

G L O S S A

Christ, the Life-giving Spirit

Gordon D. Fee's recent book *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* is acclaimed on its cover as "the most comprehensive treatment available of Paul's understanding of the Holy Spirit" and "a veritable *tour de force*." Throughout the book Fee's attention to the Spirit is commendable, and his treatment is thorough. Fee's discussion of 1 Corinthians 15:45, however, needs further scrutiny. In 1 Corinthians 15:45 Paul states, "So also it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul' [ψυχὴν ζῶσαν]; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit [πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν]." This passage is important particularly for the experience of the believers. After Christ's resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit, and as the Spirit, Christ can now impart not only the judicial efficacy of His death but, much more, the organic elements of His salvation, including His divine, eternal, resurrection life and nature, into His believers. However, Fee argues against taking this verse, especially the clause *the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit*, as an isolated text to make a christological statement, in which Christ and the Spirit could be viewed as interchangeable. Instead, he regards verse 45 as a midrash pesher, "a quotation that is at once citation and interpretation," of Genesis 2:7 (264). He argues from the context of 1 Corinthians 15 (mostly from verses 22 and 44) that the clause *the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit* has purely eschatological significance referring to the future bodily resurrection of the believers (264). In his argument against a Christological interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:45, Fee makes five textual observations in regard to Paul's use of the statement *the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit*, suggesting that Paul was compelled to do so by the language and structure of verses 22 and 44 and the Septuagint's (LXX) rendering of Genesis 2:7.

(1) Paul's modifications of the LXX in the first line—the additions of the adjective "first" and of the name "Adam"—are specifically designed to lead to the second line, where his real concern lies. (2) The two words [soul, ψυχὴ, and spirit, πνεῦμα] that describe Adam and Christ respectively are the cognate nouns for the adjectives ψυχικόν [soulish] and πνευματικόν [spiritual] in v. 44. This in fact is the *only reason* both for the citation and for the language used to describe Christ. This clear linguistic connection implies that the original bearers of the two kinds of bodies mentioned in v. 44 are Adam and Christ.

That is, the two "Adam's" serve as evidence that even as there is a ψυχικόν body (as the first Adam demonstrates: Gen 2:7), so also Christ, the second Adam, by his resurrection is evidence that there must be a πνευματικόν body. (3) Not only so, but Paul's *reason* for saying that Christ became "a life-giving πνεῦμα" is that the LXX had said of Adam that he became "a living ψυχὴ." That is, the *language of the citation* called for the *parallel language about Christ*. (4) Even though the content of the second line is neither present nor inferred in the Genesis text, it nonetheless reflects the language of the prior clause in the LXX, "and he *breathed* into his face the *breath of life* (πνοὴν ζωῆς)"; now in speaking about Christ, Paul makes a play on this language. The one who will "breathe" new life into these mortal bodies—with life-giving πνεῦμα (as in Ezek 37:14) and thus make them immortal—is none other than the Risen Christ. (5) The language "life-giving" repeats the verb used of Christ in the previous Adam-Christ analogy in v. 22, indicating decisively, it would seem, that the interest here, as before, is in Christ's resurrection as the ground of ours ("in Christ all will be made alive"). Thus the argument as a whole, as well as the immediate context, suggests that even though Christ has now assumed his exalted position in a σῶμα πνευματικόν and is thus a "life-giving πνεῦμα," his function in this role will take place at the resurrection of the believers, when he "makes alive" their mortal bodies so that they too assume a σῶμα πνευματικόν like his. (265)

Despite this carefully crafted argument, it is difficult to imagine that Paul said Christ became "a life-giving πνεῦμα" simply because he was forced by the Septuagint's rendering of Genesis 2:7 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 and 44. This suggests that Paul was constrained by the utterance of the Septuagint to write something that would seemingly contradict his other utterances concerning the Trinity.¹ Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul was not bound by the structure of the Septuagint. Indeed, he was quite free when he quoted it.² Even in this verse, as Fee points out, he took the liberty to supply the words *first* and *Adam* to the part of the verse quoted from Genesis 2:7. Fee also acknowledges that Paul altered the language of the citation to say "life-giving Spirit" rather than "living Spirit" as a parallel to "living soul" in the first part of the verse.

