

THE CONCEPT OF UNION WITH CHRIST AFTER DEATH IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Catholic thought today has registered its own emphasis in eschatology. The popular mind centers attention on the definitive judgment which launches the soul at death upon an eternity of joy or of anguish. In this frame of reference the apocalyptic events of the end-time claim little interest. For most people the general judgment in only consequential and secondary, a mere ratification of the preliminary decision which is far more important.

It may come as a surprise, then, to learn that the Christians of New Testament times did not share this outlook. Their preoccupation centered in the Parousia, in the apocalyptic return of Christ as Judge and Savior. The interest in the final restoration was so dominant that it tended to withdraw attention from the immediate aftermath of death.

Jewish Background of Early Christian Eschatology

This outlook of the early Church was the emergent of its biblical and Jewish background.¹ Christ and the Judeo-Christian community made their own the eschatology which Hebrew thought had formulated after the long and intricate processes of its development.²

¹ The Jewish theories of retribution are treated at length in the following studies: R. H. Charles, *A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, in Judaism, and in Christianity* (London: Black and Co., 1899); G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era II* (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1958), 279-322, 377-395; M. J. Lagrange, *Le Judaïsme avant Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Gabalda, 1931), 343-363; E. F. Sutcliffe, *The Old Testament and the Future Life*, 2 ed. (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1947); A. Gelin, *The Key Concepts of the Old Testament*, tr. G. Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 70ff R. Martin-Achard, *De la mort à la résurrection d'après l'Ancien Testament* (Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1956).

² A. Gelin, *Key Concepts*, 73, tries to schematize in three stages the development of the Israelite doctrine of retribution: (1) Divine retribution is conceived of as something collective and temporal; (2) as something individual and temporal; (3) as something individual and other-worldly. He adds significantly, p. 79, "It will be recognized that my schematized presentation of these problems is not, necessarily, rectilinear or strictly chronological."

Even now it is difficult to trace the devious course which led from the early belief in collective and worldly retribution to the post-exilic hope of other-worldly reward both for the solidarity and for the individual.³ The course of development was so complex that the Jews never produced a universally accepted eschatology. We cannot speak of a Jewish *dogma* of retribution even in our Lord's own day.⁴ The Saducees, with no belief in reward after death, could and did attain to the highest positions in church and state.⁵

The theology of the Pharisees, however, dominated the scene. These respected leaders taught the doctrine of an apocalyptic end-time and the bodily resurrection of the just as it is enunciated in Dan 12:1-4, 2 Mach 7:9, 12:44-45, Enoch 91:10, 92:3-5, 102:6-11, 103:1-4, Psalms of Solomon 3:11-16. As G. F. Moore has well noted, the thesis of the Pharisees was the natural consequence of God's revelation:

On the premises of Scripture, the only logical way in which the Jews could conceive the fulfillment of God's promises to the righteous was that they should live again upon earth in the golden age to come and share in the salvation of Israel. The resurrection seems, indeed, so necessarily the consequence of the whole teaching of Scripture concerning the salvation of the righteous and their great reward that it is not strange that the Pharisees found it explicit or by intimation in all parts of their Bible.⁶

Christ accepted this doctrine and made it his own, thus giving certainty to the essential features of final retribution. His synthesis

³ G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, 318, points out that the slow arrival at full doctrine on reward in the after-life really gave Israel an edge over other religions whose notion of the after-life took early origin in the ancient myths. Cf. M. J. Lagrange, *Le Judaïsme*, 344: "Dans Israël, l'évolution demeura fidèle à son principe monothéiste; elle est donc supérieure à celle des autres religions."

⁴ Besides the notable differences in the doctrine of Pharisees and Saducees, we must also take into account our uncertainty about a Qumran doctrine of resurrection. Cf. M. Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking, 1958) 343-352, esp. 344-346.

⁵ In many of their views the Saducees tended to be conservatives who refused to accept that progress in dogma which flowed logically from the principles of the ancient faith.

⁶ *Judaism*, 313-314.

of the highest developments in Old Testament revelation stands as a basic assumption in all New Testament thought.

Prime Elements in Biblical Doctrines of Reward

The essential features of the doctrine of Christ and the Pharisees bring to the fore the three elements which remained constant in Hebrew thought on retribution despite the many changes which preceded its final formulation. For in all stages of its development this doctrine shows three characteristics which are inherent in biblical thought. These dominant elements must be kept in mind if we are to understand the teaching and spirit of our early Christian sources.

First of all, every biblical theory of retribution provides for man as an animated and personalized body and not as a dichotomy of body and soul as in the Greek system.⁷ Whether in the early concept of reward and punishment on this earth or in the late development of retribution in an after-life, the *whole* man is always involved. Biblical man lives always as an animated body, and so as a body he must be rewarded. No people ever had so keen a sense of man's psycho-somatic unity as did the Semites.

