

# A NEGLECTED MILLENNIAL PASSAGE FROM SAINT PAUL

by

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The passage for this discussion, as it appears in the Authorized Version of 1611, reads as follows: "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:20-24).

As is obvious from the title, there is a special interest in this passage: to discover if the section has any important bearing on the question of the possibility of two future resurrections with a millennium, or some similar period of time, separating them. This is the prime essential affirmation of premillennialism. It is the usual thing for discussion of this subject to proceed as if the twentieth chapter of Revelation contains the only essential data on the subject--as if the whole issue of a further probationary period after the *parousia* of Christ could be settled once and for all if a period of time between a future resurrection of the just and another of the unjust could be discovered in or expelled from that passage. Granted that Revelation 20 is the most complete passage on the subject, its value as definitive evidence is hampered by the fact that it appears as part of an apocalypse or vision. Of prophetic visions Moses was told there would always be something less than "mouth to mouth" speech, "even apparently and not in dark speeches" (Num. 12:8). All informed persons who attempt exposition of the Book of Revelation will heartily agree. But, here in 1 Corinthians, from the prosaic, usually factual and direct pen of Paul, is a chapter on the resurrection of the dead in which it is difficult to find even a common figure of speech. The portion of the chapter before us appears at first glance to require something like that period of time between the resurrection of the just and of the unjust affirmed by premillennialists. Will sustained attention enforce the impression, or is it only a kind of verbal mirage which disappears with investigation?

The writer does not expect to convince all his readers of his own conclusion on the passage; he does hope that by bringing the attention of students back to it the passage may begin to receive some of the attention it rightly deserves in contemporary theological discussion.

Following this brief introduction, my procedure shall be to state the main and subsidiary problems and after that to discuss the pertinent exegetical data. Following this I shall present my own conclusions.

## PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

For the present discussion the main problem is as follows: Do the words *aparchē Christos* ("Christ the firstfruits"), *epeita hoi tou Christou en tēi parousiai autou* ("afterward they that are Christ's at his coming"), *eita to telos* ("Then cometh the end") specify three groups in the resurrection of men?--one composed of Christ Himself, a resurrection now past; one of those who are Christ's at His *parousia*, yet future; and, still another at a time more remote at the "end" of the series of resurrections composed of "the rest of the dead" (Rev. 20:5). If so, then this passage clearly teaches premillennialism.

Preliminary problems are to determine the specific subject of 1 Corinthians 15 and to determine the relation of verses 20-24 to this general subject. I shall treat the two preliminary questions at once and reserve the main question for treatment in connection with discussion of exegetical data.

The chapter begins as a definitive statement of the specific tenets of the Christian gospel. They are "that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (vv. 3-4). At verses 11-12 Paul makes transition to the theme of the rest of the chapter, viz., "So we preach, and so ye believed. Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" His subject from that point onward to the close of the chapter is the physical resurrection of man, or, as we more commonly say, the resurrection of the body. Christ arose. It was wholly physical resurrection, for only His body was deceased. Of course the *man* Christ Jesus was dead; but it was His body that was directly lost to personality functions. This is the only possibility, for our Lord was never dead spiritually: as Peter writes, "being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet. 3:18, A.S.V.). On through the chapter, with a narrowing of interest to the resurrection of the believers by an almost imperceptible transition after our text, the physical resurrection of mankind as a whole is the center of attention. This fact is so obvious it should not be necessary to defend it. And, except for the interest of Universalists in finding spiritual resurrection in the words, "in Christ shall all be made alive" (v. 22), and of the dogmatic interest of certain others like Hodge (*An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*) in excluding the unwelcome wicked dead from our passage, it probably, in the writer's opinion, would not need defense.

