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ajct@sistenugu.com

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The editor-in-chief

African Journal of Contextual Theology

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

P.O. Box 9696 Enugu, Nigeria

e-mail: editorajct@sistenugu.com; editorajct@yahoo.com

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The Reign of Christ in Paul's Eschatological Vision: 1 Cor 15:20-28¹

Munachi E. EZEUGU, C.S.Sp

1 Introduction

1.1 *Aim and Scope of Study*

The reign of Christ is not a prominent theme for St Paul. In all the seven generally accepted authentic letters of Paul², it is spoken of only once³, namely, in 1 Cor 15:20-28 in the context of an eschatological discourse. Nevertheless, this sole mention of the reign of Christ has been found to be very crucial in the reconstruction of Paul's eschatological vision. Paul articulated his vision of the eschatology in several passages in his letters.⁴ Among these, the most extensive treatment is undoubtedly in 1 Cor 15, where he devotes a whole chapter to the theme of the resurrection of the dead. The passage we are about to study, 1 Cor 15:20-28, constitutes, as we shall see later, the structural centre of 1 Cor 15. It is, therefore, a key passage in the interpretation of Pauline eschatology.

The crucial nature of this passage is demonstrated by looking at the use made of it by scholars who have attempted to reconstruct Paul's vision of the eschatology. A classic example that comes

¹This article is dedicated to the memory of Fr. Joseph Plevnik, S.J., under whose professorship I did my advanced degree studies in Pauline literature in Regis College of the Toronto School of Theology. He went to the Lord on June 4, 2010, yet he continues to teach and inspire through his many writings. *Requiescat in pace.*

²The seven authentic Pauline letters as commonly accepted by scholars today are: 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Romans, and Philemon.

³Paul, on the other hand, speaks more often of the kingdom of God, cf. 1 Thess 2:12; 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal 5:21; Rom 14:17.

⁴Pauline texts dealing with the eschatology include 1 Thess 1:2-3, 9-10; 2:19; 3:11-13; 4:13-18; 5:1-10; 5:23; 1 Cor 1:4-7; 2:9-10; 3:12-17; 4:3-5; 5:1-5; 6:9-10; 7:29-31; 8:10-11; 10:8-13; 11:26-32; 13:8-12; 15:1-58; 16:21; 2 Cor 1:13-14; 4:13-18; 5:1-10; 12:1-4; Gal 1:3-5; 5:2-5, 21; 6:7-9; Phil 1:6, 9-11, 19-23; 2:12-16; 3:13-14; 3:20-4:1; Rom 1:16-18; 2:1-16; 5:1-10; 6:3-11; 8:11-21, 29-30; 12:19-20; 13:11-14; 14:2-13.

readily to mind is the theologian Albert Schweitzer, who has put together the following schema of Paul's eschatological doctrine:⁵

- a. The sudden return of Jesus (1 Thess 5:1-4)
- b. The resurrection of believers who have already 'fallen asleep' and the transformation of those still alive into the resurrection mode of living (1 Thess 4:14-15)
- c. All are taken up into the clouds to be 'forever with the Lord' (1 Thess 4:16-17)
- d. The Messianic Judgement (1 Thess 4:6)
 - (i) Held by Christ (2 Cor 5:10; 1 Cor 4:4-5; 5:2; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:10; 2:16)
 - (ii) Held by God (Rom 14:10); 1:18; 2:2-10; 3:6)
- e. The Messianic Kingdom (1 Cor 15:23-8).
- f. The last enemy, death, is overcome (1 Cor 15:36)
- g. The Messianic Kingdom comes to an end
- h. The General Resurrection
- i. The Last Judgement
- j. God becomes all in all: the consummation (1 Cor 15:28)

Many aspects of this schema are disputable - the scenario of two separate judgments, one by Christ and the other by God, for example - but we shall focus in this study on the location of the reign of Christ, the Messianic kingdom, as a separate period of time between two resurrections. As we can see from the above schema, Schweitzer adduces the text of our study as support for this interpretation of Paul. Our aim in this study is, therefore, to re-read 1 Cor 15:20-28 to see if it can bear the weight of Schweitzer's interpretation, which has been accepted as canon by many readers of Paul today.

