

## The Resurrection, the *Parousia*, and the Millennium

1 Cor 15:20-57

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A brief summary of Appendix 7 in the book entitled,  
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### Introduction

First Corinthians 15 has been described as “the *locus classicus* in the writings of Paul . . . of the concluding events of this eon, that is, of present history.”<sup>1</sup> Verses 20-28 state the heart of his argument that believers are united with Christ and will be bodily raised at his coming. Verses 29-34 continue the argument by emphasizing that our fullness will come in the future but is not realized in the present (in contrast with the “over-realized eschatology” of those resurrection-deniers in Corinth who were preoccupied with spiritual gifts and the present). He then concludes his argument in vv. 35-57 by discussing how the resurrection will occur and why transformation is necessary to enter into the fullness of the kingdom. Verse 58 ends the chapter with a word of encouragement for believers to persevere in faithfulness, knowing that their work is not in vain.

One issue this passage raises is whether or not it is consistent with the existence of a temporary, post-*parousia*, “millennial kingdom.” If such a millennium (i.e., the “thousand years” of Rev 20:1-7) is to be found in 1 Corinthians 15, it is seen as occurring between vv. 23-24. D. Edmund Hiebert says, “the crux of the millennial issue” is “the indefinite phrase, *eita to telos* [‘then (comes) the end’], which begins verse 24.”<sup>2</sup> Necessary to premillennial exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15 are the following: (1) In vv. 23-24 *epeita* (“after that”) and *eita to telos* (“then the end”) form a temporal sequence following the *parousia* into which fits the millennium.<sup>3</sup> (2) In vv. 23-

<sup>1</sup> Boers, “Apocalyptic Eschatology,” 52.

<sup>2</sup> Hiebert, “Evidence,” 229-30.

<sup>3</sup> Wallis, “The Problem,” 230-33; Culver, “A Neglected Millennial Passage,” 148-49.

24 the phrase “*but each in his own order*” refers to three, not two, *tagma* (“order, rank, class”) of persons to be resurrected: (A) Christ; (B) believers; and (C) “the end” (i.e., unbelievers; or all those who live during the “millennium,” including unbelievers).<sup>4</sup> In fact, however, the grammar and context of vv. 23-24, and the grammar, context, and theology of vv. 20-28 and 1 Corinthians 15 as a whole do not support a premillennial interpretation of the passage. Instead, they are consistent with the amillennial position.

## Analysis of the Passage

### *Epeita* (“after that”) and *eita to telos* (“then the end”)

*Epeita* (“after that,” v. 23) and *eita* (“then,” v. 24) often denote temporal sequencing. On the other hand, a sequence denoted either by *epeita* or *eita* “is often without a chronological reference at all. And when a lapse of time is supposed it can be of the shortest possible duration, as is the case with the ‘span’ between the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the transformation of the living faithful at the *parousia* as portrayed in I Thess. 4:17, where *epeita* is used to link these two events.”<sup>5</sup> Ralph Smith adds, “There is no example in the New Testament of *eita* being used of a long interval.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul uses the same words, *epeita* and *eita*, to show the temporal sequencing of Christ’s post-resurrection appearances in 1 Cor 15:5-7. Significantly, in that passage: (1) those adverbs are used to describe a series of related events connected closely in time (unlike a third supposed *tagma* at “the end” of a millennium); and (2) syntactically, in 1 Cor 15:5-7 *eita* and *epeita* are used to show structural contrast, with *eita* being the adverb which shows a close linkage of events and *epeita* showing events lacking a close linkage (exactly opposite of how premillennialists use the terms in their construal of 1 Cor 15:23-24). Strimple correctly concludes that since “either of these ‘adverbs of sequence’ can also be used in the sense of *immediate* sequence . . . [n]ot the adverb itself . . . but only the context can determine for us the length of the interval marked by the adverb.”<sup>7</sup>

Contextual clues indicate that *eita to telos* in 1 Cor 15:24 cannot imply the existence of a millennial period. Christ’s own words in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24) equate “the end” (*to telos*) with the *parousia* (Matt 24:14—*tote heksei to telos*, “then comes the end”). Within the general context of 1 Corinthians itself, the “eschatological emphasis of 1:7, 8 is the underlying

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<sup>4</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 273; Ladd, *The Gospel*, 43-44; Zaspel, “The Kingdom,” 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Hill, “Paul’s Understanding,” 308; see also BDAG, “*eita*,” 295.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, “A Neglected,” n.p., citing Mark 4:17, 28; 8:25; Luke 8:12; John 13:5; 19:27; 20:27; 1 Cor 15:5, 7, 24; 1 Tim 2:13; 3:10; Heb 12:9; James 1:15.