The phrase "resurrection of the dead" (*anastasis nekrōn*, v. 12) is of physical resurrection, of dead men as an event, considered abstractly. By man as a genus of being (*di' anthrōpou*, v. 21) this event has existence. Such is the force of *di' anthrōpou anastasis nekrōn*. Notice that every noun is anarthrous, enforcing the general ideas of mankind in general and of resurrection of dead men in general rather than of any particular group. Furthermore, the idea of physical resurrection continues. The subject is narrowed at verse 35 to the nature of the resurrection body. And, in discussing it Paul further narrows the treatment to the nature of the resurrection

body of believers. It is, however, still physical resurrection as the repeated use of *sōma* ("body") in verses 35, 37, 38 (twice), 40 (twice), 44 (thrice) and *sarx* ("flesh") four times in verse 39 amply testify. Paul's statement at verse 50 that *sarx kai haima* "(flesh and blood) cannot inherit the kingdom of God" does not contradict this, as Brunner (*Eternal Hope*, chap. 15) and other current writers who wish to be orthodox while denying or confusing the future resurrection of the body would like to have it. These words must be squared with the rest that Paul has said. Rather, a distinction is being drawn between the body as it *now* is and the body as it *will be* in the resurrection. Flesh (*sarx*) is an ambiguous word in the New Testament, having a literal meaning and many figurative ones. Body (*sōma*) is generally plain. The metamorphosis to a different kind of body, nonetheless real, is indicated in the closing part of the chapter, so familiar to us all, viz., "We shall be changed," etc.

Now, how do verses 20-24 fit into this discussion of physical resurrection of mankind? I think it is very clear that it is pertinent to the broad general theme, viz., the physical resurrection of the dead bodies of all mankind. The phrase *ek nekrōn*, "from dead ones," i.e., the dead in general (v. 20) orients the whole portion immediately following. There can be no restriction to any group less than the whole of dead mankind as yet. The phrase *tōn kekoimēmenōn* (v. 20, genitive plural participle perfect passive of *koimaō*) is, indeed, a form of expression used most frequently of believers in the New Testament. Ordinarily meaning simply *to sleep*, the transparent metaphor is easily applied, as in our language, to death. It is true that of the fourteen times it is used metaphorically of death in the New Testament most refer to the death of the righteous. Yet 1 Corinthians 7:39 ("if her husband be dead") and 2 Peter 3:4 ("since the fathers fell asleep") show it to be broader figure for death in general. Some contextual specification is necessary, therefore, before restriction to any particular group of *kekoimēmenōn* ("the ones who have been sleeping") can be accomplished. Such restrictive phrases are "in Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:14), "saints which slept" (Matt. 27:52), etc. That *pantes* "(all) in Adam" (v. 22) who are "dying" (*apothnēskousin*) is certainly the whole race. That the parallel *pantes* "(all) in Christ" (v. 22), are the same cannot be doubted. Paul is not saying that all who are in Adam die and that all who are in Christ shall be made alive; but, by placing *pantes* after the restrictive phrases in each case (*en tōi Adam* and *en tōi Christoi*), he makes it clear that *pantes* is all-inclusive as regards the race in each case. The whole race in Adam dies; the whole race in Christ shall be made alive--physically.

"Hodge, interpreting the word *zōopoieisthai* in a moral as well as a physical sense on grounds hardly tenable restricts the term 'all' to believers. But the great majority of commentators, ancient as well as modern (Chrys. Theod. Theoph. Beza, Olsh. de Wette, Meyer, Bloomf. Barnes) abide by the universal reference, preserving the parallelism in both clauses. 'As the death of all mankind came by Adam, so the resurrection of all men came by Christ; the wicked shall be raised by him *officio Judicis*, by the power of Christ as their Lord and Judge: The righteous shall be raised *beneficio Mediatoris*, by virtue of their union with Him as their head.' Valpy." (Daniel W. Poor, note inserted *in loco* *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. Daniel Poor, 1871).

## MAIN EXEGETICAL DATA

The best plan of procedure here seems to be to break up the passage into sections, commenting on salient portions seriatim.

"But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that are asleep" (v. 20, A.S.V.).