⁵ A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (trans. W. Montgomery), London, 1931, pp. 65-68.

Needless to say, this study is limited in scope. We do not intend to go through the entire range of texts on Paul's eschatological doctrine and come up with a comprehensive schema of Pauline eschatology as Schweitzer did. We do not intend to study the whole of 1 Cor 15 in which our text occurs. We do not even intend to pursue all the exegetical and theological issues that could be raised in connection with 1 Cor 15:20-28. Rather we shall limit ourselves to a basic exegesis of the passage to recover what Paul is actually saying and then zero in on the lexical, semantic and contextual indices that could be relevant in elucidating what Paul thought about the reign of Christ as an eschatological reality.

1.2 *Biblical and Theological Assumptions*

Methodologically speaking, what biblical and theological principles of Pauline studies does this study assumes or not assume? Firstly, this study does not assume that what Paul says in one letter or context will necessarily agree with what he says in another letter or context. Ideas do develop and change, and this includes Paul's. The question of whether and to what extent Paul's thoughts remained the same or evolved throughout his literary and theological career is outside the scope of this work. This is not to deny the possibility of piecing together a systematic Pauline doctrine or vision of eschatology. But our focus in this work is on the passage 1 Cor 15:20-28 and especially in what it says about the reign of Christ and what this contributes to our understanding of Paul's eschatological doctrine. Secondly, the study does not, as a point of departure, assume that whatever Paul says in every part of his letters must be held as normative for systematic theology today. It is important to state this because much disagreement in biblical studies arises from scholars putting their theological convictions before the text. This study does not assume that as a

methodological principle.

2 The Text of 1 Cor 15:20-28

2.1 *Delimiting and Establishing the Text*

1 Cor 15:20-28 begins with an emphatic adversative phrase '*nuni de*' ("But, as a matter of fact"⁶) which marks a new turn in the argument. This phrase stands in marked contrast to the twice repeated hypothetical clauses in vv. 14 and 17, actually picking up from where the argument left off in v. 12. That clearly marks the beginning of a literary unit. The beginning of a subsequent unit, indicating the lower limit of the present unit, is not encountered until v. 29, where the tone of the argument shifts radically from that of positive theological, christological and cosmological considerations to more personal *ad hominem* arguments taken from the lives of Paul and the Corinthians Christians. Our passage could, therefore, be considered an integral unit in the self-contained eschatological treatise of 1 Cor 15. Most versions and translations treat it as such, including Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the Revised Standard Version, the New Jerusalem Bible, the New American Bible, the Good News Bible, etc.

There are some minor textual variants in the Greek texts of 1 Cor 15:20-28. The word '*egeneto*' occurs at the end of v. 20 in a few Mss such as D² Ψ M sy. But by far the majority of witness, including such major textual traditions as χ A B D* F G P etc. represent the shorter text. The 17th century AV follows the longer text and translates "and *become* the firstfruits of them that slept" but scholarly consensus today is in favour of the shorter text. As the CIC commentary says, the '*egeneto*' is a "manifest

⁶Gordon D. Lee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987, p. 784.

correction.”⁷ In v. 24 some Mss have 'paradô' (K L) or 'paradidoi' (B F G) in place of the widely attested 'paradidô'. The variants are all forms of the same verb and do not, at any rate, affect significantly the sense of the verse. In v. 25 some mss, such as A F G 33. 104. 629., add 'autou' “his” after 'ekthrous' (enemies). That could be an addition to make explicit what is implied in the shorter text.

In v.27 the 'oti' following 'eipâ' is omitted in such Mss as P⁴⁶ B 33. 630. and 2495. On textual critical principles alone the authenticity of the particle “is of doubtful authority.”⁸ Yet it is upheld by such important witnesses as A D F G Ψ M and by the critical editors of Nestle-Aland. In v.28 'tote [kai] autos houios' (then *even* the son himself), the 'kai', which might be emphatic in function, is omitted by such witnesses as B D* F G and attested by χ A D² Ψ M. By retaining it in square brackets, the editors of Nestle-Aland admit that it is hard to decide its authenticity. Besides, some witnesses, such as A B D* 0243., omit 'ho huios' while others such as χ D² F G Ψ 075 M attest it. Again, here it is a matter of some texts making explicit what is implicit in others. Textual critical principles favour the shorter text. We regard all these textual variants as minor because none of them alters the meaning of the text in any significant way. We can therefore proceed with the text as established in Nestle-Aland.