Secondly, every Hebrew theory of retribution looks primarily to the social group.⁸ With historical origins in a close-knit tribal society and with divine origin in a covenant between God and the people, Israel never lost sight of the fact that it must live as a people. Even when the individual emerges in the theology of Jeremias and Ezechiel,⁹ the devout Israelite finds his fulfillment and mission in the

⁷ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952) 14, draws this precise distinction between the Hellenic and Hebrew concepts: In the Hellenic conception of man "the body is non-essential to the personality: it is something which man possesses, or, rather, is possessed by. 'The Hebrew idea of the personality,' on the other hand, wrote the late Dr. Wheeler Robinson in a sentence which has become famous, 'is an animated body, and not an incarnated soul.' Man does not *have* a body, he *is* a body. He is flesh-animated-by-soul, the whole conceived as a psycho-physical unity."

⁸ G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, 311-312; R. Martin-Achard, *De la mort à la résurrection*, 25-27. This same emphasis is observable also in the Qumran Scrolls; cf. M. Burrows, *More Light on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 295-296.

⁹ Jer 31:29-34; 18:11; 25:5; 35:15; Ezech 18. When in 587 the era of the covenant seemed to be near its end, Jeremias was led to formulate

nation's destiny to glorify God as a corporate personality. A markedly personal note characterizes the post-exilic piety of the *Anawim*; in their prayer, however, they remain always aware of membership in the *Qahal Yahweh*. This corporate ambient is the very context in which they lived. It is the background of their piety and the support of their confidence.¹⁰

The Bible, therefore, is alien to the subjectivism and atomistic individualism of our age. The hopes of the individual may be fired with the flame of his own personality; their fulfillment always includes the collectivity. Whether retribution is on this earth or in a world to come, whether reward involves the whole nation or only the just, Hebrew thought always centers in the social group.

Thirdly, every theory of retribution always gives first place to God and his glory. In the beginning men were content to die after a blessed long life on earth and to pass into the namelessness of Sheol,¹¹ happy in the thought that their people would continue to dwell on the land and to glorify God.¹² When this halcyon confidence was shattered by the nation's infidelity men had to seek another theory of retribution to safeguard God's glory.¹³ His honor was one

the idea of the new covenant. Cf. A. Gelin, *Key Concepts*, 68: "Nowhere else has he (Jeremias) so energetically and so happily expressed the idea that religion is an inner reciprocity (*Herzengemeinschaft*) uniting the individual to God, to be granted by God as a gift and to be developed by man as a personal good."

¹⁰ This factor is emphasized in the study on the Psalms by Pius Drijvers, O.C.S.O., *Les Psaumes* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1958); cf. 47-48: "Il ne faut pas oublier ici que la poésie d'Israël n'a, en général, rien d'individuel. . . . La poésie d'Israël est née plutôt de la vie même du peuple. Elle a toujours un caractère collectif, elle est un produit de la nation."

¹¹ The Israelites, like many primitive people, believed that the dead are found assembled in a vast territory which is reserved for them, in general under the earth. The world of the dead, Sheol of the Hebrews, is comparable to Hades of the Greeks and Arallu of the Assyro-Babylonians. If the Israelites borrowed this idea from their neighbors, this borrowing antedates the entry of the Hebrews into Palestine; cf. E. Dhorme, "Séjour des morts chez les Babyloniens et chez les Hébreux," *Revue Biblique* (1907) 5ff. In late Israel Sheol became a place of both reward and punishment, a provisory resting-place where the dead await the final consummation.

¹² R. Martin-Achard, *De la mort à la résurrection*, 25-27.

¹³ The compelling influence of the thought of God's glory is seen most clearly in Deutero-Isaias.

of the motives which drove Israel from one theory to another until at last it reached the perfect eschatological dream which envisioned endless glory for God through endless praise offered by the risen just.

These three themes dominated the retribution thesis of the Pharisees.¹⁴ The end-time would bring full reward in the presence of God to the resurrected nation and to the righteous individual. The nation of the just would thus glorify God forever. This belief rings through the confession of faith uttered before Antiochus by the Machabee martyrs (2 Mach 7:9-11,14,23,29). It is true, the 4th Book of Machabees and the Alexandrian Book of Wisdom, coming from a Greek background, emphasize the spiritual joys of final retribution (cf. Wis 2:22—3:19). This emphasis, however, merely stresses what is most important in man's salvation; it does not negate the Hebrew thesis that the *whole* man must share this reward.¹⁵

Late Hebrew thought knew also that reward and punishment begin in some way immediately after death. The justice of God and the survival of man required this. In the inter-Testamental literature, therefore, Sheol ceased to be merely an abode of the dead, without distinction in reward and punishment. It became instead a provisory stage where the dead anticipate their future lot. One part of this resting-place is called Paradise for there the just enjoy felicity; another part, called Gehenna, is a place of punishment for the wicked.¹⁶

The late development in Jewish eschatology lacks the clearness and certainty of the Pharisee thesis on retribution at the end-time.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. H. Strack—P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum NT aus Talmud und Midrasch*, I, 207-215.