<sup>7</sup> Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 109-10.

motif of the entire letter.”<sup>8</sup> That passage (1 Cor 1:7-8) “brings together the revelation (*apokalypsis*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, the end [*to telos*], and the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, in this very epistle:

Paul clearly understands the “end” to be coterminous with the second coming: “as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end (*telos*), guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7-8, italics added). The “day of the Lord” is clearly the day of the second coming, as may be seen from 1 Thessalonians 5:2, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” The point is that the “end” does not come, say, a thousand years after the second coming; for Paul, the second coming is the end.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore unreasonable to say that Paul meant something entirely different by *to telos* (“the end”) when he used that same term just a few chapters later in 1 Cor 15:24.

The same thing is seen in the specific context of 1 Cor 15:23-24. The grammar of those verses reinforces the thrust of Paul’s emphasis on the *parousia* as “the end.” R. C. H. Lenski discusses this:

“Then,” *epeita* [v. 23], may mean immediately after or at any time after. It is the final phrase “at his Parousia” which informs us about the interval that will occur in this case. Paul adds no corresponding phrase or corresponding expression when he writes “Then the end.” What right have we to insert or to assume such a phrase: “Then the end—after a thousand years”; or: “Then the end—after an indefinitely long interval”? . . . In v. 23 “then” or “thereupon,” *epeita* = “at his Parousia.”

### ***Tagmata and to telos***

Essential to the premillennial position is the necessity to find three *tagmata* (“orders, ranks, classes”), or stages of resurrection, in vv. 23-24: (1) Christ, the first fruits; (2) those who are Christ’s at his coming; and (3) “the end” (which necessarily includes the rest of humanity, the unbelievers).<sup>11</sup> However, in v. 24 *to telos* cannot support the concept of a third resurrection *tagma*.

Grammatically, according to v. 23, there are only two *tagmata*, not three. Lenski makes this clear: “The fact remains that ‘as first fruits’ is a predicate noun that is attached to ‘Christ’: ‘as first fruits Christ,’ and it is thus different

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<sup>8</sup> Arrington, *Paul's Aeon Theology*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 110.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, *Christ's Victorious Kingdom*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> See Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 273; Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 43-44; Zaspel, “The Resurrection,” 7-8.

from the two adverbs that follow. Again, the fact is that ‘first fruits’ has and can have only one correlative, namely the general harvest which consists of ‘those that are Christ’s.’ Thus ‘Christ’ and ‘those of Christ’ constitute a complete whole.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, v. 23 itself describes and defines the “orders” (*tagmata*) of the resurrection: “*Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming.*” *To telos* (“the end”) could not be a *tagma* because *to telos* is a temporal event signifying the completion of Christ’s reign from heaven, when he finally defeats all enemies and “hands over the kingdom to the God and Father”; it is not a category, or “rank,” or “order” of groups being resurrected at all.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, if *eita to telos* (“then the end”) is read as a continuation of the series of resurrection *tagmata* (“orders”), then, of necessity, *to telos* (“the end”) would have to mean “the rest,” i.e., all the rest of the dead.<sup>14</sup> However, to interpret *to telos* as referring to the resurrection of unbelievers would be a “revisionist reading,” since “no known Greek usage allows ‘the end’ (*to telos*) to be construed as the rest (of those to be raised).”<sup>15</sup> Grammatically, therefore, *to telos* does not bear the interpretation that it must have in order to be consistent with the premillennialist view of this passage.

*To telos* means “the end.” Significantly, in 1 Cor 1:8 Paul correlates *telos* (*eōs telous* [“until the end”]) with the *parousia*.<sup>16</sup> Since Paul used the word *telos* earlier in this very epistle to signify the *parousia*, it would be inconsistent to take that same term as meaning something considerably different in 1 Cor 15:24. In fact, the context of its use in 1 Cor 15:24 indicates that *to telos* is the end of Christ’s reign from heaven—the end of “this age” when all opposition and enemies are defeated. *To telos* is “a technical phrase denoting the final consummation.”<sup>17</sup> Or, as Holleman puts it, *to telos* is “the absolute end of human history, the very last day on which the old aeon will be finished completely and the new aeon will start.”<sup>18</sup> The end of “this age” and the beginning of the “age to come” occurs at the *parousia*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation*, 671; see also Héring, *First Epistle of St. Paul*, 165-66; Kistemaker, *Exposition*, 551.