2.2 Translation and Structure

A Vv.20-22 *Past: Christ's Resurrection and Its Implication for the Dead*

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first

⁷Archibald Roberson - Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (ICC), Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914, p. 352.

⁸Roberson - Plummer, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 356.

fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For as by a man [came] death, by a man [has come] also the resurrection of the dead. ²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

B Vv.23-27a *Future: Christ's Parousia and the Resurrection of the Faithful*

²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then [comes] the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷"For God has put all things in subjection under his feet."

C Vv. 27b-28 *Christ as God's Viceroy*

^{27b}But when it says, "All things are put in subjection under him," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. ²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone.

The English text of the RSV is presented here only as a working translation. In v.21 the Greek text has no verb; the verb "come" being understood. The word rendered as "man" is '*anthrōpos*', meaning a human person. The RSV uses "man" in this context in a generic and not in a gender-specific sense.

The RSV rendering of v.24 is very problematic. The word translated as "then" in v. 24 is different from the word translated

as “then” in v.23. Whereas v.23 has '*epeita*', v. 24 has '*eita*'. As we shall see later, though both words could correctly be rendered as “then,” they do not have the same semantic value. Similarly the term '*to telos*' is rendered as “the end.” Although the average English reader is more likely to understand this as meaning “the last phase” or “the termination,” its literal meaning is closer to “the goal” or “the purpose.” Again, as in v.21, there is no verb in the clause under consideration; the word “comes” is added by the translators. That is not all. The word translated as “after” in v.24b is the same word '*hotan*' translated as “when” in v.24a. Why the translators chose to translate the same word in the same verse by two different words is hard to understand.

In v.25 “all [his] enemies”, the possessive pronoun is absent in the text as established on the basis of textual critical principles (see above). The grammar of v.26 is enigmatic: '*katargeitai*' is present tense passive of '*katargeō*' “to destroy, annihilate”. The sentence should therefore literally be rendered “Death, the last enemy *is being destroyed*” which appears puzzling in the context. Translators usually go the same way as the RSV and render it as a passive infinitive, “The last enemy *to be destroyed* is death.”

As for the structure of the text, we observe that Paul uses the '*de*' particle as a rhetorical device to move forward his argument in the text. As such the text can be structured into three sub-units all marked by an initial '*de*' particle. In each instance the particle has an adversative function and introduces a new slant in the development of the theme of the passage. The first sub-unit, vv.20-22, opens with an emphatic adversative '*nuni de*', “But now...” to introduce a real situation after exploring an unreal, hypothetical situation in the preceding unit. The real situation is

that Christ has been raised and his resurrection is constitutive for all "who have fallen asleep."

The second sub-unit, vv.23-27a, likewise opens with an adversative 'de', "But..." to correct a possible or real wrong impression for the Corinthian Christians, that the resurrection of the faithful is a present spiritual reality that happens at the moment of one's incorporation into Christ through baptism.⁹ Here Paul introduces an important distinction: the victory of Christ over death happens in two instalments, Christ's resurrection which has already taken place, and the resurrection of the faithful which is yet to take place at Christ's parousia in the future.

In the last unit, vv.27b-28, Paul again introduces an adversative 'de', "But..." to correct a wrong impression that one could possibly get from his argument so far, namely that of an absolutizing Christology. Ultimately the one who acts in history, who guides history to its goal (*telos*) and who will reign over all is God, with Christ as his viceroy. Here Paul reminds the reader that his eschatological discourse, which appears so radically Christ-centred, is, in fact, fundamentally and ultimately God-centred.

3 The Theme and Import of 1 Cor 15:20-28

The theme of 1 Cor 15:20-28 is clearly stated in the opening verse 20 as follows: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." Every other thing in the passage is an explanation, starting from the explicative 'gar'

⁹What was the doctrinal position of the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote, since they held that there was no resurrection from the dead (v. 12) and at the same time practiced vicarious baptism on behalf of their dead? A lot of debate has gone into this important question. For a summary under four headings of the various answers that have been proposed, see Martinus C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5* (JSNT Supp. 22), Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988, pp. 96-105.