¹⁵ The Alexandrian Book of Wisdom is not a finished treatment of eschatology; Cf. Wis 1:12-14. It must be complemented by other streams of tradition in Israel, e.g., Daniel and the apocalyptic writers.

¹⁶ G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, 287-322, surveys the inter-Testamental literature and indicates all occurrences of this theme.

¹⁷ In regard to reward and punishment during the interim period, G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, 391, speaks of an "ambiguity of terms" in our sources; R. Tournay, "L'Eschatologie individuelle des Psaumes," *Revue Biblique*, 56 (1949), 486, similarly observes, "Ce point reste encore imprécis."

The Hebrew mind, with its compelling sense of man's unity, found it difficult to conceive of reward and suffering for a disembodied spirit. Whatever is positive in this picture of man's lot during the interim period seems to borrow shape, tone, and color from the picture of the final drama.

Teaching of Christ on the End-Time

Christ made his own the doctrine of the Pharisees on the end-time, sharpening its focus and stabilizing its certainty through his own teaching and that of his apostles. We turn to the Gospels first; though they are among the latest compositions of the early Christian church they are true to the teaching and emphases of Jesus Himself.¹⁸

During his earthly life Christ was engaged in building a bridge between the worlds of the Old and New Covenants. It was his task to herald the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes and to manifest himself as the *auto-basileia*, the full and perfect embodiment of all that God had promised. Men had to see in him the eminent source of all salvation and the consummation of age-long expectancies.

He made clear enough that his kingdom would enjoy moments of growth and would suffer moments of waning. He was by no means the "eschatologist" created by Weiss,¹⁹ Schweitzer,²⁰ and Loisy.²¹

At the same time, however, He did look forward to playing a special role in the eschatological consummation. Contrary to the suggestion of C. H. Dodd,²² Christ did not limit his vision to a "realized eschatology." The fact is that a true eschatological note recurs in the Gospel record of his teaching.²³

¹⁸ A. Feuillet, "Parousie," *Dict. de la Bible*, Supp., 1337ff., reviews with competence, though summarily, the eschatological doctrine of the gospels.

¹⁹ J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, (Gottingen, 1900).

²⁰ A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu Forschung*, (Tubingen, 1913).

²¹ A. Loisy, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, (Bellevue, 1904).

²² C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, (London, 1946).

²³ H. Conzelmann, *Theology of St. Luke*, tr. G. Buswell (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) 96, points out that Luke has recast much of the primitive eschatological material to bring out the timeless and ethical application of the doctrine on the hereafter.

Teaching of Christ on Death and the Interim Period

Christ spoke also of the immediate aftermath of death, making his own the Pharisee doctrine on the interim period. It is to Luke we are indebted for the memory of these words of Jesus. This is significant. Luke the Greek writing for Greeks takes care to record the doctrine which matches their interest in the fate of man when life on earth comes to an end.

To Luke we owe Christ's parable of Dives and Lazarus (16:19-31). Christ speaks here of reward and punishment after death, painting his picture as the Pharisees did with the colors of final retribution, yet scaling down the perspective to accord with the interim period. The picture was a common one; in renewing it and making it his own, Christ confirmed belief in reward and punishment following immediately upon death.²⁴

Luke makes a more important contribution in recording Jesus' word to the thief on the cross: "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise" (23:43).²⁵ This promise serves as a flange guiding to our own doctrine on the interim period. Jewish thought had focused attention on a place of bliss described in terms of earthly pleasure—the food of life, living water, shade, rest, light; this they called Paradise. In his messianic proclamation from the cross ("Today") Jesus effects a transition from the Jewish hope of Paradise to the Christian hope of union with Christ: "You shall be *with me*." This word makes clear that even immediately after death the righteous man enjoys the companionship of the king of the messianic kingdom.²⁶

We are indebted to Luke also for the revealing incident of Stephen's death. The account in Acts 7:54-60 makes clear that even

²⁴ In commenting on this passage Père A. Valensin, *Évangile selon Saint Luc* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1929), 305, warns against too close a scrutiny of the details of the parable, but adds, "Mais si on la rapproche des autres enseignements de Jésus sur ce sujet des fins dernières, il est légitime d'y trouver affirmée l'irrévocabilité du jugement divin qui, après la mort, fixe la destinée de l'homme pour la béatitude ou le châtement éternels." Cf. M. J. Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Luc*, (Paris: Gabalda, 1921), 449.

