalition [cited 1 March 2012]. Online: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob-bell-love-wins-review/>

How can Bell slice up the Bible, with this terrible theology, and actually get away with it? In order to really understand how this is occurring, we need to turn to one of Bell's defenders and co-emergent leaders, Brian McLaren. According to McLaren, we cannot critique Bell's understanding of Scripture mainly because the message of Scripture is almost unknowable. He gives great credence to Derrida's hermeneutical structure when he states:

Now communication is nearly always tricky, as any of us who are married or are parents know. The speaker has a meaning which is encoded in symbols (words) which then must be decoded by the receiver. That decoding process is subject to all kinds of static - for example, interference from the biases, fears, hopes, politics, vocabulary, and other characteristics of the receiver or the receiver's community. If the receiver then tries to pass the meaning - as he has decoded it - on to others, there is more encoding and decoding, and more static. That's why, with so much encoding and decoding and re-encoding going on, the challenge of communication across many cultural time zones is downright monumental.<sup>13</sup>

When we look at what McLaren is exactly saying, we can see that he is leaning heavily upon one major point in Derrida's deconstructionism: all meaning is mixed. Anyone who has played the "telephone game" can attest to, passing along meaning is not easy, especially when such "static" gets involved; yet, as I pointed out earlier, some variance in meaning between the "encoder" and "decoder" does not mean we can know anything. McLaren seems to be leading us down Derrida's path to a strong "communication agnosticism," yet for all the "static" and all the cultural barriers, we can know something of what the "encoder" is trying to communicate even if we do not know exhaustively what the "encoder" is communicating. By using this faulty hermeneutic, McLaren and Bell avoid critiques over their use of Scripture by saying that the true communication of Scripture cannot be known. One does not have to stop long to realize that such an argument is self-defeating.

This is not the only time McLaren has rejected traditional theology and Biblical hermeneutics. In his book *A New Kind of Christianity* McLaren rejects the Genesis account of Noah and the Flood. McLaren writes, "In this light, a god who mandates an intentional supernatural disaster leading to unparalleled genocide is hardly worthy of belief, much less worship."<sup>14</sup> McLaren, of course, would respond that the view of God is always evolving and that it is the community of faith that reads meaning into the scriptures. This we know follows straight down the line with Derrida's hermeneutic as not negating the text, but "remolding it and looking for deeper meaning."<sup>15</sup> However, a few follow up questions must be asked in response to McLaren's deconstructionism: What part of scripture should we keep? Why should we keep those parts? Who makes the decision as to what to keep and what not to keep? Fundamental to

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<sup>13</sup> Brian McLaren, "Will Love Wins Win? We're Early in the First Inning," BrianMcLaren.net [cited 1 March 2012]. Online: <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/challenging-three-cherished-evan.html>

<sup>14</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), page

<sup>15</sup> Geisler, *Apologetics*, 192.

the issue is if we remold the text to say whatever it is we want it to say, we become guilty of the critique found in the book of Judges: “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”<sup>16</sup>

We can see that this postmodern hermeneutic is being used to reshape and remodel Christianity into something entirely different. This reshaping leads to a more comfortable Christianity. This is Christianity where sinners are not judged by the holiness of God and where God loves and forgives everyone. This new Christianity is developed by using a postmodern hermeneutic to exclude certain scriptures, remold meaning, and “find” “hidden” meanings. The problem is that to a certain extent, the arguments that the emergent leaders make are cogent. It is only upon closer examination that they begin to fall apart. Furthermore, it is only upon closer examination that we realize that this “new kind of Christianity” really is no longer Christianity at all. God without holiness and judgment nullifies the need for a sacrifice upon the cross; that removes Christ from Christianity which leaves us with an entirely different faith.

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<sup>16</sup> Judges 17:6

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## Christ the Firstfruits of the Dead: 1 Cor 15:20-23

By Jonathan Bright

### THE DEATH OF CHRIST

The resurrection is one of the most glorious truths of Christianity. The Lord Jesus Christ's substitutionary death on the cross propitiates the wrath of God and makes it possible for hell-destined sinners to approach the Almighty righteous God with confidence. Christ's death, of course, is the prerequisite to the resurrection.

