

# RECONCILIATION AND HOPE

*New Testament Essays on  
Atonement and Eschatology*

*presented to*

*L. L. Morris on his 60th Birthday*

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## CHAPTER XVI

### THE DEATH OF DEATH (I CORINTHIANS 15:26)

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PAUL'S ARGUMENT IN I CORINTHIANS 15 HAS BEEN CALLED BY DR. Morris "the classical Christian discussion of the subject" (i.e. the Resurrection). The aim of this essay is to examine again the development of that argument in order to see what light can be cast upon some current presuppositions about death. Such a discussion is necessarily dialectical: it is impossible to come to the biblical text without certain questions either in mind or presupposed, and it is to be hoped that exegetical discoveries will in turn challenge our presuppositions. For present purposes it is not necessary (nor would space allow us) to mention every important point in this lengthy passage, or to go into detail on matters discussed fully in recent commentaries.<sup>1</sup>

#### I

We begin with the text, asking what it is that Paul is saying to whom, and (as far as we can reconstruct it) in what circumstances. When we look at the chapter as a whole we find what is at first sight a bewildering oscillation between different ways of writing. The language of the first paragraph (vv. 1-11) is that of the *kerygmatic tradition* of the Church: "so we preach and so you believed" (11). In the second paragraph (12-19 (22)) the argument becomes *ad hominem*: "how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" The argument is predominantly of a negative or at least of an indirect kind: the reliability of the apostle and his message is impugned by this denial (v. 15); faith is meaningless and justification ineffective (v. 17); hope for those who have died in Christ is groundless (vv. 18 f.). The third paragraph (vv. 20-28) is introduced by the positive affirmation of the resurrection of Christ, with a use of the Adam-Christ parallelism which is to be developed later (vv. 45-49), language which owes something to the Jewish-Christian tradition but probably also something to Gnosticism. Then we move into the first use

<sup>1</sup> In addition to many older commentaries of value, the student of the New Testament is today well served by recent commentaries in French, English and German, by J. Héring (Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchâtel and Paris, 1949), L. L. Morris (*TNTC*, London, 1958), C. K. Barrett (*BNTC*, London, 1968), and Hans Conzelmann (*KNT*, Göttingen, 1969).

of an *apocalyptic scheme* (vv. 23–28). The fourth paragraph (vv. 29–34) resumes the *ad hominem* style of argument: What do people mean . . . why am I in peril . . . what do I gain . . .? The fifth paragraph which may be subdivided into the introduction (v. 35) and three sections vv. 36–38; 39–44; 45–50, is introduced by the unmistakable sign of a *diatribe*: “Someone will ask . . .”. Paul no doubt still has in mind the Corinthian reader but to a degree is now arguing with an imaginary opponent. If in the second and fourth paragraphs he can be assumed to be laying hold of phrases used and practices followed in the Corinthian Church, that assumption can be made with less assurance here. The third of the subsections certainly takes up the theme introduced in vv. 21–22: the whole paragraph may begin with general considerations arising out of the logic of the argument, it ends using the kind of language with which the Corinthians may well have been familiar. The sixth, and concluding paragraph (vv. 51–58) resumes *the use of apocalyptic terms*, lifting the whole to a climax in the citations from the Old Testament (vv. 54 and 55) and in thanks to God for the victory through Jesus Christ.

These, then, are the formal characteristics of the chapter. It moves from *kerygma*, to *ad hominem* argument, to apocalyptic discourse, to return to *ad hominem*, moving through *diatribe* to its conclusion in the language of apocalyptic and of praise. Is it possible to detect method in the apostle’s changes of tone and manner, or do thoughts come tumbling into words in a random fashion? If it is possible, we may gain some insight into the nature of his controversy with the Corinthian Christians, or some of them. We may also gain some insight into Paul’s distinctive attitude to death and resurrection, and may as a result wish to make some comments upon current attitudes.