²⁵ G. W. MacRae, S.J., "With Me in Paradise," *Worship*, 35 (1961), 235-240.

²⁶ This aspect was unknown in Jewish theology of the interim period.

though the thought of the Parousia dominated the mind of the early Christian writers they possessed at the same time a concept of union with Christ at death. As L. Cerfaux points out, it is the Christ of the Parousia whom Stephen beholds.²⁷ The circumstances of the vision, however, indicate that his presence is meaningful here and now. Christ does not "sit" at the right hand of the Father in the role of Parousia judge. Instead he "stands" in an attitude of expectant welcome.²⁸ The words which Stephen utters, "Lord, receive my spirit," are the very words which Jesus used to surrender himself into the bosom of his Father (Lk 23:46). "With these words he (Stephen) fell asleep."²⁹ The real meaning of this cliché, so frequent in Jewish literature, must be gleaned from the context. There is no question of "awaking" only at the final resurrection. Even at the moment of death Stephen lives in some way "with Christ."³⁰

St. Paul's Eschatology

St. Paul has hardly made any real advance beyond these contributions of St. Luke. In his eschatology as in his anthropology he is a Pharisee of the Pharisees; he knew and accepted what was best in Jewish thought.³¹ There is great value, however, in studying his contribution. As the theologian of the Church he saw clearly what Christianity had done to sharpen the focus of Old Testament

²⁷ *Christ in the Theology of St. Paul*, tr. G. Webb—A. Walker, (New York: Herder, 1959), 72.

²⁸ E. Jacquier, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Gabalda, 1926), 236.

²⁹ In ancient times death was spoken of as a sleep. The New Testament also uses this word, but with a different accent. Cf. M. Meinertz, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments II*, (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1950), 221: "Wenn so der Auferstehungsgedanke hinter dem Bilde vom Todesschlaf steht, wenn man weiter bedenkt, dass Paulus den Leib des Menschen als einen integrierenden Bestandteil und nicht als das Gefängnis der Seele betrachtet, dann versteht man, dass sein ganzes Sinnen auf die Zeit gerichtet ist, da der ganze Mensch durch die Auferstehung seine vollendete Beseligung erreicht. Das um so mehr, als die Sehnsucht nach dieser Vollendung bei der Parusie, wie wir sahen, so gross war."

³⁰ Cf. A. Feuillet, *op. cit.*, 1359.

³¹ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, 11: "There are indeed individual words and extensions of usage which are to be explained from other sources. But the basic categories with which he works derive from the OT view of man, and presuppose the questions and interests upon which that view rests."

revelation and to illumine it with the light of Christ.³² Secondly, his letters are the earliest writings of the New Testament period, not written like the Gospels to reproduce the words and teachings of Jesus but to show the full mind of the Church in Paul's own day. In reading his epistles, therefore, we come to grips with flesh and blood Christianity between 50 and 60 A.D.—its attitudes and interests.

In these letters the Parousia comes frequently to the fore, not only in the beginning of his ministry (it is the whole problem of Thessalonians) but also at its close. In dying Paul looks forward to "that day": "There is laid up for me a crown of justice which the Lord, the just Judge, will give to me in that day; yet not only to me, but also to all those who love His coming" (2 Tim 4:8).³³

In the captivity epistles his attention to the mystery of Christ leads him to concentrate on anticipated eschatology; through the *arrabon* of the indwelling Spirit (Eph 1:14) the Christian has already begun his future life.³⁴ If anything, however, this foretaste serves to whet the desire for that day when, through resurrection, the whole man shall be with the Lord.³⁵

This prospect of a rich personal experience provides only a partial reason for the magnetism of the Parousia. The last day drew the mind of Paul much more because it represented the salvation of the whole Body of Christ for the glory of the Father. For Paul the Hebrew, salvation had to include the note of solidarity and further the glory of God. For Paul the Christian this meant the resurrection

³² There is considerable progress in Paul's doctrine, a progress which consists in rendering explicit everything that belief in the final resurrection involves—baptismal resurrection, the rigorous imperative of moral resurrection, and the glorious resurrection at the end. Cf. A. Feuillet, "Le mystère Pascal et la résurrection des chrétiens d'après les Épîtres pauliniennes," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, (1957) 337-354.

³³ Not only the expression "in that day" but also the word for "coming" (*epiphaneia*) are technical terms denoting the Parousia.

³⁴ O. Cullman, *Christ and Time*, tr. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 72 speaks of the Holy Spirit as "the anticipation of the end in the present."