Christ's death was required by the plan of God. It was pictured in the Old Testament by the Passover Lamb in Exodus 12. As God had poured His judgment upon Egypt in nine plagues, He had seen fit to make a difference between Israel and Egypt, sparing the Israelites who dwelt within the land. Prior to the tenth plague, God promised to spare the Israelites once again, but only if they applied the blood of the lamb to the lintel of their doorposts. The shed blood of the lamb substituted for the lives of the firstborn of Israel. In the same manner, Christ's shed blood would spare those who put their trust in His name.

Christ's substitution for His people in His death is also highlighted in the Servant Song of Isaiah 52-53. Christ's bearing the penalty of our sins is starkly portrayed in verses 4-6 of Isaiah 53:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Notice that the suffering Servant takes our griefs and sorrows upon Himself. Our transgressions and iniquities caused Him to be wounded and ultimately to die upon the cross. It is with Christ's stripes that believers receive spiritual healing. The Heavenly Father laid upon His only begotten Son all of our iniquities. Not only is Christ's suffering for our sins seen in these verses, but our own sinfulness is also portrayed in stark language: "our transgressions," "our iniquities," "all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Our willful departure from God's will is distinctly portrayed.

The Apostle Paul points out this substitutionary aspect in verse 3 of 1 Corinthians 15: "Christ died for our sins." He paid the penalty so that we would not have to. The shed blood of Christ is sufficient to cleanse the entire world's sin, but only those who appropriate this gift of love receive the full merit of it.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul makes much of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, making it the basis of the hope we as believers have of our own resurrection. In verse 20 the resurrection stands in full contrast to the hopeless condition of mankind without the resurrection seen in the previous verses. Notice how the verse begins with contrast: “but now.” In contrast to a meaningless life with no hope of resurrection, believers have full assurance that Christ lives evermore.

It is well worth noting that the death is described in this verse as sleep. Scriptures as a whole emphasize that the soul does not sleep—to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). The true self, the soul, immediately goes into the Lord’s presence at death. Yet sleeping is equated here (and in the Lazarus account in John 11:11-14) with death. It is clear that it is not the soul which sleeps, but the body. Hence, the believer’s future resurrection will be a waking of the old body (which will be clothed with immortality) to rejoin the immortal soul from which it had been severed at death.

### THE RESURRECTION AS FIRSTFRUITS

1 Corinthians 15:20 and 23 presents the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ as “firstfruits.” To understand this terminology, it is necessary to go back to the Old Testament for background as to the significance of the firstfruit offering. In Leviticus 23:10-17 the Lord directed the children of Israel to make an offering of the firstfruits of the land after they had conquered the land. The first part of the harvest would be offered to the Lord. The worshipper would offer a burnt offering of lamb and a meat offering along with the first sheaves of the harvest. This firstfruit offering not only signified the gratitude of the worshipper, but it also was a statement of faith that the Lord would continue to provide for his needs. This firstfruit offering showed confidence that the rest of the harvest would come in and that God would provide.

Just as the firstfruit was given at the very beginning of the harvest, Christ was the first in time of this kind of resurrection. The time element is emphasized in 1 Corinthians 15:23. “Every man in his own order” hearkens back to the intervening verses which note the two groups humanity is divided into: those who follow Adam and those who are in Christ. “Christ the firstfruits” precedes the rest of us who will be raised “at His coming” in the Rapture.

How does the Lord’s resurrection parallel this firstfruit concept? Just as the firstfruits were offered in confident expectation of continued provision of further harvest, the Lord Jesus Christ is the firstfruit from the dead. He is the first to rise to eternal life; all resurrections previous to His were of a short duration only. The son of the widow of Nain, Lazarus, and the Old Testament resurrection at the hand of Elijah all faced a second death after their resurrection. Christ rose never to die again. This is the kind of resurrection believers look forward to—where those who believe in Christ will never die again. Looking at Christ, the believer has confident expectation that he too will have eternal life without end.

### THE RESURRECTION AS THE NEW HUMANITY

The Incarnation—God becoming man—becomes an issue in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22. Theological textbooks describe how both Christ’s deity and humanity were necessary in the atonement. Christ did the work of our kinsman redeemer as a human, but only God could bear the full penalty for sin. The Resurrection is usually rightly extolled as Christ’s victory over

death, sin, and hell. As in the case of Christ's death, His humanity as well as His deity is important. Specifically, the humanity of the Second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the basis of the believer's resurrection in Christ. "By man also the resurrection of the dead."