### 1. *The kerygmatic opening: 1–11*

Two questions arise, relevant to our present purpose: first, if the question of resurrection was referred to Paul by letter (or messenger) why does he depart from his customary opening: Concerning this, that or the other (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1)? The absence of the formula (along with other evidence) has led Schmithals to suggest that this section belongs to what he calls Letter A, which preceded that in which Paul deals with matters referred to him.<sup>1</sup> Schmithals supports his case for assigning this chapter to this earlier letter with a hypothesis that Paul had misunderstood the nature of the Corinthian contention that there is no resurrection of the dead. Schmithals’ thesis will be confirmed if it can be shown that Paul’s understanding of the situation in this case deviates from his understanding of it elsewhere (in Schmithals’ Letter B); his contention will be weakened

<sup>1</sup> W. Schmithals *Die Gnosis in Korinth* (Göttingen, 1965), pp. 146–50 E.T. *Gnosticism in Corinth* (Nashville and New York, 1971), pp. 155–59.

if we can show that throughout Paul seems to be dealing with varied expressions of the same fundamental error. In fact it can be shown that throughout this letter, as we have it, Paul is contesting that enthusiasm which suggests that the eschatological conditions are already fulfilled (see 4:8 and note the superiority of the enlightened in the argument over food offered to idols, to take but two examples), so that there is no place left for a future resurrection.<sup>1</sup> Given this, it may be assumed that the Corinthian objection was too narrowly phrased to admit of direct answer. Paul begins his refutation of their error by reminding them of what it means to stand in a tradition of preaching and believing. The gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ begins with what happened to him in Palestine – he died, he was buried, he was raised, he appeared – and that has significance for men everywhere.

The second question is as good as answered already: why did Paul not base his case here, as to the Thessalonians (I Thess. 4:15) on a “word of the Lord” – presumably a prophetic revelation – but upon the kerygmatic tradition of the resurrection of Christ? Presumably because he was concerned to defuse the enthusiastic atmosphere of the Church in Corinth; Günther Bornkamm, in an essay “Faith and Reason in Paul”,<sup>2</sup> contends that “Paul allots to reason, to the rationality of men, an exceedingly important role for the self-understanding of the Christian and for all areas of his life.” He points out how Paul avoids wherever possible the “revelation-speech” type. He shows how in I Corinthians 14 (the section immediately preceding the passage under review) Paul places prophecy (speaking with the mind) and speaking with tongues (speaking with the spirit) in sharp contrast one to the other, and states his strong preference for the former. Intelligent and intelligible speech is always to be preferred to the inspirational, which exalts at the moment. Thus in introducing the discussion of the resurrection, Paul does not pit his experience against that of the Corinthians. Indeed the reference to himself in this opening section is to one to whom the Lord appeared, not (be it noted) to one who had shared in the risen life. He speaks not of what happened in himself, but of what happened to him: he was confronted by the living Lord, and then only “to one untimely born”; and his calling is to be an apostle, not a purveyor of the present experience of the resurrection, a preacher to whose message the appropriate response is not heightened experience but faith. “So we preach and so you believed.”

## 2. *The first argumentum ad hominem: 12–22*

Verses 1–11 had demonstrated what it means to stand in the Christian tradition. It is valid for men everywhere; it means going back to the

<sup>1</sup> So Barrett, Conzelmann, Käsemann in several essays, and others.

<sup>2</sup> E.T. in *Early Christian Experience* (London, 1969), p. 35.

Church in Palestine; it means going back to Christ crucified and raised from the dead. Verse 12 brings the matter into the life of the Corinthian Church: Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead (with the implication taken over from the previous verse that "you believed"), how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

It is important to note that Paul does not write to the Corinthians as though they were not Christians. On the contrary he treats them as confused Christians. If the Corinthians had held (as has frequently been assumed) that there was a complete destruction of the personality through death and so resurrection was not a possibility, it is doubtful whether they could be called Christians. It is, of course, possible that the force of the *ἐν ὕμῖν* is that Paul is excepting from the Christian community those who denied the possibility of resurrection, as though to say that there are those among them who are not of them. This is probably reading too much into the words; and it is more likely that Paul is pointing to their failure to continue to look forward to a future resurrection. This error was (as we have already assumed) that of a presentative eschatology, everything was present for them, perhaps in the cult (hence the words added by Paul to the tradition concerning the Lord's Supper: "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes", 11:26). In that case the words that follow, "if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised" (v. 13), are not to be taken as an argument from the general to the particular. Rather, the denial of a future resurrection isolates the resurrection of Jesus in such a way as to deprive it of all meaning and substance. "Christ is indeed no historical private person, but according to verse 45 the last Adam, in whom the believers are enclosed, as they previously were in Adam."<sup>1</sup> So absolutely everything which flows from Christ's resurrection as preached among them is rendered null and void: faith is futile and hope is vain (vv. 14-19).