<sup>13</sup> See Lambrecht, “Paul’s Christological Use,” 505, 509n.16; Héring, *First Epistle of St. Paul*, 165-66; Hill, “Paul’s Understanding,” 309; Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 753-54; Lenski, *The Interpretation*, 672-74; Schmithals, “The Pre-Pauline Tradition,” 362.

<sup>14</sup> Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 270.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, *First Corinthians*, 552; see also Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 754n.39 (“not only is there no evidence for such a meaning for this word . . . but Paul is perfectly capable of saying *hoi loipoi* (‘the rest,’ ‘the others’) when that is what he intends”).

<sup>16</sup> See BDAG, “*telos*,” 998 (“it means to the end=until the *parousia*”).

<sup>17</sup> Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 295.

<sup>18</sup> Holleman, *Resurrection and Parousia*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> See main text, chapter 4—Interpreting Biblical Eschatology in Light of its Overall Structure.

## Other Considerations Rule Out a Premillennial Interpretation of the Passage

### *Eita, tote, and the abolition of death*

First Cor 15:23-26 states that believers shall be made alive at Christ's *parousia* (v. 23). Verse 24 begins *eita to telos* ("then the end")—at that time he will "deliver up the kingdom to God the Father" (v. 24), and "*then the son himself*" (*tote kai autos ho huios*) will be subjected to the Father (v. 28). That will occur when Christ "*abolishes death*" (vv. 25-26). The question is: When is death abolished—at Christ's *parousia* or 1000 years thereafter, following the "millennium"?

Paul answers the question of when Christ abolishes death in the context of this very passage when he describes the consummation in vv. 50-57. He begins in v. 50 by saying that "*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.*" He goes on to state when the perishable will "*put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality*" (v. 53; cf. v. 51). That occurs at "*the last trumpet*" when "*the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed*" (v. 52). Verse 54 goes on to say that, "*when this mortal will have put on immortality, then [tote] will come about the saying that is written, 'death is swallowed up in victory.'*" Lincoln points out, "The clear temporal reference [to the events of v. 54] is to the *parousia* (cf. verse 52)."<sup>20</sup> Thus, "*the end*" (v. 24) is coterminous with the abolition of death (v. 26); both occur at Christ's "coming" (i.e., the *parousia*, v. 23).

The argument throughout 1 Corinthians 15 is focused on the resurrection of the dead and the abolition of death which occur at Christ's *parousia*. The premillennial conception of an intermediate millennial kingdom, the resurrection of third *tagma* 1000 years after the *parousia*, and *then* the abolition of death would turn the theme and climax of Paul's argument into a penultimate anti-climax.<sup>21</sup> According to premillennialism, there would be two victories over death—one at the resurrection of Christ's people at the *parousia*, and another at the end of the millennium.<sup>22</sup> That duplication of events is not hinted at in the text, which clearly indicates a single vanquishing of death. Thus, the premillennial view of this passage is contrary to Paul's line of thought and reason for writing this chapter.

### Christ's "Reign" Versus the "Millennium"

Christ's "reign" began with his resurrection and ascension; he is now at the

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<sup>20</sup> Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> See Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia*, 129; Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> See Strimple, "Amillennialism," 111.

right hand of God reigning in power.<sup>23</sup> This is seen by Paul's quoting or alluding to Ps 110:1 ("*The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'*") in v. 25 and Ps 8:6 ("*You made him ruler over the works of your hands and placed all things under his feet*") in v. 27. Christ has been exalted and is ruling from heaven now in the "already" phase of his kingdom. According to Ps 110:1, Christ will continue to rule from heaven until all foes are subdued. It is the *parousia* itself which manifests the completion of Christ's final victory (i.e., ushers in the consummation—the "not yet," eternal phase of the kingdom).

The premillennial view is completely contradictory to Ps 110:1 as referred to in 1 Cor 15:25. According to Ps 110:1, Christ sits at the Father's right hand in heaven "until" all enemies have been "*put under his feet*" (i.e., made his footstool). Premillennialism would have Christ leaving heaven 1000 years *before* he has put "*all enemies under his feet.*" It would then have Christ reign on earth for 1000 years but then face a massive Satanic uprising against Christ and his people at the end of the thousand years. Christ's enemies, including death, would only be overcome (i.e., "*put under his feet*") at the end of the "millennium."