The first man, Adam, doomed all his descendants to death by his action in the Fall. The Second Adam brings life through His resurrection. In His death the Lord Jesus Christ took our sins upon Himself and experienced the full wrath of God for those sins. Now that God's wrath has been propitiated, believers receive eternal life.

"In Christ shall all be made alive" can be difficult to explain. Scripture clearly states that not all will be saved—verse 22 does not seem to relate to only the saved. Godet's *Commentary on First Corinthians* helpfully notes the options. Some commentators believe the two uses of "all" refer to the same groups—the all in Adam are the same as the all who will be made alive. Other authors affirm the "destination" is the same for all, but people may reject their being made alive by not trusting in the Lord Jesus. Numbers of commentators agree that the second "all" is obviously "all believers" who will be made alive. A final option is that being "made alive" refers to both the resurrection to damnation as well as the resurrection to everlasting life.<sup>1</sup>

In examining the choices for explaining this phrase, it is helpful to note that the bracket verses 20 and 23 both refer to Christ as the firstfruits. If verse 23 explains verse 22, then "those that are Christ's at His coming" are those who are made alive in Christ in verse 22. Thus the best explanation is to accept the "all [that are Christ's] shall be made alive" understanding of the verse.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Christ's substitutionary death on the cross and His resurrection as both firstfruits and the beginning of new life for believers. In this Easter season believers should rejoice in Christ's resurrection as God's promise that we too will enjoy resurrection unto life.



### About the Author:

Jonathan Bright received a Masters in Divinity from Bob Jones Seminary. He taught four years in South Korea and currently teaches Bible courses at EUCON International College. When he is not teaching, Jonathan enjoys reading and spending time with his wife and two sons.

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<sup>1</sup> Godet, Frederic Lous. *Commentary on First Corinthians*. Kregel Publications. © 1977. Pp. 781-783.

## **The Resurrection of Christ: Our Reason to Endure in Hope — 1 Cor. 15:19-20**

By Matthew Epperson

- NIV If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.
- ESV If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.
- KJV If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of them that slept.
- NASB If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

### ***Introduction***

The two verses of this study form a crucial juncture between two divergent logical conclusions that Paul reaches in his defense of the physical resurrection of the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul swiftly and decisively confirms the reality of the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead. Paul then proceeds to decimate the supposition (apparently held by some of the Corinthians) that physical resurrection cannot occur. Paul's logical acumen obliterates all possible Corinthian opposition to the physical resurrection. Garland summarizes, "In 15:13-19, Paul argues *ad absurdum* to show how futile the Christian faith would be if there were no resurrection of the dead... If Christ is not raised from the dead, then everything based on that belief collapses in a heap of broken dreams."<sup>1</sup> Paul's argument results in only one possible conclusion: bodily resurrection is not only possible, but it has actually occurred, beginning with the resurrected Christ. Paul then demonstrates that bodily resurrection is also a theologically inevitable and necessary result of God's salvation plan. In verses 19 and 20, Paul asserts the logical and theological necessity of the resurrection of Christ as the foundation of the believer's present and future hope.

### ***The Condition Causing Despair***

#### *The Condition*

Paul begins verse 19 with a conditional statement: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ." This conditional statement fits the pattern known by Greek grammarians as a 1<sup>st</sup> class condition. Greek grammarian A.T. Robertson describes the 1<sup>st</sup> class condition as one that "*assumes* the condition to be a reality and the conclusion follows logically and naturally from the

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 701.

assumption.”<sup>2</sup> Note carefully the word *assumes*. Paul does not actually believe that we only have hope in Christ in this life, but he will adopt that position as the basis for the conclusion that follows.<sup>3</sup> One might ask why Paul should reason in this manner with the Corinthians. Fee provides an answer: “By this form of logic, called *modus tollens*, the Corinthians are being forced to agree that there is a future resurrection of believers on the basis of their common faith in the resurrection of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Paul makes a brilliant debating move which compels the Corinthians into a situation where they must either accept the reality of the bodily resurrection of believers or dismiss Christianity entirely. He does this by arguing from the very position that some of the Corinthians seemed to advocate until he reaches the ultimate and horrendous conclusion.<sup>5</sup>