This reading of the argument explains the positive statement which follows in verses 20-22. Most editors of the Greek text, followed by most translators, complete the paragraph which began at verse 12, at the end of 19. It is noteworthy that C. K. Barrett makes the break between 22 and 23. Verses 20-22, being the positive statement, provide us with the essential clue to what has been in Paul's mind. Christ's resurrection is no isolated event. Using terminology which would be equally meaningful to the Jewish and gnostically minded, Paul draws out the Adam-Christ parallel but with the essential contrast in tenses: "as in Adam all die (present), so also in Christ shall all be made alive (future)" (v. 22). What is at stake then resides in this future tense.

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Barth, "Erwägungen zu 1. Korinther 15:20-28", *EvTh* 30, <sup>10</sup>(1970), an essay to which the present writer is deeply in debt. See too, Conzelmann *op. cit.*, pp. 313-14; and footnote 20 on p. 314, with the following sentence quoted from H. Braun: "if the resurrection of Christ is isolated to a single instance, it is no longer the Christ event."

Paul has, then, depended upon the argument that Christ's resurrection and that of Christians are integrally related. He has not yet, however, made clear why they must be separated by a time span. It is for this purpose that he introduces:

### 3. *The first apocalyptic passage: 23-28*

What is the effect of introducing this kind of language at this point? It is three-fold.

First it provides a time scheme within which the resurrection of Christ and of those who belong to him each has its proper place: Christ the first fruits at the time designated in the kerygmatic opening referred to above, those who belong to Christ at his parousia. Then, and only then, the end. In other words, what Paul does by the introduction of this language is to continue to restore the horizontal perspective to the Corinthians. This indeed had been the effect of the kerygmatic section: they had been placed in a tradition stretching back to Palestine, to the death of Jesus and his being raised on the third day. Now they are placed in a sequence of events which opens out before them into the future. The present derives its significance from its past and its future: it is "christologically the time of overcoming the Powers, anthropologically the time of the Church, of the proclamation of the death of Christ, of faith and of hope".<sup>1</sup> The conquest of death belongs to that future: it is the very last event of all, before the Son hands everything to the Father. Whatever else apocalyptic had been, it was an interpretation of history. This kind of historical thinking expressed in apocalyptic terms forces a separation between Christ's resurrection and that of believers, and attaches the latter to the end of the process: for those who think in such terms it is no longer possible to speak of resurrection, the risen life, as present possession.

Secondly, the strength of what Paul does here does not derive simply from the introduction of a new way of speaking, one which after all might have been alien to his readers, as it is strange to us. Jürgen Becker has recently warned us of the necessity, especially in dealing with Paul's apocalyptic passages, of asking "how and why and with what aim Paul in specific instances formulates exactly this way and not otherwise."<sup>2</sup> We must press the issue: how does he do it and with what aim? A careful reading of the passage suggests that what is at stake among the Corinthians is not simply a matter of a correct or incorrect reading of the time-clock of history. Apocalyptic discourse is not being introduced merely in order to correct the calendars of the Corinthian Christians. The passage is introduced to reassert the sovereignty of Christ and the sovereignty of God. What is at stake is not simply the anthropological question, the question

<sup>1</sup> Conzelmann *op. cit.*, p. 329.

<sup>2</sup> "Erwägungen zur apokalyptischen Tradition in der paulinischer Theologie" *EvTh* 30, 11 (1970).

of the self-understanding of believers, but the Christological ("He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet") and the theological ("that God may be all in all").<sup>1</sup> The word *πᾶς* is used no fewer than ten times in the verses 24-28, frequently with great emphasis.<sup>2</sup> Christ will deliver the kingdom to the Father after destroying *every* rule and *every* authority and power. For he must reign till he has put *all* his enemies under his feet (a citation from Psalm 111:1 but with the adjective inserted by Paul). And so on, until it can be made effective that God is *πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν*. Hope for the future resurrection has now become, in G. Barth's phrase, "theologically necessary". The Corinthian Christians who in their enthusiasm claim that already they are filled with the Spirit, already they reign with Christ in heavenly places, are denying the sovereign work of Christ over history, over the contrary forces which beset men, over death itself. Moreover, a too exclusively risen-Jesus centred experience of the Christian faith, excludes God whose sovereign will and purpose Jesus was appointed to serve.