("for") of v.21.

In the context of the whole chap. 15, the import and function of vv.20-28 can be seen by investigating the structure of the chapter and the place occupied in it by the pericope. Following is the result of our investigation in this regard.

The Resurrection of the Dead (1 Cor 15:1-58)

- A The Basis the Resurrection of Christ (1-11)
 - a The Gospel Paul Preached (1-2)
 - b The Resurrection Tradition (3-11)
- B The Certainty of Resurrection (12-34)
 - a If Christ *is not* raised *Reductio ad absurdum* (12-19)
 - b But Christ *is* raised *Positive Demonstration of Thesis* (20-28)
 - c If the dead *are not* raised *Argumentum ad hominem* (29-34)
- C How (With What Body) Are the Dead Raised? (35-58)
 - a Analogies of seeds and "bodies" (35-44)
 - b Analogy of Adam and Christ (45-49)
 - c The Assurance of Immortality (50-58)

From the way the chapter is structured as given above, it is possible to regard vv.1-11 as the prologue, vv.35-58 as the epilogue, and vv.12-34 as the main body of Paul's argument in the chapter. This main body of the argument again has a threefold division where vv.12-19 is clearly parallel to vv.29-34 in that both units deal with hypothetical situations. That leaves us with our chosen passage, vv.20-28, as the one unit where Paul offers a positive argument in demonstration of his thesis in this chapter. The passage, therefore, can be said to be, in the context of 1 Cor

15, the central unit, the heart of Paul's argument, and the hermeneutical key to the chapter as a whole.

4 The Interpretive Crux of 1 Cor 15:20-28: The Reign Of Christ

The centrality of 1 Cor 15:20-28 for the understanding of Paul's eschatological teaching in 1 Cor 15 is probably matched only by the exegetical and theological difficulties it presents to readers. The central theological difficulties presented by the passage are these: (a) with regard to the resurrection, whereas some readers see two resurrections in the passage, a resurrection of the faithful and a general resurrection of all the dead, other readers see in it only one resurrection, that of the faithful; (b) with regard to the reign of Christ, whereas some readers see the resurrection of Christ as an intermediate period between the parousia and the final consummation, others see it as a period that began already with the resurrection of Christ but is to be completed at the parousia.

How could such varying theological conclusions be drawn from the exegesis of the same text? The key exegetical issue on which each of the above theological positions either stands or falls is this: Paul speaks of resurrection "each in his own order," (*ekastos de entō idiō tagmati* -v. 23). But does Paul speak of two or three "orders?" We find that the decisive phrase, the passage that settles this question either one way or the other, is the non-verbal clause '*eita to telos*' (v. 24) which the RSV and the AV before it have rendered as "Then comes the end" thus compounding the problem. Every interpretation of the passage, according to our analysis, stands or falls depending on how this clause is understood.

As a result, the bulk of the remaining part of this study will be devoted to a lexical, semantic and contextual study of the clause '*eita to telos*' with an end to determining its denotation and connotation in the passage and, consequently, how it affects the meaning of the pericope at hand. We shall also examine another clause that has contributed in no small measure to the way the text has been read theologically, namely the '*pantes zōipoiāfāsontai*' (All will be made alive) of v.22. Who are the "all" that Paul here speaks of? This, we hope, will greatly shed more light on our text.

4.1 *The Meaning of 'eita to telos' (then comes the end - v. 24)*

Most translators treat '*eita*' as synonymous with '*epeita*', a word marking a fresh temporal stage. But is that the way the word functions in all contexts? More specifically, is that the way in which Paul employs it in his writings? To investigate this we shall consult Greek dictionaries and lexicons as well as survey the way in which Paul uses the word.

The dictionaries usually give the meaning of '*eita*' as more or less synonymous with that of '*epeita*'. In *The New Analytic Greek Lexicon*¹⁰ we have these entries:

eita, then, afterwards, thereupon ...; besides, Heb. 12:9.

epeita, (*epi* + *eita*), thereupon, then, after that, in the next place, afterwards.