The contents of Paul’s conditional statement have generated mild debate from Bible scholars. Fee explains, “There is some debate as to whether this [*elpikotes esmen*] is a periphrastic perfect (= we have hoped) or a copula with a participle functioning as a substantive (= we are people who have hoped).”<sup>6</sup> The significance of the difference between these two grammatical functions probably has little to no meaning for the average Bible student, since they are essentially identical statements; however, the tense used should benefit everyone. Gaebelein remarks, “The perfect tense of the verb *elpizo* (‘we have hope’) implies a continual hope in Christ throughout life.”<sup>7</sup> Every Greek student should know that the perfect tense signifies a past action with results/effects continuing into the present. Applying this knowledge to the perfect participle found here, Garland rightly suggests that the verb implies that “we have set our hope and continue to hope.”<sup>8</sup> Paul does not speak here of a blind or foolish hope, but he qualifies the term with the prepositional phrase *in Christ*. Garland observes that “‘In Christ’ refers to the source of this hope...”<sup>9</sup> The believer’s hope can only come from Christ.

Without Christ, no hope exists for the Christian at all, but what particular hope of the Christian does Paul mean? No commentator has given this subject more thorough consideration

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<sup>2</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 1007.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson goes on to say, “This condition, therefore, taken at its face value, assumes the condition to be true. The context or other light must determine the actual situation” (Robertson, 1008). The context of verse 19 demonstrates that in reality the Christian does have hope beyond this life, as demonstrated in the following verse.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987), 740.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 659. “In his entire presentation Paul singles out nothing incidental; he adheres absolutely to the original proposition in its true and genuine sense as maintained by these doubters. The deductions which he draws are simple, clear, inescapable... This is true logic, unassailable and deadly.”

<sup>6</sup> Fee, 744.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Ely Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 10:284.

<sup>8</sup> Garland, 702.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

in relation to this passage than Spiros Zodhiates. Zodhiates hits the mark when he states, “Hope in Christ, therefore, is something more than the conviction of life after death; it is the hope of a joyous state of existence of body and soul in which we shall have fellowship with God and be perfected in righteousness.”<sup>10</sup> The Christian does not find his hope in Christ in the bodily resurrection of the believer. Yet Zodhiates makes no mistake by including every aspect of the believer’s hope: “The ‘hope in Christ,’ then, of which Paul speaks is not the hope of the resurrection, nor even the hope of a future life, but the hope of the pardon, the favor, the approval and love of the Most High God.”<sup>11</sup> If the Christian hoped for no more than a physical resurrection, he would have no great hope. The unsaved also will have a physical resurrection. The Christian’s peculiar hope is that he will (unlike the unsaved) receive a glorified body in the resurrection, in which he will enjoy the blessed presence of God for all eternity.

Many times the little words create the biggest trouble. The adverb *monon* (only, alone) provides the most significant obstacle to a proper understanding of Paul’s condition in verse 19. Once more, Fee provides a concise statement of the difficulty: “Does the ‘only’ modify the phrase ‘in this life’ (NIV), or more specifically the verb itself, emphasizing that in this life we have only hoped in Christ but with no real future?”<sup>12</sup> Unlike the dilemma of the participle, this problem has a real bearing on the meaning of the verse. Calvin would interpret *only* in reference to *in this life*, saying that Paul “...means here to limit the fruit of our faith to this life, so that our faith looks no farther, and does not extend beyond the confines of the present life.”<sup>13</sup> In favor of Calvin’s position, one needs to look no further than the consensus of the English translations provided above. On the other hand, Thiselton argues, “Paul carefully portrays someone **who has placed hope in Christ with nothing beyond**, i.e., *only so*.”<sup>14</sup> The idea, according to this view, is that the Christian has done nothing more than place an empty hope in Christ. Fee strikes this second view down: “More likely it is the former since ‘hope’ is always a positive term in Paul’s extant letters and the second option makes it somewhat negative.”<sup>15</sup> When Paul speaks of hope in the New Testament, he does not use the term in the light way that modern English does, as though *to hope* were synonymous with *to wish*. Paul’s *hope* could be defined as a *confident expectation*. To view Paul’s statement as Thiselton suggests may accord with modern usage, but it disagrees with Paul’s usage.