This leads to the third effect of the introduction of this language: faith in and hope for the resurrection is rescued not only from the subjective experience of the Corinthians, but also from preoccupation with the individuals on to a broader canvas. Death, the last enemy, is not merely a threat to personal survival. Death is the last of the contrary forces to be overcome by the Lord of life. Death calls in question the meaningfulness of life. Christ who was raised from the dead will bring meaning to the processes of history and of life. The insertion by Paul of the phrase, "Death is to be destroyed, the last enemy", between the two citations from scripture, between the two affirmations of Christ's completed work in handing over the kingdom to the Father, gives the statement a strange and decisive prominence. Christ's reign and death coexist in the meantime, until the end. Christian faith exists not only as *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*, but also as hope based upon promise, a promise which encompasses the individual believer and the race. Indeed unless Christ's reign is triumphant over the contrary powers on the grand side, including death, it is difficult to see how it can be regarded as totally effective for the life of the individual. The death which must be overcome is not only my death but the death of my world.

#### 4. *The second argumentum ad hominem: 29-34*

This section is introduced abruptly: we are conscious of a sharp change in style and tone. First in a series of rhetorical questions, Paul points to the

<sup>1</sup> In his very instructive article referred to in the previous note, Professor Becker argues (against Käsemann) that Paul uses apocalyptic language to heighten the understanding of their present existence in faith on the part of his readers, and not for the extension of their understanding of Christ as Pantocrator. It is noteworthy, however, that Professor Becker never refers to this passage.

<sup>2</sup> See on this point Gerhard Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 523.

Corinthian Church's own practice (baptism on behalf of the dead, which, if we do not understand, Paul did, and to which he could appeal), and to his own apostolic labours with the hazards involved, described either literally or metaphorically as fighting with beasts in Ephesus. Then in a series of brief sentences, Paul exhorts them to adopt the kind of behaviour which would be expected of those who live in the period of Christ's reign, of his conquest of the evil forces; the kind of behaviour which would be appropriate among those who await the destruction of death in the resurrection. Those who do not have such a hope have a corrupting effect on their fellows: they live only for the present moment (v. 32b). They have no knowledge of God (v. 34b), a phrase which must surely now be understood in the light of the argument of the previous paragraph, that hope for a future resurrection is a necessity if we are to believe that God is God.

The paragraph need not detain us further, except to note that, as frequently with Paul, the great affirmations (in this case given in apocalyptic language in what has preceded) must always be seen to have quite particular and precise implications for the attitudes, relationships and behaviour of the Christian. The Corinthians are to wake up properly out of the drunken stupor of their enthusiasm (v. 34: see Barrett *ad loc.*), and live like sober Christians ready for what lies ahead of them. Paradoxically enough, the awareness that resurrection – and therefore death – is still in the future, should bring them to life now.<sup>1</sup>

##### 5. *The diatribe: 35–49*

Having set the great (the vision of Christ reigning and of the ultimate triumph of God's sovereignty) and the small (the behaviour of the Corinthian Christians and the activity of the apostle) in juxtaposition, Paul can now proceed to occupy the middle ground. He has talked much about resurrection, but what does it mean? If it is not simply the present exalted experience of the Corinthians, what will the resurrection-life be? This is the kind of question which Paul could imagine being raised, which does not, of course, mean that it is speculative or unrelated to the views held in Corinth. The passage calls for separate exegetical treatment; but we must content ourselves here with a few observations which may be relevant for our present purposes.

Verses 36–38 stress the necessity of death, and the discontinuity between the present and the resurrection life. It is important to note this because it has been said too often and too easily that to Paul the Jew the thought of a naked soul is abhorrent, a bodiless life impossible. Before Paul speaks about different kinds of body, he makes clear that there is real discontinuity: without death there is no possibility of resurrection (v. 36b). If

<sup>1</sup> See R. Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* E.T. (London, 1969), I, p. 87.

we read into the analogy of the seed sown and the "body" subsequently given in the plant our knowledge of the processes of germination, we are reading into a metaphor something which would not have occurred to Paul or the Corinthians, any more than Jesus or his hearers would have seen in the mustard tree out of the smallest seed what we would call a natural development. The stress in verse 38 is on the subject of the sentence: *God* gives it a body, according to his choice. The matter is in his hands. The death is real, the miracle of the new life is no natural development as though the same entity can be clothed in two ways, as though (to quote Bultmann) "into the place of the body (*σῶμα*) has moved the Greek concept of form (*εἶδος*), gained from the observation of nature."<sup>1</sup> To await the resurrection is genuinely to wait upon God for a new personal existence.