There is little controversial here, nor is there much important to our special inquiry. Observe, incidentally, that Christ has been raised (*egēgertai*) out of dead ones (*ek nekrōn*). He came out of the group of all dead mankind by a kind of selective resurrection, not from "the dead" in the sense of *thanatos* (*death*) as a condition or realm (vv. 21, 54, 55).

"For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead" (v. 21, A.S.V.).

The most significant fact here is the use of *anthrōpos*, the generic term for *mankind*, in each of the two members of the sentence. That the words should be rendered by translation with our English indefinite article, hence, "a man," may be true, but does not affect the meaning materially. A member of the race (Adam) was the organ of death's entrance, just as a member of the race (Christ) was the organ of the entrance of resurrection of the dead.

"For as in Adam all die [are dying], so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (v. 22, A.S.V.).

The location of *apothnēskousin* is present indicative, describing an action going on continuously in the present. All over the world every hour men are reaching the climax of physical death. Likewise the process of dying is always a part of all of us. "All are dying." This applies to physical death only. Note the contrast *ontas nekrous*, "being dead" in Ephesians 2:1, 5, where spiritual death in trespasses is the subject.

*Zōopoiēthēsontai*, on the contrary, is future passive, "shall be made alive." Of course, in the same sense as all are dying they shall all be made alive--physically. Says H. A. W. Meyer: "As early interpreters as Chrysostom, Ambrosiaster, and Theodoret have rightly understood *pantes zōopoiēthēsontai* not simply of the blessed resurrection, but generally of *bodily* revivification, and without limiting or attaching conditions to *pantes*" (*Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Corinthians*, translated by D. Douglas Bannerman, translation revised and edited by William P. Dickson).

That this is the general Pauline theology, his statement in Acts 24:15 shows, viz., "There shall be a resurrection both of the just and unjust."

It is precisely at this point that the scent of evidence of millennialism "gets warm." Note now the next statement. "But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that

are Christ's at his coming" (v. 23, A.V.).

*Hekastos* ("every man," A.V., "each," A.S.V.) looks back to *pantes zōpoiēthēsontai* ("all shall be made alive"). *Hekastos* is the distributive way of looking at the collection group, *pantes*. "Each" is to be made alive, i.e., raised from the dead "in his own order." This is a crucial datum.

On this word "order" (*tagma*) the complete article in Thayer's Lexicon is as follows: "a. properly that which has been arranged, thing placed in order. b. specifically a body of soldiers, a corps: 1 Sam. 23:13; Xen. mem 3, 1, 11; often in Polyb.; Diod. 17, 80; Josph. b. b. 1, 9, 1; 3, 4, 2; [esp. for the Roman 'legio' (exx. in *Soph.*, Les. 3.v., 3)]; hence universally a band, troop, class: *hekastos en toi idioi tagmati* (the same words occur in Clem. Rom. 1 Cor. 37, 3 and 41, 1), 1 Cor. 15:23, where Paul specifies several distinct bands of those raised from the dead [A.V. order. of the 'order' of the Essenes in Josph. b. j. 2, 8, 3. 8]."

The word receives much more elaborate but essentially the same treatment in the most recent revised edition of the Liddell and Scott Lexicon.

Thus it is clear that the word *tagma* does not mean position in a series, as in ranking honor students who are placed first, second, third, etc., in their class. Rather a whole group, cohort, body, collection of men is here denoted by the word rendered "order." Meyer (*op. cit., in loco*) supports the same view as does also Kling (*op. cit., in loco*), as follows: "The implication is that those *in Christ* will come forth by themselves--those of a kind keeping together." Robertson and Plummer (*First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*), Lenski (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians*), Vincent (*Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. III), and other writers generally accept this as the general meaning of *tagma*. The single important exception seems to be Hodge who, as mentioned before, has dogmatic commitments at stake. He asserts that *tagma* equals *taxis*, which does mean order of succession, but this without sufficient ground (*op. cit.*, pp. 326-27). Even if it should be discovered that the word occasionally has this meaning, other facts of this verse establish the general meaning herein. Since the word *taxis* is used ten times in the New Testament in the sense Hodge here assigns to *tagma*, one must ask, Why did not Paul use the word *taxis*?