### *The Consequence*

The second portion of verse 19 details the consequence that would be true, if the condition were true. Paul begins this consequence section with the word *we*. One may wonder to whom *we* refers. Barnes provides two good reasons for understanding *we* to refer to all

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<sup>10</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *Conquering the Fear of Death* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1970), 233.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>12</sup> Fee, 744.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 2:21.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1221.

<sup>15</sup> Fee, 744.

Christians: “(1) Paul had not mentioned the apostles particularly in the previous verses; and, (2) The argument demands that it should be understood of all Christians, and the declaration is as true, substantially, of all Christians as it was of the apostles.”<sup>16</sup> Paul needs to address all Christians in order to demonstrate the relevance of this truth for the Corinthians.

Paul claims that the Christian deserves more pity than all other men. Bauer’s lexicon suggests the translations miserable and pitiable for *eleeinos*.<sup>17</sup> The comparative form (*eleeinoteroi*) appears in 1 Cor. 15:19. Normal translation of a comparative adjective would use the adverb *more*, so why do most of the English versions use *most*? Bullinger explains that what occurs in 1 Cor. 15:19 is an example of “the comparative for the superlative.”<sup>18</sup> Paul uses the comparative form with a superlative meaning, which may seem unusual to the English speaker, but it did not seem at all strange to Paul. Bullinger says that this use comes from a Semitic idiom.<sup>19</sup> Paul uses the language in a way that he had grown accustomed to throughout his life.

As one tries to determine what Paul means by this statement that the Christian deserves more pity than all other men, it may help to understand what Paul does not mean. Barnes remarks that Paul “...does not mean that Christians are unhappy, or that their religion does not produce comfort...”<sup>20</sup> The translation *miserable* misleads the reader slightly. Probably *pitiful* gives a truer sense of Paul’s intention. Hodge agrees, “This passage does not teach that Christians are more miserable in this life than other men. This is contrary to experience. Christians are unspeakably happier than other men.”<sup>21</sup> There is indeed joy, even in this life, for the Christian; and if there were no eternity, morality would truly produce a happier life in this world, but praise the Lord that one may hope for much more than happiness on earth!

If the Christian does have happiness from morality and religion, why does Paul say that the absence of the resurrection makes him the most pitiful of all men? Thiselton answers,

Since Paul builds up *an intensified cumulative logic* in which he *gathers up the whole refutatio*, what would make Christians pitiable if there is no resurrection is the whole chain of consequences in vv. 13–18 which follow the counteraxiom of v. 12: (i) the gospel has no substance; (ii) faith is ineffective; (iii) the witnesses are liars; (iv) sin retains its destructive and damaging control; and (v) believers who have died are irretrievably lost.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical: I Corinthians to Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 291.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), s.v. *ελεεινο*.

<sup>18</sup> E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 527.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>20</sup> Barnes, 291.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 323.

<sup>22</sup> Thiselton, 1221.

Following Paul's logic, the Christian should be pitied because the denial of the bodily resurrection would mean the annihilation of the entire Christian hope. Why must this be true? Ryrie explains, "If Christ did not rise then His life and ministry ended on the cross, and He does nothing from that time on. Through the Resurrection and Ascension our Lord entered into His present and future ministries..."<sup>23</sup> Without the resurrection, Christ cannot prepare a place for His own, return for them, intercede on their behalf, or perform any other meaningful function for the believer. Fee analyzes the situation correctly:

"By believing in Christ's death and resurrection, we (meaning both he and they) have placed our trust in Christ to forgive us our sins. But if Christ is not raised from the dead, that means we not only do not have present forgiveness but have lost our hope for the future as well. And if we have believed in the future when there is no future, then of all human beings we are the most to be pitied—not because Christian existence is interested only in the future, but because the loss of the future means the loss of the past and present as well."<sup>24</sup>

The complete loss of hope sustained by the Christian, should the resurrection prove false, would be a tragedy beyond human expression.