Verses 39-41 are best taken then as illustrations of the creative work of God, in all its variety. So too the dead are in the hands of the Creator God who takes "things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are." Once more, as in the previous (apocalyptic) paragraph, Paul points to the theological core of the matter. The kinds of flesh which characterize animals, birds and fish, the glory that belongs to heavenly and earthly bodies, to the sun and the moon, in all their infinite variety derive from God. So it is with the resurrection of the dead.

Verses 42-50 state in stark contrast the antitheses between death and life:

<i>φθορά/ἀφθαρσία</i>	the perishable/the imperishable
<i>ἀτιμία/δόξα</i>	dishonour/glory
<i>ἀσθένεια/δύναμις</i>	weakness/power
<i>ψυχικόν/πνευματικόν</i>	psychic/spiritual
<i>ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος/ὁ ἔσχατος</i> <i>Ἀδάμ</i>	the first man/the last Adam
<i>ἐκ γῆς χοϊκός/ἐξ οὐρανοῦ</i>	from the earth, of dust/from heaven

The matter is summarized: living men (flesh and blood) in their perishable, unworthy, weak, psychic nature cannot inherit the kingdom of God. That entry can be effected only by God himself.

It is wise to assume that in the whole of this section Paul's thought is permeated and controlled by his customary understanding of *σῶμα* the body. To repeat, it does not mean simply the vehicle for personal existence. Life in the body is personal existence, but it is more. Gerhard Barth invokes the recent studies of Käsemann and Schweizer in this regard.<sup>2</sup> Käsemann correctly stresses that Paul uses *σῶμα* "to denote the corporeality of human life, organic to the creation, claimed by God as his own by right, yet threatened by the cosmic powers . . . . No New Testament writer stresses more than Paul that the resurrection of the body is

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 90.    <sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, pp. 526-27.

the goal of all the divine action and that therefore to this extent corporeality is the end of all the ways of God. It is for this reason that when the Apostle wants to portray the new aeon created and ruled by Christ, he goes for his terminology not to the gnostic myth of the world-soul but to the myth of the Archetypal Man, who is also the Redeemer, with his immense body." And again: "We must conclude that *σῶμα* does not mean for the Apostle what it means for the modern idea of person or personality – it does not mean individuality. . . . In the anthropology of classical Greece, the essential characteristic of the body is that it experiences limitation and individuation through its form and proportions. For Paul, on the other hand, it is the possibility of communication."<sup>1</sup>

So, far from reverting to individual hopes, let alone subjective experiences, Paul in this section sketches as the hope of the resurrection life a new life in community and in communication, in Christ and before God: a life which the unrighteous cannot inherit (6:9), nor can men in their weakness and mortality, but which can be received as a gift at the hand of the Creator-Redeemer.

#### 6. *The concluding apocalypse: (50) 51–57*

"At this point", writes Barrett, "Paul moves into specifically apocalyptic language"; and of that there is no doubt. The mystery is the revealed truth about the end. Paul does not say how he became possessed of this knowledge: there is no stress on any special gift which he may have for discerning these things, no entry into competition with the enthusiasts of Corinth. Just as in the previous apocalyptic passage Paul had used a traditional scheme for his own purposes, so here Paul uses the material to hand, with reserve. There is none of the detailed delineation of the fate of the righteous and the unrighteous, or of the order of their appearing at the end. Two points only are stressed; and they are the points central to Paul's controversy with the Corinthians. First, "the dead will be raised": the resurrection is a future event, belonging to the End when the last trumpet will sound. Secondly, "we (i.e. those still living) shall be changed": in other words, we are not risen with Christ; not for us yet, until our mortal bodies have been changed, the life beyond death.

If we ask how Paul uses apocalyptic imagery in this concluding section, the answer must be: in such a way as to reinforce what he has said before. He is not using it to introduce fresh ideas, but to emphasize – in language which has perhaps greater imaginative power, which certainly has its peculiar eloquence – what he has been saying throughout.

<sup>1</sup> "The Pauline Doctrine of the Lord's Supper" E.T. in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London, 1964) pp. 129–130, 132–133. See too Eduard Schweizer, *TWNT*, VII, p. 1063.

In a further, most notable way, Paul concludes by taking up a point with which he had begun this discourse. He had said twice in his kerygmic opening that the key events of Christ's death and resurrection were "according to the scriptures". So too the final event: "then shall happen, come to effect, the Word that has been written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory' . . ." That future event is part of the great purpose of God unfolded in the kerygma about Christ. Indeed the meaning of the "he was raised on the third day according to the scripture" will then be disclosed: scripture, it will be shown, has pointed to the true meaning of Christ's resurrection, which is no single isolated event in itself but is a victory over death, of universal significance.