*Epeita* ("afterward," A.V.; "then," A.S.V.) is quite as important. Though translated "then" it is not a word indicating reason or cause, as our English word "then." Neither does it mean "then" in the sense of "at that time" as our English word does. The Authorized Version translation "afterward" is very good. Paul uses this word nine times, and unless this be the exception, always in the sense of "afterward." In this very chapter (v. 6) it is rendered "after that" and (v. 7) "after that" and (v. 45) "afterward." Practically identical with *eita* (v. 24, "then cometh the end") this word alternates with it frequently as here. Liddell and Scott give as the very first meaning, "Sequence in time, without any notion of Cause."

The group next raised after Christ, who is Himself the "firstfruits" of this harvest, are those

who are Christ's (*hoi tou Christou*). These are unquestionably the saved (cf. Gal. 5:24; 1 Thess. 4:16). The time of their resurrection is His second coming, here called *tei parousiai* ("the presence"). Deismann (*Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 372, 382) has shown that *parousia* (*presence, coming*) was the technical term for the arrival of a potentate or his representative. That it usually--this text included--signifies in the New Testament the coming of Christ to set up the Messianic kingdom accords with this definition, and is the opinion of many modern commentators.

"Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power" (v. 24, A.V.).

Our attention here is chiefly drawn to *eita to telos* ("then the end"). That *eita*, like its linguistic relative and near equivalent, *epeita*, is an adverb introducing subsequent events, ordinarily, is demonstrated earlier in this chapter. In 15:5 Christ is represented as "seen of Cephas, then [*eita*] of the twelve" and later in verse 7 as seen "then [*eita*] of all the apostles." As so frequently in all Greek literature, it alternates in these same verses with *epeita* to introduce a series of temporally related events. The parallel usage as seen above with that in verses 23 and 24 is too close to be without important significance. Observe the sense: "And that he was seen of Cephas, then [*eita*] of the twelve: after that [*epeita*], he was seen of five hundred brethren at once. . . . After that [*epeita*] he was seen of James; then [*eita*] of all the apostles. And last of all [*eskaton de pantōn*] he was seen of me also." I think personally that *eskaton* has the same function here as *to telos* in verse 24, i.e., to mark the final member of a series.

The series is divided into groups of viewers of the resurrected Christ, each viewing divided by an interval of time, and each introduced with *eita* or *epeita*, generally alternately, and concluded with "last of all." This is not absolute proof, but the conclusion is almost irresistible that there is just such a series of events in verses 20-24: First, Christ's resurrection, then (*epeita*) after the interval of the present age, the resurrection of those who are Christ's at His coming, and after another, comparable interval (*eita*) the resurrection of the rest of the dead. Other similar uses of these two adverbs are too numerous and too well-known to require further laboring of the point.

*To telos* ("the end") has been assigned about four significantly different interpretations. Kling (*op. cit.*) asserts that it refers to the end of the resurrection process--a resurrection of the wicked dead removed by a significant interval from the resurrection of the righteous dead at the *parousia*. This is premillennialism and, in the writer's opinion, the only adequate view. Meyer (*op. cit.*) supposes that it refers to the end of the resurrection process also, but puts this at the time of the appearance of Christ at the second coming. This obscures or ignores the meaning of and parallel use of the adverbs *epeita* and *eita*. Lenski (*op. cit.*) is in essential agreement with Meyer. As noted, this view is untenable as placing a different construction, equivalent to the Greek *tote* ("then," "at that time," cf. v. 54) upon *eita* from that given its equivalent *epeita* in the previous verse. It is also difficult to accept a significant interval such as the nineteen hundred plus years of this age placed in the word *epeita* in verse 23 and then find no interval at

all in *eita* in verse 24. Alford (*The Greek Testament*, II, 609-610) completely dissociated *to telos* from the preceding words as to any mutual qualification. The end (*telos*) simply comes after the consummation of resurrection processes. This view permits premillennialism also. With Hodge (*op. cit.*) *to telos* simply indicates absolutely the end of all things. In proof Matthew 24:6, 14; 13:39 and 28:20 are cited. True, these passages do mention a certain point (or certain points) known as the end. But that they all point to the absolute consummation of all things, or that they all refer to anything beyond the beginning of the *parousia* is open to serious doubt. Hodge assumes the very point to be proved--that the end (*to telos*) here and elsewhere is always the absolute end of the world process. It is like assuming that the word *eskatos* must always indicate Eschatology (as verse 8 certainly shows it does not).

