

The Resurrection in the Pearly Gate Pub

George W. Stroup

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Perhaps it was only a dream. But then dreams are sometimes more than just “only.” After all, according to Scripture, some of them can be messages. In any case, it was almost Easter, I had a sermon to write, and I found myself yearning for one more conversation with two old friends I had not seen in a while. And then there I was, standing in front of an establishment that looked for all the world like a pub in Frodo’s Shire. It even had a green door and a brass knob in the middle. The sign above the door read “The Pearly Gate Pub,” and two smaller signs on the door read “All Are Welcome” and “We Never Close.” I entered and immediately spotted them, sitting in a corner by themselves, drinking beer, absorbed in deep conversation. Chris Beker and David Bartlett.¹ Both of them professors of New Testament, at one time my faculty colleagues in different institutions, and, more importantly, close friends.

Chris: George, it has been a long time! What are you doing here?

George: Well, the sign said “All Are Welcome.” This place doesn’t look like a private club.

Chris: They even welcome foreigners here! As you know, I am a stranger to these shores.

David: Not only is it open to all, but the beer is free! And Baptists can drink here without worrying about the consequences.

George: Free at last! Free at last! Why are you sitting over here by yourselves?

David: We meet every day to discuss topics in the Bible that continue to interest us. Other folks in here are more interested in sports or politics and leave us to ourselves.

Chris: Unless there is a Red Sox game on television, and then I take a break from talking to David.

George: If I may interrupt just for a moment, I’m working on a sermon for Easter Sunday—on the resurrection, of course—and hoped you might give me some help.

David: You and I have been talking about the resurrection for more than fifty years. You know what I think. What is there left to say?

Chris: And on this topic surely your hope is—shall we say—misplaced? That is, your hope should not be in us, but elsewhere.

George: Yes, I know. You keep reminding me that resurrection hope is finally hope in the triumph of God. But I’m more worried about defeat in the pulpit on Easter Sunday.

Chris: What exactly is the problem?

George: Well, several things. First, no offense, Chris, but most of the people I know are more interested in what happens to them after they die than they are the triumph of God. Second, they think when they die that is the end² or that resurrection is something that happens to them immediately afterwards. Third, those who do believe there is more to life than death believe that resurrection is about the immortality of their souls. As the Westminster Larger Catechism puts it, when we die, our souls are immediately received into heaven, where we wait for the resurrection of our bodies.³

And, finally, they think resurrection is about an escape from this world to a better

one, one in which the pub is always open and the beer is always free! Our physical body and our life in this world is like life in a prison, and our souls yearn to escape, to be set free.

Chris: I wonder how the soul enjoys cold beer if there is no body to drink it? (Pun intended.) Anyway, the pub is always open and the beer is free, but there's also the choir practice and the endless singing.

David: I actually enjoy the choir practice and the singing. Chris not so much!

Chris: As I have told you many times, George, all of these problems are easily dealt with if we simply understand the confession "God raised Jesus from the dead," as Paul does, as God's apocalyptic triumph over all things. Jesus' resurrection is, to use Paul's expression, the "first fruit" of what is yet to be—namely, the resurrection of all things, including the dead. When we die, to use Paul's words, we sleep, we rest in Christ and in God's everlasting arms, and we wait with the rest of creation for that "day of the Lord" when everything will be transformed and God will be all in all. We are not raised a disembodied soul but, as Paul puts it, a transformed, spiritual body. Resurrection is not an escape from this world but a transformation of it, a transformation not only of human beings but of all creation.

George: I know, I know. I have heard all of this many times before, but there still seem to me to be some problems.

David: Such as?

George: To begin with, in your interpretation of Jesus' resurrection, Chris, you seem to privilege what Paul says in I Corinthians 15.⁴ Granted, it is probably the earliest written description of the meaning of Jesus' resurrection in the New Testament, but does that alone make it normative for all other New Testament texts? And, second, if we privilege I Corinthians 15, does that mean the confession "God raised Jesus from the dead" must be interpreted apocalyptically? Does Easter faith affirm both that God raised Jesus from the dead and Paul's modification of Jewish apocalyptic? If I believe God raised Jesus from the dead, must I also believe in Paul's apocalyptic interpretation?

Chris: You raise two issues. On the question of the proper interpretation of the resurrection, it does seem to me that the four issues you have raised are more clearly and directly addressed by Paul than by any other text in the New Testament. And on the question of the relation between resurrection and apocalyptic, the core or coherent theme of the gospel as Paul understands it—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—is unthinkable apart from Paul's modification of Jewish apocalyptic. Apocalyptic is not just simply the husk within which we have the good news about resurrection. What Paul means by resurrection is inseparable from his apocalyptic worldview.

George: So, any interpretation of what Christians mean by the resurrection of Jesus Christ will be incorrect if it is not understood in terms of Pauline apocalyptic? That seems odd to me. I don't have to understand the world the way Paul does in regard to slavery. Why then must I understand Jesus' resurrection in terms of Paul's apocalyptic worldview?