The tragic loss of the future hope becomes even more painful when one considers the present state of the believer. Calvin indicates three realities of the believer's present circumstances that verify Paul's assertion of misery: 1) the chastening hand of God; 2) the believer's restraint from worldly pleasure and excess; and 3) the persecution experienced by believers in this world.<sup>25</sup> The Christian life is rendered completely vain with the removal of all hope of resurrection. The Christian endures all of these griefs for nothing. Morris presents a balanced view of Paul's argument when he writes, "While Paul never minimizes the compensations the Christian has in this life in the way of peace within and the like, yet it is only common sense to see that, if this world is all there is, anybody is better off than the Christian."<sup>26</sup> Some would go even farther than Morris. Lenski puts it bluntly: "A Christianity without a risen Christ and the sure and certain hope of our resurrection from the grave, whatever men may say in laudation of its moral influence and its good works, is worse than none."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Lenski overstates the matter, but he provides an excellent example of the extent of the despair that arises from the denial of the resurrection. Paul's argument following the denial of the resurrection to its logical conclusion leaves the reader dismayed by the horrific scene before him.

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<sup>23</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1999), 311.

<sup>24</sup> Fee, 745.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, 22-23.

<sup>26</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 212.

<sup>27</sup> Lenski, 658. *Contra Zodhiates*, 238: "If the Christian life had brought him [Paul] many losses, it had brought him still more gains, and, even apart from the future, the balance was still on the right side." It may be impossible to say whether Paul would have sided with Lenski or Zodhiates. The argument of 1 Cor. 15 seems to agree more with Lenski's attitude. Fortunately, we will never need to know Paul's opinion of Christianity without the reality of the resurrection.

## *The Contrast Confirming Hope*

### *The Reality of the Resurrection*

Paul has no desire to leave the Corinthians with the negative note of verse 19. Instead, he quickly shifts to the reality of the resurrection. Fee explains, “Here by way of emphatic contrast it [*nuni de*] expresses the way things really are at the present moment...”<sup>28</sup> Paul had brought the Corinthians to the brink of hopelessness and despair only to magnify by comparison the glorious hope and rejoicing that they had in Christ. Godet captures the joy of Paul’s contrast: “And now let us replace the foundation, which by supposition we had for a moment removed: the whole majestic edifice of the Christian salvation rises again before us even to its sublime consummation!”<sup>29</sup> Denying the resurrection denies all of its implied blessing and hope. In reaffirming the truth of the resurrection, Paul also reinstates the believer’s entire hope in Christ, from justification to glorification. Lenski observes, “All of the deductions which Paul has knit so tightly he now unravels with one motion. All of them are false because the original proposition is false.”<sup>30</sup> Never has anyone heard happier news! All of these supposed causes for hopelessness vanish because they stand on a foundation of mist. Paul blows the mist away with a simple reminder: the resurrection has already occurred, therefore it must be real.

Paul’s delusion-shattering statement comes in plain and basic language. He has already proved the great truth of the resurrection at the beginning of the chapter. Now, in verse 20, Paul simply reminds the Corinthians of the fact once more.

Debates over whether the verb (*egegertai*) should be understood to show that God raised Christ or that Christ raised Himself must not cloud the significance of the first portion of verse 20. Bauer shows that the verb may be translated *be raised* or *rise*.<sup>31</sup> In this instance, one finds evidence to support either option. Zodhiates argues in favor of *Christ is risen*, showing that Christ was, in fact, involved in His own resurrection: “‘He is risen’ of His own power and will.”<sup>32</sup> While Zodhiates has a good point to make about Christ’s deity and power over death, his view does not best fit Paul’s argument in this passage. Robertson’s view that in 1 Corinthians 15:15ff. “the true passive ‘emphasizes the action of God’” better suits the following context emphasizing the purpose and will of God.<sup>33</sup> Although it is no more correct to say that Christ raised himself than it is to say that God raised Christ, the course of Paul’s argument suggests a focus on God’s action in this verse.

Having said so much about the voice of the verb, one almost forgets that the primary significance of *egegertai* in verse 20 lies in the tense. Paul uses the perfect tense, describing an

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<sup>28</sup> Fee, 748.

<sup>29</sup> Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 778.

<sup>30</sup> Lenski, 661.

<sup>31</sup> Bauer, s.v. ἐγέρω.

<sup>32</sup> Zodhiates, 269.

<sup>33</sup> Robertson, 817.

action completed in the past with results continuing in the present. Paul's focus on the past action and the present result in verse 20 leads Morris to conclude that Paul "uses the perfect tense of the verb to rise with all the fullness of its meaning."<sup>34</sup> One might translate this perfect tense *is raised* or *has been raised*. Both translations accurately reflect the text, and each has its own benefits. *Has been raised* clearly reveals the text's perfect tense and the completion of Christ's resurrection. *Is raised* best matches Paul's focus in this verse on the present reality of Christ's resurrected state. Paul intends to emphasize that Christ no longer abides among the dead. Though He *was* counted among the dead, He *is* risen.