Not even in this thought, however, are the Corinthians allowed to rest. For Paul, men may not simply acquiesce in an assurance of future victory. This victory is over the dominating experiences of historical existence: in the here-and-now death, sin, and the law are the great forces contrary to us. In so far as we have a new attitude to them, we begin to share in the victory of Christ. Paul was to develop his exposition of this three-fold victory in Romans 6-8.<sup>1</sup> For present purposes the allusion to it, and the thanksgiving for it, are sufficient.

## II

"The prime virtue of the historian", writes Käsemann, "and the beginning of all meaningful hermeneutic consists for me in so drilling ourselves to listen that we first of all allow the alien element in history its full validity and do not let the basic idea of involvement do violence to it".<sup>2</sup> It has been one of Dr. Leon Morris's great virtues as a scholar that he has again and again sought to expose his readers to the text, even if it brings them to an alien world. The fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians certainly introduces us to a strange world: its language is no longer our language, and the errors of the Church addressed are in important respects different from ours. The work of the interpreter is not finished, however, when he leaves the reader in that alien world. There remains the difficult but inescapable question: what can this text mean for us? The remaining paragraphs of this essay can do no more than suggest directions for further enquiry.

First, we might observe that a great deal of ink has been spilt in recent decades, especially in the heyday of Biblical Theology, on the issue Immortality of the Soul versus Resurrection of the Body. It seems clear

<sup>1</sup> See the great sequence: freedom from sin (chapter 6), freedom from the law (chapter 7), freedom from death (chapter 8); and note the particularly instructive treatment of these by A. Nygren in his *Commentary on Romans* (E.T. London, Philadelphia, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> "Zur Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik" *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen, 1965) II, p. 107 n. 2. E.T. in *JTC* 6 (1969), p. 101.

that the issue in Corinth was nothing like as simple as that definition of the problem would suggest. It is true, however, that the consciousness of modern man has been deeply influenced by these two concepts. The question for us is not whether the argument between survival and resurrection raged in Corinth, which it did not, but how far the two notions of death therein embodied are retained in the imagination of our contemporaries – and therefore in our own imaginations.

For us in the Western tradition, Greece gave the ways of thought and speech which views death as a transition from this to another life. There is, it is assumed, survival. This has given us some of our greatest poetry. The survival is frequently of a shadowy character, which has contributed to the power of the verse through the melancholy which pervades it. So Odysseus at the entrance to the underworld:

“Now the souls gathered, stirring out of Erebos,  
brides and young men, and men grown old in pain,  
and tender girls whose hearts were new to grief;  
many were there, too, torn by brazen lanceheads,  
battle-slain, bearing still their bloody gear.”<sup>1</sup>

Through Homer and Virgil and Dante the pictures come and are part of the inherited imagination of those who today have not read the poets themselves, or even paused before the illustrations of Blake.

Plato first gave philosophical justification for belief in survival. The Orphic-Pythagorean assertion of survival which Plato inherited came up against the objection that we have no knowledge of this. Plato provided the argument. For him sense-perception does not yield knowledge but only opinion; to gain knowledge we have to transcend sense-perception, although this can be suggestive in that it points to archetypes, the world of Forms. The soul of man by coming into contact with the Forms has contact with what is unchangeable. Death is the moment at which the soul is released from the body and so enters into the realm of pure ideas or forms to which it properly belongs. Here is the root of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

It does not belong to early Christianity. It entered powerfully into later Christianity. It is with us still. Death as the separation of body and soul would be regarded as an essential Christian dogma by many Christians today.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the view put forward by Paul in I Corinthians, most (perhaps all) statements about death in these terms fail to take the finality of death with a radical seriousness.

By way of contrast with this, the Biblical understandings of death are pretty well united in being, as Eberhard Jüngel argues,<sup>3</sup> “two-dimensional”.

<sup>1</sup> *The Odyssey* XI. 38–42, tr. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> For a sophisticated discussion of this view by a leading Roman theologian, see Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (Herder, Freiburg, 1961), pp. 24–34.

<sup>3</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Tod* (Stuttgart, 1971), pp. 145 ff.