³⁵ Cf. Paul's description of the activity of the Spirit in Rom 8:1-17 with the words which immediately follow (18-25) wherein he describes man's desire for the Parousia.

of the whole Body of Christ for the glory of the Father. "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father. . . . And when all things are made subject to him, then the Son himself will also be made subject to him who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:24,28).

St. Paul's Teaching on Death

In Paul's judgment nothing could compare with the final consummation. For up until the Parousia death would reign; and for Paul death is not a mere biological fact but a tyranny, a penalty for man's offense which lay heavy not only upon the living but also in some way even upon the dead.³⁶ The symbol and effect of sin, it was a power hostile to God which would continue to blight humanity even until the very end: "The last enemy to be destroyed will be death" (1 Cor 15:26). Paul's lack of interest in the immediate aftermath of death and his yearning for the Parousia make clear that in his judgment even those who have died in the Lord still lack something.³⁷

In this regard it is significant that when the Thessalonians mourn their dead (1 Thes 4:13) the Apostle does not comfort them with the reminder of a consummation in glory already achieved. He is content simply to point out that the living will have no advantage over the dead at the time of the Parousia (1 Thes 4:14-18). He says nothing more than this to reconcile his readers to the fate of those who have already died. For Paul the Hebrew, death stripping man of his body stood in open hostility to the full consummation of God's glory and man's definitive salvation.

This attitude is fundamentally biblical and Hebrew. Paul's yearning for the Parousia echoes the hope of the author of Daniel for the total messianic victory over sin (Dan 9:24-25). The Apostle shares fully the ardent longing of the Prophet who looked beyond

³⁶ Death, as man's destiny, "came by man" (1 Cor 15:21); as a fate, if not as a biological fact (Paul never so distinguishes) it "entered into the world. . . through sin; and. . . passed unto all men, for that all sinned" (Rom 5:12). Cf. S. Lyonnet, "Le péché originel et l'exégèse de Rom 5:12-14," *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 44 (1956), 63-84.

³⁷ A. Feuillet, "Mort du Christ et mort du chrétien d'après les épîtres pauliniennes," *Revue Biblique*, 66 (1959), 484-485.

the "seventy weeks" to the definitive defeat of all evil and the total realization of all good.

The Christian Note in Paul's Teaching

There is, however, another essential element in Paul's teaching, and this is formally Christian. It is this aspect of his doctrine which illumines death with truly Christian light.

Through an act of supreme generosity Christ has made himself one with the human solidarity which lies under the burden of sin and death (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 8:3). As a man, incorporating in himself all that is human, he went through death in order to change the whole meaning of death. On Calvary he faced all the horrors of a death which sin had made terrible. He endured the experience dreaded by every man as God's worst punishment, and thus he himself underwent God's judgment on the fallen human race (John 12:31).

It was precisely by this act that Christ took the bitter sting out of death (1 Cor 15:56-57). Because he was God's own Son, death *had* to be for him the doorway to life, the return to the bosom of his Father.³⁸ Previously death was the consummation of man's separation from God; in Christ it became the way to God. Previously it was the symbol of sin separating man forever from the living God. In Christ it became the supreme manifestation of loving obedience which promised immediate access to God.

Such a death, the death of God's own Son beloved by the Father and totally devoted to the Father, contained a compelling right to glorious risen life with the Father. "He became obedient unto death, even to death on a cross. *Therefore* God has exalted him" (Phil 2:8-9). The connective "therefore" marks the consequence not of mere promise but of inherent necessity. Resurrection was contained in the very nature of this death as the life of the flower is contained in the seed.³⁹

³⁸ Harald Riesenfeld, "La descente dans la mort," *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne. Mélanges offerts à M. Goguel* (Neuchâtel-Paris, 1950), 213-214.

³⁹ In the apt phrase of S. Lyonnet, "Conception paulinienne de la rédemption," *Lumière et Vie*, 36 (1958), 52, Christ's resurrection must be related to the mystery of the cross as "l'aboutissement plus encore que la récompense." Cf. 55-57.

For Paul nothing could be more definitive than the death-resurrection of Christ. His *transitus* from life in this world broke the tie which bound Him to *sarx*, the solidarity of earthly existence, with its inherent qualities of weakness, mortality and distance from God. Death swept him out beyond everything which bore the blight of life upon earth—the flesh and the law, sin and suffering, earthly weakness and death itself. Through resurrection he began an entirely new life in which he could give full play to the love and power which is his as messianic Son of God: “We know that Christ once raised from the dead, is never to die again: he is no longer under the dominion of death. For in dying as He died, He died to sin, once for all, and in living as He lives, He lives to God” (Rom 6:9-10).