It is quite beyond the scope of this paper to deal exhaustively with *telos*, a word appearing over forty times in the New Testament. Sometimes it denotes the second advent, sometimes not. Its meaning in 1 Corinthians 15:24 will have to stand on its own contextual legs. Hodge and others seek to prove that this "end" is not a final resurrection in a series of three by stating that the New Testament in general is opposed to chiliasm (belief in a thousand years between the resurrection of the just and of the unjust). An examination of alleged proof texts (e.g., John 5:28-29; 6:34-40; 2 Thess. 1:7-10, etc.) invariably shows that all are capable of interpretation either on the basis of chiliasm and two future resurrections or of the postmillennial and amillennial schemes. I submit that this passage, together with Revelation 20, is the definitive passage, if any is.

The two clauses begun by *hotan* appear to be connected immediately in time with *to telos*. This word commonly translated "when" or "whenever" does appear to show that the delivering up of the kingdom to the Father and putting down all rule, etc., are at *to telos* ("the end"). Since this is declared to be the time also of destruction of death, it is clear that the winding up of all temporal affairs, even according to a premillennial scheme of things, is involved. This is precisely what Revelation 20 says will occur at the termination of the millennium (Rev. 20:5-15).

## CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing is not a complete evaluation of every particle of the linguistic data, but the field has been touched at salient points. May I now draw some conclusions by way of summary.

1 Corinthians 15:20-24 teaches the main features of millennialism, viz., that all men are to be raised from the dead, but not all are to be raised at one time. Christ's own are to be raised first. Then after a significant period of time the rest of the dead are to come forth also. Paul does not reveal how long this period is to be. That the period between Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the just has already extended nearly two millennia suggests that a second interval, indicated by a nearly synonymous adverbial term, will be a somewhat extended period also.

These conclusions are enforced by the words of others--some of them very learned New Testament scholars. Let their words be a kind of summary peroration. I cite two whose works have been useful and respected among English readers for several generations. "There is to be a sequence in the resurrection of the dead, and St. Paul explains this by three groups:--(1) Christ Himself, the firstfruits; (2) the faithful in Christ at His coming; (3) all the rest of mankind at the end, when the final judgment takes place. The interval between these latter two, as to its duration, or where or how it will be spent, is not spoken of here. The only point the Apostle has to treat of is the order of the resurrection. (See 1 Thess. 4:13, 17; Rev. 20.)" (Ellicott, *The Bible Commentary, in loco*).

The translator of Kling's German work on 1 Corinthians in Lange's Commentary series was Daniel W. Poor, a Presbyterian pastor of Newark, New Jersey (1868). In closing his annotations at this point he writes (and his words are here cited with full approval): "It is a singular illustration of the power of a theory to warp the mind from the fixed meaning of words, that Calvin, while using the Latin text which rightly translated *eita, postea* [afterward], yet goes on to comment in the use of *tune* [at the time, immediately] utterly ignoring the difference of signification. By the words *epeita* and *eita*, two separate epochs are distinctly marked; and it is a violation of all usage of terms to construe them otherwise. The interval between the first and second is stretching beyond 1800 years [now beyond 1900 years]; how many ages will intervene between the second and third--who can tell?"

Who can tell? Many believe John can, and I think he does--about one thousand years.

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Robert D. Culver, "A Neglected Millennial Passage from Saint Paul," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 113, num. 450 (April 1956), pp. 141-52. **Note:** The text has not been modified.