While Fee's book wants to moderate verses such as

1 Corinthians 15:45, 2 Corinthians 3:17, and Romans 8:9-11, where Christ and the Spirit are identified with each other, from our understanding of Paul's Christology (cf. footnote 739, 266), it is precisely such verses which help us establish Paul's Christology and contribute to the full picture of it.

The book's concern about blurring the distinctions between Christ and the Spirit presses the distinctions between Christ and the Spirit to the point that they are separate for all practical purposes.³ It ends up with two life-giving Spirits. While Fee concedes that Christ is "a life-giving spirit," but not "*the* life-giving Spirit" (266-267),⁴ he argues that the attribute "life-giving" will apply to Christ, in effect, only when He functions in this capacity at the future bodily resurrection of the believers. Fee does this with a complicated contextual argument which ignores the life-giving function of the Spirit that is referred to in John 6:63 and 2 Corinthians 3:6. When he expounds 2 Corinthians 3:6 and 16-18, Fee acknowledges that the life-giving function is present in this age, stating that the ministry of the new covenant is "characterized by the Spirit, the giver of life" (299) and that "the redemptive work of Christ (v. 14), ...is realized in our lives through the 'inscribing' work of the life-giving Spirit" (320). This suggests that there are two life-giving Spirits, one who gives life in this age, the third of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6), and one in 1 Corinthians 15:45, Christ, who will function in the capacity of a life-giving Spirit in the future bodily resurrection of the believers. However, there is no biblical basis for assigning the function of giving life to the Spirit in this age and to Christ at the time of the resurrection of the believers.

It seems as if the book also wants us to ignore what Paul says about the Spirit of God in the seventeen verses in 1 Corinthians prior to 15:45 which speak of the Spirit,⁵ but we should not be expected to dissociate the life-giving Spirit in 1 Corinthians 15:45 from these other references to the Spirit. The most natural way to take this verse would be to understand that the Spirit is identified here with the risen Christ.

Moltmann, Berkhof, Dunn, and others are not troubled in saying that *the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit* identifies Christ with the Spirit, especially when this identity is primarily understood in terms of the economic Trinity. In terms of their function and our experience, the two cannot be separated, although the hypostatic distinction is eternally preserved. According to Moltmann:

Paul's identification of Christ and the Spirit in I Cor. 15.45 is unique. Christ, the new human being, 'became life-giving spirit'. What Paul means is evidently that the risen Christ lives from, and in, the eternal Spirit, and that

the divine Spirit of life acts in and through him. Through this reciprocal perichoresis of mutual indwelling Christ becomes the 'life-giving Spirit' and the Spirit becomes 'the Spirit of Jesus Christ'. (67)

Berkhof, quoting Käsemann, states, "The Spirit is the earthly presence of the exalted Lord....In the Spirit the Resurrected One is manifested in his resurrection-power" (26-27). Dunn also comments on the relationship of Christ and the Spirit:

In Paul's thought the category 'Spirit (of God)' and the category '(exalted) Christ' overlap. Each defines and limits the other—the Spirit defined by Christ and 'limited' to that which accords with the character of the earthly Jesus and exalted Lord, Christ experienced as Spirit and 'limited' to Spirit in his relationship with men. But neither has wholly subsumed the other under it as a subordinate category, neither has wholly absorbed the other so as to leave no remainder—so that all we have to deal with now is the Christ-Spirit....In Paul's thought the exalted Christ assumes a uniquely intermediate status: before God he appears as firstborn Son, firstborn of a new family of resurrected humanity, first instalment of a new relationship between God and man; before man he appears as life-giving Spirit, not just the first instalment of that new relationship, but as the one who makes that relationship possible for others—not just 'living spirit', but 'life-giving Spirit'. (147)

Another argument for Christ being the Spirit is related to His human life on this earth. His human life from His incarnation to His resurrection was characterized as a life fully involved with the Spirit. He did everything by, with, from, and according to the Spirit. If the unique mark of His human life was the Spirit, how is it that after His resurrection the Spirit would come in such a way that He would not be intimately involved with the exalted Christ? The Spirit bears titles such as the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), and the Spirit of God's Son (Gal. 4:6). So also Paul wrote, "The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit."