Chris: Because slavery is not a part of Paul's interpretation of the core content of the gospel. Resurrection is, and I Corinthians 15 indicates, that for Paul, there are correct and incorrect interpretations of what it means to say "God raised Jesus from the dead."

George: And I gather Paul's understanding of apocalyptic has a specific meaning and

what you refer to as certain essential features or “coordinates.”

Chris: Yes, the imminence of that day when God will raise all the dead and transform all things and the cosmic scope of resurrection are both apocalyptic coordinates. I reject all interpretations of Paul’s gospel that reduce it to only a present reality or to anthropology.

George: And you think that Paul’s apocalyptic gospel will help me with my Easter sermon?

Chris: Yes, and I think the proof of that is the issues you raise—the assumption that resurrection is only about what happens to us when we die, that it is only a present reality, that it affirms the separation of body and soul and the immortality of the latter, and that it is an escape from this world. These are terrible misinterpretations of the gospel. We see the errors in these interpretations when we look at them through a Pauline lens more clearly than when we use other New Testament perspectives. Paul cannot imagine the resurrection of Christ apart from an apocalyptic interpretation of the general resurrection of the dead. The one entails the other.

David: I wonder, though, if there are not good reasons for refusing to make one perspective or “voice” in the New Testament normative in relation to the others.⁵ We should listen carefully to Paul, but should we not also listen to other interpretations? For example, if we look at the four gospels, they differ in how they tell the Jesus story and, not surprisingly, they differ in their interpretations of resurrection. That is because they are written in different contexts and to churches facing different kinds of issues. Would it not be better to let them speak to us from their different perspectives rather than attempting to make Paul normative for them?

Chris: Why would that be “better”?

David: Chris, you describe Paul’s theology as an interaction between situational contingency and a coherent center or core.⁶ The latter takes the form of a symbolic structure in which the Christ-event, specifically Christ’s death and resurrection, is articulated in the language of Christian apocalyptic. Might not the synoptic gospels and John have important things to say to us about Jesus’ resurrection that we do not find in Paul?

Chris: Such as?

David: I think there is a good chance that the creed Paul quotes in I Corinthians 15:3-7—what he says was handed over to him and he has handed over to the Corinthians—presupposes the empty tomb, but at best the empty tomb is implicit in that creed and in Paul’s theology.⁷ It is possible Paul knows nothing about the empty tomb tradition. It is, however, explicit in the gospels, and I wonder if the empty tomb does not tell us something important about the resurrection that is missing in Paul?

Chris: What do you have in mind?

David: Two things. First, Jesus’ resurrection cannot be proven, but the Gospels do provide evidence for it. Resurrection is a matter of both fact (or evidence) and faith.⁸ The tomb is empty. The body is not “where they laid him.” That “fact” is open to multiple interpretations, but in the gospels, it is a fact. Resurrection faith is not unfounded wishful thinking. Second, the empty tomb stories conclude with a promise—that Jesus awaits the disciples not only at the end of history, but (depending on which gospel) also in Galilee or Jerusalem. And that means that the resurrection is not just about what happened on “the third day,” but about what continues to happen in the lives of believers and in the worship of the believing community.⁹

Chris: Well, the tradition of Jesus' appearances is just as much "fact" as the empty tomb. It is a fact that various people claimed to have encountered Jesus following his death. I do not see what the gospels and the empty tomb tradition have to add to Paul's interpretation.

David: Resurrection hope is not just about what happened on the third day or what happens on "the day of the Lord," but what happens in the interim as well.

Chris: Let's take Mark's gospel as an example. It is sometimes described as "the Pauline gospel." Yet there are important differences between Mark and Paul. Paul is a theologian of the cross while Mark is more a theologian of the sufferings of Christ.¹⁰ Christ's passion is for Mark the paradigm for Christian discipleship. Discipleship means denying oneself, taking up one's cross, following Jesus, and participating in his suffering. It is the cross that both judges and triumphs over the world. Mark has no need of the confirmation of the resurrection, which perhaps explains why Mark's gospel ends the way it does (that is at 16:8, with a preposition). So, what does Mark add to our understanding of the gospel that is missing in Paul?

David: What is missing from Paul and surely important for understanding the gospel is the significance of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, what Jesus says and does that leads him to the cross, the material that makes up the bulk of the synoptic gospels and that provides a basis for an interpretation of discipleship. Might that not give Paul a fuller description of the gospel and help him with some of his inadequacies?

Chris: What do you mean by Paul's inadequacies?