A Further Christian Note in Paul's Teaching

There is also another factor equally essential to Paul's thought. The death-resurrection of Christ is of benefit not only to himself but to all Christians. He died and rose again as a corporate personality, bearing all men in himself to the Father. The Hebrew conception of corporate personality underlies Paul's whole concept of the role of Christ. Like Adam, Christ embodies and represents all men; he is the new Adam (1 Cor 15:22,45-49; Rom 5:14-19). Through the law of solidarity, therefore, his death and resurrection are efficacious for all: “We have come to the conclusion that, since one died for all, therefore all died” (2 Cor 5:14). The experience of Christ, like the life in Adam, has power to extend and to renew itself in every man. That is why Paul can write in the name of every Christian: “With Christ I am nailed to the cross. It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Paul is not speaking of mere external imitation—“As Christ . . . so the Christian.” His thought rests not on the level of external concomitance but on the deeper level of organic functioning. He speaks of the experience which he describes as life “in Christ Jesus.”

In the Pauline vocabulary this phrase means a real and psychosomatic union between Christ and the Christian. Through baptism the neophyte is so united to the risen body-person of the Savior that he shares the very life of Christ and becomes capable of extending the influence of his personality: “All you who have been baptized into

Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor freeman; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27).⁴⁰

This union is both real and dynamic, bringing a vital share in the redemptive mysteries of Christ's own death and resurrection. What Christ has done in his body in dying on the cross and in rising from the dead is shared and reproduced in the Christian. The union between them is as exclusive and communicative as that of man and wife. This truth comes to clearest expression in Rom 7:4: "Therefore, my brethren, you have died to the law by becoming identified with the body of Christ, and accordingly you have found another [husband] in him who rose from the dead, so that we may bear fruit for God."

The Christian does not merely assent psychologically to the redemptive activity of Christ, as some of the Lausanne scholars would hold.⁴¹ If that were the case, Calvary would be nothing more than another Sinai, and our justice would no longer be the gift of Christ but the wages of our own tedious human effort which always fails. To this latter suggestion Paul would have only one answer—*me genoito!* It repeats the fundamental error of the Judeo-Christians which Paul strove against throughout his ministry. He himself knows no other way of justice except that which he describes in Phil 3:8-10: "I count everything dung, for the sake of gaining Christ and finding myself incorporate in him, with no righteousness of my own, no legal rectitude, but the righteousness which comes from faith in Christ. . . . All I care for is to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings."

All this becomes possible through the gift of the Spirit which the Christian receives when he is united to the body-person of Christ in baptism. For the Spirit renews in the member of Christ the very death which the Savior died on the cross (death to the flesh and to

⁴⁰ The doctrine briefly summarized here has been called the "lynch-pin" of Paul's thought; cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, 48. The theme is developed at length in "The Christian's Union with the Body of Christ in Cor, Gal, and Romans," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23 (1961), 199-201.

⁴¹ Cf. P. Bonnard, "Où en est l'interprétation de l'épître aux Romains," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*: Ser 3, 1-2 (1951-52), 225-243.

sin); at the same time he vitalizes the Christian with the very life which Christ himself now lives in glory.⁴² This share is so real that Paul does not hesitate to write: "We were buried with him by means of baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ has arisen from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

Effect of Union With Christ: Death-Life

This sharing in the mysteries of Christ is real yet not static. All during his days upon earth man must live *en Christo* while at the same time continuing his human life *en sarki*. The criss-cross of these two levels leads inevitably to tension and contradiction. Man is constantly drawn to assume again the "mind of flesh" (Rom 8:5) which represents primarily a denial of man's dependence on God and a proud confidence in what is of mere human effort or origin. To react against this the Christian must often renew his baptismal death to sin and to *sarx* (Rom 6:12ff; Col 3:5-11).⁴³

Life with God, too, must know its constant deepening and increase (Col 3:1-3). If the Christian has "put on" Christ at baptism, he must ever continue to "put him on" more and more throughout the course of his life upon earth. The mystery of Christ's resurrection once shared in is to be lived always more intensely. Christian life, therefore, knows a fundamental law of growth—*magis magisque*. The conformity to Christ which gives new shape and new vitality to the whole personality at baptism is to grow constantly

⁴² It is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit which explains the bond between the Body of Christ and the renewal and transformation of the bodies of those who are united to it (cf. Rom 8:11; 2 Cor 5:17). By union with the Body of Christ the Christian receives the powers of the age to come, just as the beneficiaries of the healing miracles of Jesus received his power. This explains why, at the stage of 1 Cor (11:29-31), Paul explains sickness and death as resulting from the profanation of the Eucharist. Cf. O. Cullman, "La délivrance anticipée du corps humain d'après le Nouveau Testament," *Homage et Reconnaissance—à l'occasion du soixantième anniversaire de Karl Barth* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1946), 31-40.