The book's connection between the breathing of the breath of life in Genesis 2:7a and Christ's life-giving at the time of our bodily resurrection, rather than shedding any true light on 1 Corinthians 15:45, sheds more light on its view of resurrection. It appears from the presentation of 1 Corinthians 15 that resurrection is understood simply as an event in the future. No doubt, in this chapter Paul is arguing for the bodily resurrection of the believers; however, Paul's argument is based on what Christ now is. Postponing Christ's role as a life-giving Spirit to the end of the age, however, is not in accordance with the biblical revelation.

Even in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul presents resurrection as more than just an event in the future, although this certainly was a principal concern of the Corinthian believers. Although Fee is correct in stating that 1 Corinthians 15:22 refers to a future event that will transpire when Christ comes, it also refers to a general principle. In this chapter Paul speaks of his own experience of resurrection. Part of his argument for the future bodily resurrection of the believers is that he is experiencing resurrection life daily. In verse 31 he says, "I die daily" (cf. Rom. 8:36; 2 Cor. 6:9). If there were no resurrection, why would he and how could he endure the suffering and persecution he was undergoing? Paul was enjoying the grace of God to labor more abundantly. This grace is equivalent to the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit (cf. Paul's statement "not I but the grace of God" in 1 Corinthians 15:10 with his parallel statement in Galatians 2:20, "no longer I who live, but it is Christ"). He also proclaims that the resurrection of Christ and our faith are vain (Gk. *kenos* empty in its content) without the reality of the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:14). Our faith is also futile (Gk. *mataios* vain, without purpose) without the ability of the resurrection life to deliver us from the power of sin (v. 17; cf. Rom. 8:2).

Paul also strengthens the view of resurrection as a process by drawing an analogy between the resurrection and the sowing of a seed (vv. 35-38). Surely the growth and development of a plant involve a process. The outer shell of the seed sown into the ground decays, and the life confined within it sprouts and eventually blossoms. Our body of corruption is like the shell of the seed that is sown into death. As we are undergoing the process of dying, both physically and through the subjective working of the death of Christ (as the Spirit), by putting to death our members and the practices of the body (Col. 3:5; Rom. 8:13), by crucifying our flesh (Gal. 5:24), and by always bearing about in our body the putting to death of Jesus that the life of Jesus might be manifested in our mortal bodies (2 Cor. 4:10-12), the resurrection life enlivens us even to the extent of giving life to our mortal bodies (Rom. 8:11). The bodily resurrection is just the final crowning experience in the process of our resurrection.

Even if these experiences are acknowledged as experiences of resurrection life and even of the Spirit who gives life (2 Cor. 3:6; John 6:63), it is not clear from the book that these are considered to be experiences of Christ as the life-giving Spirit. It seems that it would be safer to take the natural meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:45 and understand that in the context of the experience of the believers, the last Adam, Christ, *is* the life-giving Spirit. If not, one is forced to write his own "midrash peshet" for this verse and for other problematic verses in the New Testament. By taking the simple meaning, we avoid a position of having merely a Christ who is life-giving in name only, and of

delegating His life-giving function to a representative (i.e., the Holy Spirit) until He returns to carry out the consummate act of life-giving—the resurrection of our bodies. If we take the simple meaning, we surely do have an objective resurrection in the future, but we also have a practical application and experience for today.

by Roger Good

Notes

¹In "Christology and Pneumatology in Romans 8:9-11—and Elsewhere: Some Reflections on Paul as a Trinitarian," Fee references a number of trinitarian passages written by Paul, and argues that Paul held to a trinitarian view of God where the distinctions between the "persons" of the Trinity are preserved.

²E.g., 2 Corinthians 8:15 (cf. Exo. 16:18) where he changes both the word order and vocabulary, or Romans 10:7 where "Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us" in Deuteronomy 30:13 becomes "Who will descend into the abyss."

³In "Christology and Pneumatology in Romans 8:9-11," Fee states that he prefers to understand the expression "'Christ in me/us/you' (e.g., in 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 3:16; and Colossians 1:29) as 'Christ by his Spirit dwells in me/us/you'" (326).

⁴See the October 1996 issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, pp. 47-48, which discusses the significance of the article with the phrase *life-giving Spirit* and its theological implications.

⁵Such as 2:10, 14; and in chapter twelve.

Works Cited

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