From this we can gather that the two words, both adverbs, can be synonymous in meaning. But the *epi* prefix in *epeita* appears to reinforce the sequential sense of the word such that it could clearly be translated "after that" which is not applicable to '*eita*'. Moreover, we observe that, unlike *επειτα*, it is sometimes

¹⁰Wesley J. Perschbacher, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990, pp.123, 156.

possible to translate 'eita' as "besides" which has little or no temporal sequential force.

Next we look at Arndt and Gingrich's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* which offers more specific insight on the function of 'eita' in enumerations such as we have in 1 Cor 15:24:

in enumeration *eita* often serves to put things in juxtaposition without reference to temporal sequence, it becomes in general a transition-word *furthermore, then, next* introducing a new argument in a demonstration.¹¹

Again this seems to confirm our earlier observation that εἰτα in our passage might have a sense other than temporal sequence. It remains still to be seen how Paul uses the word in other contexts. Here we do not need to look very far, for εἰτα is used two other times in the immediate context of 1 Cor 15, namely in vv.5 and 7.

- v. 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then (*eita*) to the twelve.
- v. 7 Then (*epeita*) he appeared to James, then (*eita*) to all the apostles.

Here we ask, with the intention of ascertaining the semantic import of εἰτα in these usages, whether Paul is speaking of one or two separate appearances in each of these verses. Evidently, we have here a tradition in which the "twelve" and the "apostles" are

¹¹William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press and Cambridge: University Press, 1957, p.233.

regarded as two distinct circles in the early church.¹² For Paul this distinction is important since that is the only way he could claim to be an apostle, being evidently outside the circle of the Twelve. This tradition identifies Peter with the Twelve and James (the brother of the Lord, not one of the Twelve) with the apostles as their respective heads. Now Paul was of the conviction that meeting the head of a group is tantamount to meeting the whole group, as demonstrated in his visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18-19).¹³ Relating this principle to the question at hand, it is possible that Paul intends to indicate in each of the verses above one appearance and not two – an appearance to the head of the group with the members, really or virtually.¹⁴ In that case εἶτα, usually translated as “then,” would indicate a logical sequence (“consequently”) rather than a temporal one (“subsequently”) usually indicated by ἐπειτα:

- v. 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, *then* (consequently) to the twelve.
- v. 7 *Then* (subsequently) he appeared to James, *then* (consequently) to all the apostles.

So far we have seen from lexicon entries that '*eita*' does not carry the same temporal sequential weight as '*epeita*'; and from Paul's usage within the immediate textual context of the passage of our study, we see that it is possible to understand '*eita*' as indicating a

¹²Gordon D. Lee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987, p.732.

¹³Paul writes in Gal 1:18-19 that in his Jerusalem visit he only saw Peter and James. Though he does not here mention Peter in connection with the Twelve, he does mention James in connection with the apostles. The logic here, as in 1 Cor 15, seems to be that once you met the leader you have presumably met the group the leader represents.

¹⁴This kind of thinking could be behind the designation of the circle of close followers of Jesus in Mark 1:36 as '*Simōn kai hoi met' autou*', (Peter and those with him).

logical sequence. As we move on to the passage of our main concern, 1 Cor 15:24, we see this possibility becoming a probability. For this we need the supporting evidence of the meaning of '*to telos*'.

In general, there are three different ways in which scholars have tried to make sense of '*to telos*' in our passage.¹⁵ *To telos* has been understood as a noun meaning *the rest, the remainder* (referring to the rest of the world or non-Christians), as an adverbial *finally* and again as a noun meaning *the end*. Yet the basic meaning of '*to telos*' is *the end*, in the sense of *the aim*; it is the root of the English word "teleology". Scholars who sponsor the first two interpretations generally do so not on literal but on the theological grounds of anchoring in Paul the belief in a general resurrection of the dead or an intervening, temporal, Messianic kingdom between the parousia and the final consummation.¹⁶ As Schweitzer clearly admits,

The general resurrection and the immediately following judgement upon all men (sic) and upon the defeated Angels, are not mentioned in the series of events enumerated by Paul in 1 Cor 15:23-8. All this falls for him under the general concept of 'the End' (*eita to telos*) 1 Cor. 15:24, and is taken for granted as well known.¹⁷

Apart from such "well known"(!) theological presuppositions,

¹⁵Clarence T. Craig, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians" in G.A. Buttrick et al. (eds) *The Interpreter's Bible*, New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953, p.238f.