⁴³ This directive for Christian life recapitulates the message of the Old Testament, "Cursed be the man who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh, whose heart turns away from the Lord" (Jer 17:5).

until at last it becomes perfect conformity through the Parousia resurrection.⁴⁴

It is unfortunate that Paul's words on bodily resurrection in 1 Cor 15 have so often been considered apart from the consistent doctrine of the rest of his epistles. This has led to the mistaken notion that the final change will have in it something quasi-magical. Many indeed think of resurrection only as a physical resuscitation. They have overlooked Paul's words on the bond between resurrection and the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11). This Spirit is always at work preparing the Christian for the Parousia by perfecting his likeness to Christ. The glorious moment of bodily resurrection, therefore, is but the last and consummate stage of that conformation to Christ which has been going on all during life.⁴⁵

The Full Pauline Perspective

We are now in a position to estimate the full Pauline perspective on death and the Parousia. As a Jew and as a Christian he could not think of man's perfect salvation except in terms of the full glory of God, the full redemption of the solidarity, the full conformity of all men to Christ through the Parousia resurrection. Obviously, therefore, his best thoughts always rested on the end-time of perfect consummation. Whatever took place before that was simply the development of man's first conformation to Christ through baptism.

Père Feuillet has aptly pointed up what is essential in this perspective:⁴⁶

Paul is interested above all in two crucial moments of our

⁴⁴ This bond between baptism and eschatological glory is expressed in Eph 5:26-27.

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note the concatenation involved in Paul's use of the verb *enduesthai* to describe the Christian's relation to Christ. In Gal 3:27 he speaks of initial union with Christ by saying that all the baptized "have put on Christ" (*ependusasthe*). In Rom 13:14, Eph 4:24, and Col 3:10 he employs the same metaphor to urge progress in developing the Christian spirit. Finally, in 2 Cor 5:4, he once more uses this verb to show that the resurrection of Christians at the Parousia is but the perfect consummation of the "putting on" of Christ which baptism has inaugurated: "We do not wish to be unclothed, but rather clothed over (*ependusasthai*), that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

⁴⁶ "La demeure celeste et la destinée des chrétiens," *Rech Sc Rel*, 44 (1956), 401-402.

participation in the risen life of Christ: baptism which inaugurates this sharing and the Parousia which consummates it. Baptism makes us one with Christ in His death and resurrection; the glorious Parousia places the final seal on our conformity to Him. All that takes place between these two moments does not establish any really new relation to Jesus.

Physical death, therefore, claims no special attention in Paul's letters. In his eyes it does not bring that full life with God which only the *total* man can know. For this resurrection is necessary, the resurrection of the individual and of the people of God. Death, therefore, marks only one more moment in the progressive conformation to Christ which is life's whole purpose.

He conceives of it only in the line of the progressive mortification of *sarx* which began at baptism.⁴⁷ Paul envisages all Christian existence as a death realized in principle on Calvary (2 Cor 5:14), commenced in fact for each Christian at baptism (Gal 2:20), continued all through life (Rom 6:12; Col 3:5), and completed by death "in Christ" at the term of one's earthly existence.

Death, therefore, is significant in Paul's mind not because it marks the consummation of entry into a new solidarity (only the Parousia could do that) but because it marks for the Christian the dissolution of the old solidarity of *sarx*. Even this significance, however, must be qualified. The dissolution is only partial; for the solidarity of the *sarx* is bound up with "this age" rather than with this earth. Even those who have died in Christ must still await the "redemption of the body" and the restoration of all things (cf. Rom 8:23).

Paul's First Word on Death—Phil 1:21-23

We cannot say, however, that Paul was indifferent to the experience of death. He has spoken of it twice, and both times with an awareness that death is a blessing.

⁴⁷ Physical death, therefore, consummates the sacramental death of baptism. Christian tradition in the early centuries was in line with Pauline thought when it spoke of Christian death, at least of martyrdom, as a second baptism, the baptism of blood after that of water: cf. Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 16 (PL 1:1217); Cyprian, *Epist* 77 (PL 4:418); Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech* III, 10 (PG 33:340); Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 13:7 (PL 41:381-82).

In Phil 1:21-23 the Apostle, faced with martyrdom, expresses his longing for death and speaks of it as "a gain."⁴⁸ "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if to live in the flesh is my lot, this means for me fruitful labor, and I do not know which to choose. Indeed I am hard pressed from both sides—desiring to depart and to be with Christ, a lot by far the better; yet to stay on in the flesh is necessary for your sake."

The most obvious remark one can make on these words is to note that were it a question of choice between life and the Parousia, instead of between life and death, Paul would not have experienced his present uncertainty in making a choice.