David: Well, you admit that Paul focuses primarily on the internal life of the church and does not address the gospel's implications for social institutions and life outside the church.¹¹ You describe him as a social conservative. Although he advocates a transformation of values within the church in regard to Jews, slaves, and women, you write, "Paul is not really willing or able to challenge the social structures of his society."¹² You also admit it is often said, regrettably, that social conservatism and apocalyptic enthusiasm seem to coincide. Although Pauline hope should mean the church will "strain itself in all its activities to prepare the world for its coming destiny in the kingdom of God,"¹³ that has not often been the case. Might not Paul's gospel be more concerned about the transformation of this world if it emphasized the church's call to follow Jesus in what he said and did by embodying the kingdom of God?

George: And that does raise a related issue. To what extent do you find Oscar Cullmann's analogy from World War II of D-Day and V-Day helpful for interpreting the relation between the already and the not yet of resurrection? After the Allied invasion of France, D-Day, to use David's categories, was a fact, but the war was not yet over. The end of the war seemed likely, it was something for which the Allies yearned and hoped, but it was not yet a reality. Does that illumine resurrection hope?

Chris: Yes and no. It's closer to Paul's understanding of resurrection than those interpretations that limit the reality of the resurrection to its present significance—that is, to the already, the now. But some forms of already/not yet, including Cullmann's, remove the not yet to a remote, distant future in which it cannot have any significance for the now. Cullmann "allows a Christocentric salvation-history to displace eschatology."¹⁴ The consequence is that if the "not yet" does not impinge on the "already" and create an urgency, a sense of imminence, then Christian hope dissolves into private spirituality and a surrender to the powers and principalities of this world.

George: Therefore, the contribution of the already/not yet interpretation of apocalyptic

is that it holds Jesus' resurrection in dialectical tension with the resurrection of the dead. If that tension is dissolved, Christian hope is either hope only for the now, the already, for this life, or hope only for the not yet, for a future so distant that it seems to have little relevance for the present.

Chris: In Cullmann's analogy, "A D-Day without an impending V-Day loses its character of D-Day. Likewise, a D-Day that is celebrated as if it were V-Day loses sight of the reality of things because it ignores God's plan of cosmic redemption and is caught in an overheated spiritualistic illusion, 'as if the day of the Lord has come.'"¹⁵ That's what the Corinthians did. The D-Day/V-D-Day analogy is helpful only so long as it maintains a dialectical tension between the two and affirms the imminence of what is not yet.

David: That raises what might be the most difficult issue in an apocalyptic interpretation of resurrection—the "delay" of the parousia, the day of the Lord, Jesus' "second coming," the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of all things.

Chris: I admit "the strongest argument for rejecting a future apocalyptic is undoubtedly the ongoing process of history itself."¹⁶ Paul's apocalyptic gospel "runs up against the frustration of chronological time..., the stubborn duration of time."¹⁷

David: What then are we to do?

Chris: A future apocalyptic is an inherent part of Paul's gospel. However, we can no longer expect the imminent arrival of the kingdom in the same manner that Paul did because "the appointed time," which for Paul had grown "very short," has for us grown "very long."¹⁸ We cannot give up the apocalyptic coordinates of imminence or cosmic-universal significance, but the emphasis now must be on "the coming actualization of God's triumph," and that means we must "work patiently and courageously in our world in a manner dictated by the way of Christ—the way from suffering to glory."¹⁹

David: Unless I am mistaken, your appeal to the "way of Christ" sounds like it might be an interpretation of resurrection that would make room for the synoptic gospels' emphasis on what Jesus said and did in his embodiment of the kingdom of God.

Chris: Time for another beer.

George: Finally, I do note that the two of you agree on at least one important point.

David: And what is that?

George: You put it well, David. You note that Paul makes a distinction between the final authority of the Son and that of the Father. For Paul "the grand conclusion of the work of Jesus Christ is the glory of God the Father."²⁰ And you seem to say much the same, Chris: "The climax of the history of salvation is not the resurrection of Christ and his present glory (cf. John) but the impending glory of God."²¹ I'll get the next round.

Notes

1On the topic of the resurrection, see J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Fortress Press, 1980), *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Fortress, 1982), *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Augsburg Fortress, 1990), and *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and Human Predicament* (Eerdmans, 1994); see also David L. Bartlett, *Fact and Faith: Coming to Grips with Miracles in the New Testament* (Judson Press, 1975), *What's Good About This News?: Preaching From the Gospels and Galatians* (Westminster and John Knox, 2003), and *Christology in the New Testament* (Abingdon, 2017).

2 Bartlett, *Christology*, p. 86.

- 3 *Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 7.196.
- 4 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, pp. 163-181.
- 5 Bartlett, *Christology*, pp. 158-9.
- 6 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, pp. 11-16.
- 7 Bartlett, *Fact and Faith*, p. 96.
- 8 See Bartlett, *Fact and Faith*.
- 9 Bartlett, *Christology*, p. 21.
- 10 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, p. 201.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 323-4.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 326.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 356.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 16 Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel*, p. 96.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 20 Bartlett, *Christology*, pp. 89-90.
- 21 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, p. 363.