¹⁶Such scholars include, notably, Schweitzer, J. Weiss, Leitzmann, Thackeray and Morgan. Cf. W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (Revised Edition), New York-Evanston: Harper & Row, 1984, pp.289-290.

¹⁷Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul*, p.67.

there is no evidence in Pauline or in general New Testament usage of '*to telos*' to justify such an interpretation. The natural thing to do, therefore, is to follow the literal interpretation of '*to telos*', which does make good sense in the context, and accordingly adjust our thinking rather than that of Paul. Whether Paul's thinking is theologically valid for a contemporary systematic theological elaboration is of course a different matter, a matter that is beyond the scope of this study.

From what we have seen so far in our investigation we can say that the common rendering of '*eita to telos*' in English Bibles as "Then comes the end" lends itself to misinterpretation in that it veers too much to the side of temporal sequence. The verb "comes" is not in the Greek. *Εἴτα* could indeed be translated as "then" as long as it is understood as a logical sequence ("consequently") and not as a temporal sequence ("afterwards"). And '*to telos*' (the end) likewise should not be understood temporally as meaning "the last event" but teleologically as indicating the ultimate realization of a "goal".

4.2 *Who Are the pantes (All) in v.22?*

"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (v.22). The analogy Paul draws between Adam and Christ immediately suggests that just as all humankind participate in death on account of Adam so also will all humankind participate in life on account of Christ. So has the verse been understood by scholars who attribute to Paul the doctrine of the general resurrection of all the dead. Such reasoning appears to be logically attractive, as exemplified by Peake:

The whole race died in Adam, the whole race will

be raised from the dead in Christ. ... The "all" is as unlimited in one place as the other. The acts of Adam and Christ are radical acts, done in their capacity as natural and spiritual heads of the race, and affecting the whole race. Christ undoes, and more than undoes, what Adam has done, physical death is cancelled by physical resurrection. This would not have been the case if universal death had been met only by limited resurrection.¹⁸

This interpretation fails to take into account the aim of Paul in the passage which is to demonstrate the resurrection of "those who have fallen asleep in Christ" (v.18). Paul's interest is not so much in the systematic theological question of the eschatological fate of humankind as much as in the christological question of how believers who have died in Christ could still have a share in the victory of Christ. Thus it is possible to paraphrase v.22 in this way: "For as (those who are) in Adam all die, so also (those who are) in Christ shall all be made alive." As the founder of the human race all humans by nature belong in Adam and so share Adam's death. Christ, on the other hand, is the founder of a new humanity whose membership is acquired not automatically by natural birth but by a decision of faith, a spiritual rebirth. The scope of Paul's eschatological discourse here is limited to believers; what happens to unbelievers in the eschatology is not his concern neither here nor elsewhere. As Gordon Lee observes in his commentary,

the general resurrection of the dead is not Paul's concern, neither here nor elsewhere in the argument. Both the context and Paul's theology as

¹⁸ Arthur S. Peake (ed.), *A Commentary on the Bible*, London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, Ltd., 1920, p.846.

a whole make it clear that in saying "in Christ all will be made alive," he means "in Christ all *who are in Christ* will be made alive."¹⁹

So we can conclude by saying that in v.22 '*pantes zôipoiâfâsontai*', the "all" that will be made alive refers not to all humankind as such but to all humankind in so far as they are in Christ, all believers in Christ. The lot of the unbeliever is not Paul's concern here. This is in keeping with Paul's suspension of judgment earlier in the book regarding the eschatological fate of those outside the Christian fold: "God judges those outside" (1 Cor 5:13).

5 The Reign of Christ in Paul's Eschatological Vision

1 Cor 15:20-28 has given rise to divergent reconstructions of Paul's eschatological vision. It is possible, however, to group all of them into two broad categories, namely, those that hold that the reign of Christ is a present event, inaugurated at the resurrection of Christ to be completed at the parousia, and those that claim that Christ's reign is a future event that will be inaugurated at the parousia to be completed in a yet more distant future at the final consummation. Our study shows that Paul's thinking in 1 Cor 15:20-28 is more in line with the former than with the latter viewpoint.