In the present instance he inclines towards death. His reasons appear in the very words he employs. He sees death as a departure from the world of *sarx* and therefore the last stage in his baptismal death to sin and weakness. This means conversely an intensification of his life "with Christ."⁴⁹ From now on he would walk uninterruptedly in that "newness of life" which has been his since baptism (Rom 6:4). Death, therefore, is a true "gain" rendering definitive his baptismal death with Christ and intensifying his baptismal life with Christ.

The fact remains, however, that death is not the Parousia. It affects only Paul and not the solidarity. It brings the dissolution of *sarx* for Paul but not for the world. It lends new intensity to his personal life with Christ; but it does not bring life to the *whole* man. Death, therefore, leaves much to be desired. And so, apart from this single fervent wish in Phil 1:21-23, Paul centers his attention throughout the rest of the epistle on the Parousia (cf. 1:6; 1:10-11; 2:16; 3:21; 4:5).

⁴⁸ The language of Paul in this passage shows considerable Greek influence. This does not mean, however, as Père Dupont suggests, *Syn Christo, L'union avec le Christ suivant saint Paul* (Paris: Desclée, 1952), 186, that "Hellenism has taught the Apostle to conceive of the life of the soul separated from the body." If Paul had grasped that, it would have come to the fore in his following epistles.

⁴⁹ Père Dupont, *Syn Christo*, 181-187, recognizes in this phrase the connotation of personal companionship which he would not concede for the same phrase in Thessalonians. One wonders if Paul, the ardent apostle, could have written this phrase at any time without thinking of a deeply personal bond.

Paul's Second Word on Death—2 Cor 5:1-10

This same spirit pervades Paul's second word on death—in 2 Cor 5:1-10.⁵⁰ In this passage, moreover, he makes explicit the perspective which governs all his thinking. He begins with the mention of resurrection (5:1) and ends with the reminder of judgment (5:10). The Parousia is always to the fore in his thought.

He is aware, though, that life has its immediate term in death when man leaves his body "to be at home with the Lord" (5:8). Interpreted in the light of Paul's constant and fervent devotion to Christ this phrase has overtones of a rich personal companionship, which becomes all the more constant once *sarx* is laid aside.

To lay aside *sarx*, however, means to lay aside the body also. This prospect fills him with dismay; cf. 5:4. He frankly confesses that it takes courage to face this ordeal, for "to be unclothed" ruptures the securities of life as man knows it; death even at its best is an exile (5:8).

Once more Paul has sketched his scale of values. No matter what death may achieve in intensifying life with the Lord it cannot match the full and rich consummation of the Parousia.

Conclusion

It is now clear that early Christian thought laid little emphasis on death and its immediate aftermath; interest centered chiefly in the Parousia. It was the task of later theology to illumine the interim period between death and final consummation. This it did by focusing the light of precise philosophy on the data of revelation to formulate a full thesis on the beatitude of the soul immediately after death.⁵¹

Unfortunately, the modern mind (product of nineteenth century subjectivism and individualism) has so concentrated on the "salvation of the soul" at death that it no longer adjusts easily to the complementary perspective of the Parousia.

⁵⁰ Cf. A. Feuillet, "La demeure céleste et la destinée des chrétiens;" E. Earle Ellis, "II Corinthians 5:1-10 in Pauline Eschatology," *New Testament Studies*, 6 (1960), 211-224.

⁵¹ Cf. Decree of Benedict XII in the Constitution *Benedictus Deus*. Here he affirms that *mox post mortem* the purified are rewarded with beatific vision.

The vision of the early church, however, is the very perspective most needed in our day. The salvation of all men and the glorification of the total man through resurrection are divine answers to a Communism which glorifies the collectivity and looks upon man above all as an animated body.

The salvation of the body corporate and the renewal of family ties before the Father on the last day provide a living hope which gives moment and meaning to our present ecumenical efforts.

The ultimate glory destined by God for the whole world is one of the best incentives to true Christian humanism. It is in the light of the Parousia that men come to understand best of all their duty to develop the world's resources, to foster men's talents, to lift human life from an inferior to a higher level. This is not merely a matter of social obligation or of civic pride; it is rather the working out of God's plan for the consummation of all things at the Parousia. For what will this final consummation mean except that once more the whole world which God has created will come completely under the control of Christ, Christ completely under His Father, giving into his hands the family and the Kingdom which he himself has perfected.⁵²

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⁵² Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, 8-9: "Christians should be the last people to be found clinging to the wrecks of an atomistic individualism which has no foundation in the Bible. For their hope does not lie in escape from collectivism; it lies in the resurrection of the body—that is to say, in the redemption, transfiguration, and ultimate supersession of one solidarity by another. This is Paul's gospel of the new corporeity of the Body of Christ, which itself depends on the redemptive act wrought by Jesus in the body of His flesh through death."