Certainly behind Paul's teaching lies on the one hand a conviction about the reality, the finality of death and on the other a hope, based upon a promise made by God to man in the resurrection of Jesus. The reality of death as the loss of all relationships, the destruction of the contacts of life between man and man, and between man and God, is certainly one that can be grasped by contemporary historians and natural scientists. Historical existence comes to an end, and historians cannot touch what (if anything) occurs subsequently to the individual concerned; biological death occurs when certain biochemical reactions are observed, there is a breakdown in organic processes and decomposition sets in.

From the time of Abraham and the promise that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed, this view of death as the end of meaningful existence for the individual has been complemented by a hope which resides in the future of the race. One generation rises and passes away, but the hope is in posterity: before man lies the future. The race goes on, hopefully to a culmination, a realization of its full potentialities, its true end. Nothing could be further from Plato and the tradition which flows from him; but Christianity has oscillated between these two essentially incompatible views of death: one the moment of transition to another life or realm of existence, the other the end of the individual, only the race goes on. This latter view is one which is tolerably congenial to modern man, whether humanist or Christian. The humanist may think life well lived if he is contributing towards a better future. The Christian can point to much in the Biblical message which speaks of a future and a hope: the eschatological perspective of the Christian faith keeps him looking forward.<sup>1</sup>

The contemporary awareness of death is, however, qualified by two other ways of talking about death: the existential and the ecological. The former finds its most eloquent expression in the imaginative literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. We might begin by observing the distinctive quality of the existential awareness in Dostoevsky. In a much quoted passage from *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin tells the story of a man who was taken to a place of execution and at the last moment was reprieved. Dostoevsky himself had had this experience; and his description of a man facing death illuminates his attitude towards this phenomenon. Death is not simply that which gives a boundary to life, but is that which gives significance to what lies this side of the boundary. Whereas there has been a strong tendency in the Western tradition (and perhaps elsewhere) to speak and think of death in terms of what lies beyond it, this way of thought and speech lays stress on what the fact of death means for life this side of the event. Moreover, the passage from *The Idiot* suggests that such an awareness of the ever-present reality of death is not morbid, but

<sup>1</sup> Justly celebrated as an exposition of what this might mean for the believer is Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* E.T. (London, 1967).

liberating. It is liberating because, through awareness of death, in a peculiarly decisive way, man becomes aware of himself. He becomes aware of the fact that he is always more than he is, that his being is never complete at any given moment: man is possibility, as Heidegger would say. Above all, face to face with death man becomes aware of his own individual existence, his *Jemeinigkeit* as the Germans say – what belongs to me.

Man then not only knows about death, observes it from a number of points of view, he also is aware of his own death – and that awareness is decisive for authentic existence, for a true and full life. I not only observe the death of others, which I surround with ceremonies which take the individual event into a wider general context, I know that I must die. I shall not witness my own funeral, to borrow a phrase of Professor Antony Flew;<sup>1</sup> or, as one summary of the existentialist view has put it: “death appears as my own present untransferable possibility of being no longer in the world”.<sup>2</sup>

It goes without saying that such a view of death is not only liberating, it is also a threat. The finality of death not only confers significance upon life, it also calls that significance into question. Contemporary “anxiety is not fear, being afraid of this or that definite object, but the uncanny feeling of being afraid of nothing at all”.<sup>3</sup> Nothingness is the object of much contemporary anxiety. Edvard Munch’s often reproduced painting *The Cry* speaks not of an anguished spirit protesting against the universe; it articulates the anguish which is at the heart of things. In the parallel picture, *Anxiety* is dressed in respectable clothes, and the anxious figures look not at some definable object but out of the canvas, at us, into Nothing.

This imaginative awareness of the Nothingness with which he is surrounded, this awareness that in life we are in the midst of death, is given historical reality by the threat under which man lives, as he takes hold of destructive weapons of hitherto unknown power and as he uses up the environment on which he depends to support life. The existential awareness of death is now complemented by the predictions of the scientists. Modern man faces not only his own individual death but also that of the race. It is doubtful whether Christian preaching or pastoral care has yet appreciated to the full the effect on men’s minds of the disappearance of hope for the future of the human race.

One last note must be sounded in this brief survey of the modern response to death. We have suggested that this response is characterized by men seeing a new significance or lack of significance in life, through their exposure to the fact of death. The possible effect of the loss of significance

<sup>1</sup> See Antony Flew: “Can a man witness his own funeral?”, *HJ*, 54 (1956), pp. 242–250.