Before we can lay to rest the futuristic view of the reign of Christ attributed to Paul in this passage, we need to examine one more argument often employed in its favour, an argument drawn, this time not from the text but from the cultural world of meaning supposedly presumed by Paul in his writings. Paul is said to have shared the Jewish apocalyptic eschatology in which physical

¹⁹Lee, *Corinthians*, p.749-50. See also Joseph Plevnik, S.J., *What Are They Saying About Paul*, New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986, p.40; Craig, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians" p.235.

death was regarded as a universal fatality brought about by Adam's sin, and resurrection equally seen as a universal experience for all the dead, which then is to be followed by a final judgment and consequent glorification and damnation as the case may be.²⁰ That Paul did retain elements of Jewish apocalyptic is beyond doubt,²¹ but at the same time he adapted them radically to the service of his newfound faith in Christ. This he achieved through what Conzelman has described as "his strictly christological starting point."²² According to Conzelman "Christ' ... has been subsequently introduced into the schema, thereby modifying it."²³ The effect of this modification is what we encounter in 1 Cor 15:20-28, namely, that thanks to the resurrection of Christ the new day has dawned, since the resurrection of Christ signals the commencement of the defeat of death and the victorious reign of Christ. This reign of Christ with its attendant defeat of death and all hostile powers goes on progressively through the evangelizing activity of Christians in the world and will be brought to a definite head at the parousia, which will be marked by the resurrection of the faithful and the absolute establishment of the kingdom of God. Our study thus coincides with the findings of Joseph Plevnik that "According to vv.23-28, the risen Christ is now actively promulgating and bringing to bear his power against death and related forces in the world and will totally annihilate these at his end-time coming

²⁰ de Boer, *The Defeat of Death*, p.111.

²¹ "Apocalyptic literature ... has four primary characteristics: (1) it has an overall concern with eschatology; (2) it overemphasizes transcendentalism, leaving everything to God's initiative; (3) it has a deterministic outlook on the events of history and the outcome of history as a whole; (4) it smacks of a relative or mitigated dualism in that it personifies and tends to personalize the forces of evil opposed to God. All these characteristics are evident in vv23-28." Peter F. Ellis, *Seven Pauline Letters*, Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1982, pp.108f.

²² Hans Conzelman, *1 Corinthians* (Hermenia), Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, p.249.

²³ Conzelman, *1 Corinthians*, p.270.

through the resurrection.”²⁴

6 Conclusion

We set out in this paper to revisit the interpretation given to 1 Cor 15:20-28 by such scholars as Albert Schweitzer, who derive from this passage the doctrine of the reign of Christ as a temporal intermediate period between the parousia, the second coming of Christ, and the final consummation, the final end of the temporal order. After establishing our text, its theme and literary-rhetoric structure, in which we also examined the common translation of the text as found in the RSV, we located the interpretive key of the passage in the problematic '*eita to telos*' of v.24 and '*pantes zōipoiāfāsontai*' of v.22. Our study of these statements in the context of Paul's usage and thinking in 1 Cor 15 revealed that these statements may not provide the answer to our philosophical and systematic theological questions regarding the end-time fate of unbelieving humanity and a temporal Messianic kingdom between the second coming and the final end. Whether these beliefs could be substantiated elsewhere in Paul's letters is outside the scope of this study. All that the study has shown is that 1 Cor 15:20-28 does not support them. What our passage says about the reign of Christ in Paul's eschatological vision can be summarized in the words of J. O'Rourke as follows:

The reign of Christ is the earthly kingdom, which began to manifest itself at his resurrection and ascension, will cease with the end of the world, which will mark the end of that kingdom; from the moment of the Parousia, Jesus will cease to reign over the world for it will disappear and become part of the heavenly kingdom.²⁵

²⁴Plevnik, *What Are They Saying About Paul*, p.41.

²⁵John J. O'Rourke, "1 Corinthians" in R.C. Fuller *et al.* (eds) *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1969, p.1159.