### *The Result of the Resurrection*

A minor textual issue requires attention before an examination of the second half of verse 20. Thiselton notes, "Some Western texts insert ἐγένετο to read *and became the firstfruits*."<sup>35</sup> This issue is minor because it in no way affects the meaning of the verse. If Thiselton's assertion is true, then the final statement of verse 20 acts as an appositive to Christ (Christ..., the firstfruits). If Thiselton's assertion is false, *egeneto* likely functions as a substitute for a form of *eimi* (Christ..., he is the firstfruits). Bauer shows that *ginomai* frequently occurs as a substitute for *eimi*, including at least three other times in 1 Corinthians (8:9; 9:20f; 10:32).<sup>36</sup> The use of *egeneto* for *eimi* would then make the final phrase a predicate assertion essentially equivalent to an appositional clause.

The term *aparche* offers a far more appealing topic for examination. Bauer defines *aparche*: "Sacrificial first-fruits of any kind (incl. animals), which were holy to the divinity and were consecrated before the rest could be put to secular use."<sup>37</sup> In *aparche*, Paul found the perfect word for his purpose. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's commentary explains, "The time of writing this Epistle was probably about the Passover (1Co 5:7); the day after the Passover sabbath was that for offering *the first-fruits* (Lev. 23:10, 11), and the same was the day of Christ's resurrection: whence appears the appropriateness of the image."<sup>38</sup> *Aparche* comes filled with connotation from the Old Testament background. Barnes comments, "The first-fruits, or the first sheaf of ripe grain was required to be offered to the Lord, and was waved before him by the priest, as expressing the sense of gratitude by the husbandman, and his recognition of the fact that God had a right to all that he had."<sup>39</sup> One may wonder why Paul would write to the Gentile Corinthians about the Jewish firstfruits, but two answers present themselves. First, Paul likely had to explain much Old Testament teaching to the Corinthians while he preached among them.

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<sup>34</sup> Morris, 213.

<sup>35</sup> Thiselton, 1223. He further suggests, "It is absent from  $\mathfrak{D}^{46}$ ,  $\aleph$ , B, A, and there is no major textual support for this secondary addition." Thiselton's statement seems to marginalize the Byzantine reading. As to whether the word was inserted from the original text or removed from it, any answer is merely speculation. The presence or absence of the word in question makes no significant impact to the meaning of the text.

<sup>36</sup> Bauer, s.v. γινομαι.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., s.v. απαρχη.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 1222.

<sup>39</sup> Barnes, 293.

Second, Garland notes that the ritual of offering the firstfruits was not only strictly Jewish, but also familiar to the Greco-Roman society.<sup>40</sup> Paul could not have chosen a more suitable word than *aparche* to achieve his purpose.

The idea of being *first* is inherent in the term *firstfruits*. Paul's use of firstfruits implies three spheres in which Christ is first. He is first: 1) in time; 2) in promise; and 3) in kind.

Christ is the firstfruits in time. Chafer shows the chronology of the resurrection: "...there are companies in resurrection with intervals between. Christ is first raised as First-fruits; then they that are Christ's at His coming, which means that at least nineteen hundred years intervene; and finally the end of the resurrection program, with a millennium between, in which all contrary authority is put down forever."<sup>41</sup> Christ's resurrection signaled the beginning of the "end times" and inaugurated God's resurrection program. He precedes His church and rightly bears the titles "Author of Our Faith" and "Captain of Our Salvation."

Christ not only personifies the firstfruits in time but also in promise. Barnes explains this aspect of the firstfruits: "That which is a part and portion of the whole which is to follow, and which is the earnest or pledge of that; as the first sheaf of ripe grain was not only the *first* in order of time, but was the earnest or pledge of the entire harvest which was soon to succeed."<sup>42</sup> Paul's picture of Christ as the firstfruits portrays Christ as the beginning of the resurrection harvest that will include all believers. Thiselton adds a theological focus to the anthropological aspect of the promise: "Most commentators emphasize the *existential assurance* of vv. 20–25: because **Christ was raised**, those in Christ will be raised, since he is the **firstfruit of the whole harvest still to come**. This is valid. However, vv. 20–25 *prepare the way for* vv. 26–28, which is *about God and God's purposes, as is this whole chapter*."<sup>43</sup> Thiselton's insight from the context fleshes out Paul's firstfruit image. Fee further expands the proper theological focus:

"Whatever else, Paul's thinking is thoroughly eschatological. He understood both the death and resurrection of Christ and the subsequent gift of the Spirit as eschatological realities. That is, he recognized that in those events God had set in motion the events of the End in such a way that they must of divine necessity be brought to consummation. The absolutely crucial matter in this view is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In Paul's Jewish eschatological heritage resurrection belonged to the final events of the End. The fact that *the* Resurrection had already taken place within history meant that the End had been set inexorably in motion; the resurrection of Christ absolutely guaranteed for Paul the resurrection of all who are 'in Christ.' This is the point he makes in vv. 20–22, using the metaphor of firstfruits and the Adam-Christ analogy. ...the inevitable chain of events set in motion by Christ's resurrection has ultimately to do with God's own absolute authority over *all things*, especially death."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Garland, 705.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), 4:376.

<sup>42</sup> Barnes, 293.

<sup>43</sup> Thiselton, 1224.

<sup>44</sup> Fee, 746.

The context confirms Fee's position, as Paul concludes this section (vv.20-28) with an emphasis on the preeminence of the sovereign God. Christ as firstfruits in promise guarantees that God will resurrect the church, and ultimately, that He will accomplish all of His will in the universe. Lenski concludes, "Only when Christ's resurrection is thus seen in its glorious connection with the final consummation is its full significance appreciated."<sup>45</sup> As the denial of the resurrection completely contradicts the Christian reality, Paul shows that the reality of the resurrection completely confirms the Christian hope.

In addition to Christ's role as firstfruits in time and promise, Paul shows Christ as the firstfruits in kind. Morris clarifies, "Christ was not the first to rise from the dead... His resurrection was to a life which knows no death, and in that sense He was the first, the forerunner of all those that were to be in Him."<sup>46</sup> Christ as the firstfruits in kind gives a sample of the believer's glorified body. Ryrie agrees, "[Christ's resurrection] serves as a prototype of the resurrection of believers... Our resurrection bodies, like His, will be different from our earthly bodies."<sup>47</sup> Paul's own words later in 1 Cor. 15 support Ryrie's claim that the believer's resurrected body will follow Christ's pattern.<sup>48</sup> The three aspects of Christ as firstfruits prove that Paul chose the best possible term to communicate these truths about Christ's resurrection.

Paul describes Christ not just as the firstfruits but as the firstfruits of them that slept. *Them that slept* translates a perfect tense participle. Morris explains that the perfect tense here emphasizes "the continuing state of the faithful departed."<sup>49</sup> The believer has died and remains in that state until the present moment, but Paul has selected a gentle term to describe his state. Zodhiates remarks, "...the important thing according to Paul is that we now regard them [the dead] as if they were merely asleep, ready to be awakened at any moment."<sup>50</sup> The certainty of the resurrection removes any sense of the finality of death. The resurrection also removes the fear of death. Zodhiates later writes, "For those who know Jesus Christ, death in Him is just as little to be feared as closing our eyes in natural slumber."<sup>51</sup> Zodhiates's conclusion echoes Paul's own triumphant exclamation: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"<sup>52</sup> In the resurrection of Christ, the believer has a complete, sure, and eternal hope. No enemy can defeat the Christian who has conquered even death itself through Christ.

### *Conclusion*

Paul asserts through logic and theology that the resurrection of Christ establishes the believer's present and future hope. Paul's logical argument first shows the complete despair of the believer apart from the resurrection. He indicates that a denial of the resurrection contradicts

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<sup>45</sup> Lenski, 661.

<sup>46</sup> Morris, 213.

<sup>47</sup> Ryrie, 310.

<sup>48</sup> 1 Cor. 15:47ff.

<sup>49</sup> Morris, 213.

<sup>50</sup> Zodhiates, 244.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Cor. 15:55

the entire Christian hope. Paul then demonstrates the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith. From a highly theological perspective, he contends that the resurrection of Christ guarantees the resurrection of His church. Christ's resurrection generates undeniable, unshakable, and unending hope for every believer, leading one to conclude with Paul: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 1 Cor. 15:58



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