<sup>2</sup> J. MacQuarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (London, 1955), p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (London, 1961), p. 128.

is well stated by Albert Camus in his novel *The Outsider*. There the author tests the validity of the detached objectivity of attitude of the central figure, Meursault, the young clerk in Algiers. The novel is written in the first person, as it were autobiographically from a prison cell, the cell of a man condemned for murder. Meursault can observe his mother's death, with which the novel opens, with detachment; he can sleep with his girl friend, without love or commitment, or equally agree to marry her, not because he wants to but simply because she asks him. He knows neither jealousy nor fear; and he seems to be free from hypocrisy also. For the murder in which he is involved he has feelings neither of guilt nor of self-justification. The frightening, Kafka-esque trial, with the manifest injustice, he can observe almost with calm. Only, at the end, the prison chaplain exasperates him: "As a condemned man himself, couldn't he grasp what I meant by that dark wind blowing from my future? . . ." After this outburst he has a longish sleep and awakens just before dawn on the day of his execution; and the novel concludes:

Then just on the edge of daybreak I heard a steamer's siren. People were starting on a voyage to a world that had ceased to concern me, for ever. Almost for the first time in many months I thought of my mother. And now, it seemed to me, I understood why at her life's end she had taken on a fiancé; why she'd played at making a fresh start. There too, in that Home (the old people's home where his mother had died) where lives were flickering out, the dusk came as a mournful solace. With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in this world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained was to hope that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.<sup>1</sup>

The indifference and isolation of modern man, the outsider, is complete; and he knows it at the hour of death.

Man the outsider rejects life, when he sees it from the perspective of death. But this may happen to man the insider also. The insecurity of a future made possible by scientific and technical achievements is already leading many to a rejection not only of that civilization but of historical existence, life itself.

### III

This then, briefly and crudely, suggests a strange new world in which

<sup>1</sup> A. Camus, *The Outsider*, Penguin ed. (London, 1961), pp. 119-20.

the Christian must try to make meaningful his talk about death, and about the victory over it. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to do more than raise the question; it is certainly beyond the powers of the writer to answer it. A few suggestions may, nonetheless, be in order.

Paul's starting point in the kerygmatic tradition suggests that for us, as for the Corinthians, an existential or experiential awareness of death is not enough. It is as inadequate to see and speak of death in itself without regard to both its antecedents and what comes after, as it was for the Corinthians so to speak of resurrection. We are creatures of time and history: we have a beginning, and the possibility of a new beginning in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We also have a future in him, a historical future in which he reigns till *all* things are put under his feet. Paul's use of apocalyptic rescues us from the individual and private apprehension, to a forward look, to that which lies beyond our individual lives, to the future of the race. But since that future is in the hands of the crucified living one of the kerygmatic tradition it is one which genuinely encompasses us all: the miracle of resurrection, of life in Christ, is open to every man.

The Christian faith therefore certainly speaks of man as possibility, certainly not (as Heidegger stresses) simply as "a free-floating potentiality-for-Being",<sup>1</sup> but because of the miracle of Christ's resurrection, and the awaited miracle of our risen life. Death cannot for the Christian be the last word. It may be the last "station on the road to Freedom" (Bonhoeffer). It is a station always ahead of us. What has been traditionally regarded as being true for the individual must now be seen as operative also for the human race. It too lives under the threat of death, but also under the promise of a new life. Just as the Christian proclamation must begin with a backward look to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so it must finish with a forward look, not indeed to a parallel death and resurrection for man, but to acts of God's sovereignty exercised through the reign of Christ. There is no reason to think that that reign is or will be exercised other than in the manner of the risen crucified one; but nor is there any reason for the Christian to forget the strange victory which was won in precisely this manner. The Christian looks to the future with hope, not because of anything inherent in the world but because of his faith in Jesus the Kyrios, who points to and makes effective the sovereignty of God.<sup>2</sup> In a day when the secular expectation looks to "the death of man", the Christian does not respond with a theology of "the death of God"; nor does he try, by induced mystical experience or the exercise of

<sup>1</sup> *Being and Time* E.T. (London, 1962), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Moltmann *Theology of Hope* E.T. (London, 1965), p. 162, n. 1, referring to "He must reign" of I Corinthians 15:25, "It is not a *δεῖ* ('must') in terms of salvation history, but one that discloses the future necessity and future tendency inherent in the event of the resurrection of Jesus. That is why it is linked not to the expectation of a fate, as in apocalyptic, but to the Kyrios title of Jesus."

psychic powers, to demonstrate the presence of God in the midst of life and death. He speaks rather of a future and a hope. The death of death depends not upon experience but on promise.