The quotation of Ps 8:6 ("*He has put all things in subjection under His feet*") in 1 Cor 15:27 similarly shows that Christ's "reign" is a present phenomenon. The verb "has put" (*hupotasso*) in that sentence is in the past (aorist) tense (*hupetaksen*). Waldron comments, "The unavoidable impression with which one is left is that Paul felt that the beginning of Christ's reign of conquest was a matter of past history."<sup>24</sup> The only other occasion in the NT in which that sentence from Ps 8:6 is quoted in the third person (as in 1 Cor 15:27) as applying to Christ—Eph 1:22—likewise clearly speaks of Christ's reign as having begun at his resurrection.

With respect to 1 Cor 15:26 ("*the last enemy that will be abolished is death*"), B. B. Warfield states, "The essence of Paul's representation is not that Christ is striving against evil, but progressively (*eschatos* ["last"], verse 26) overcoming evil, throughout this period."<sup>25</sup> Thus, in this very epistle Paul speaks of "*the rulers of this age, who are passing away*" (1 Cor 2:6).<sup>26</sup> Christ's victory over the powers was achieved at the cross. Paul confirms

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<sup>23</sup> See Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:22-36; 7:55-56; Rom 1:4; 8:34; Eph 1:20-22; Phil 2:9-10; 3:20-21; Col 1:13; 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22; Rev 1:5.

<sup>24</sup> Waldron, "The Eschatological Kingdom," sec. II.B.2; see also Borchert, "The Resurrection," 408 ("The use of the past tense [v. 27] probably indicates that Paul considers that the reign of Christ has already begun in the resurrection/exaltation event").

<sup>25</sup> Warfield, *Biblical and Theological*, 485.

<sup>26</sup> The connection of 1 Cor 2:6 and 1 Cor 15:24, 26 is clear. In 2:6 "rulers" is *archontōn*, the genitive plural masculine of *archōn*; in 15:24, when he speaks of Christ's having abolished all "rule," Paul uses the related, feminine form *archēn*. In 2:6 "passing away" is a participle form of the verb *katargeō*; in 15:24 and 15:26 for "abolished" Paul uses the aorist active subjunctive and present passive indicative forms of that same Greek verb.

this in 1 Cor 2:8 which says that if the rulers of this age had understood the significance of the cross, *“they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”* Through his death, resurrection, and ascension, Christ set in motion a process which will end in the total defeat of all hostile powers, including death.

Indeed, the characteristics of the reign of Christ are inconsistent with the “millennium” as conceived by premillennialists. The “millennium” is supposed to be a 1000 year period of time before the abolition of death but in which Christ possesses absolute control, all opposition to him is eliminated, and there is worldwide peace and harmony.<sup>27</sup> However, the language Paul uses in 1 Cor 15:24-26 “is wholly at variance with that of the temporary Messianic Kingdom of Apocalyptic and the Millennium of the Apocalypse; for the Messianic reign is here one of unintermitting strife.”<sup>28</sup>

Some premillennialists contend that Christ’s current reign is “seen only by the eye of faith [but is] unseen and unrecognized by the world”; therefore, an earthly “reign of power” during the millennium is necessary to manifest in history the lordship that is Christ’s already.<sup>29</sup> That contention is not true. Christ’s reign is visible in the world through *the church*. Eph 3:9-10 says that the preaching of the gospel brings to light *“what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.”* Further, Christ even now is appearing to thousands of people, particularly in areas closed to overt Christian witness, through visions, dreams, miraculous signs, and answers to prayer.<sup>30</sup> He is saving millions of people *“from every tribe and tongue and people and nation”* (Rev 5:9); their love and changed lifestyles are visible manifestations of Christ’s power and the presence of his kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

First Cor 15:20-57, does not support premillennialism but rather is consistent with amillennial eschatology. It is noteworthy that for premillennialists, “the value of this text can ever only lie in what it leaves unsaid, certainly not in what it does say.”<sup>32</sup> Nothing in the entire passage actually mentions Christ’s reigning on the earth, a millennial kingdom, a revolt at the end of 1000 years,

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<sup>27</sup> See Erickson, *A Basic Guide*, 101-02; Osborne, *Revelation*, 703.

<sup>28</sup> Charles, *Critical and Exegetical*, 448.

<sup>29</sup> Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," 32; Ladd, "The Revelation," 14.

<sup>30</sup> See Woodberry, Shubin, and Marks, "Why Muslims Follow," 80-85; Woodberry and Shubin, "Muslims tell," n.p.; see also Greeson, *The Camel*, 50, 79-91

<sup>31</sup> See Houssney, *Engaging Islam*, 186-87; Woodberry and Shubin, 2001: "Muslims tell," n.p.; see also Kik, *Eschatology*, 209-28.

<sup>32</sup> Hill, "Paul's Understanding," 308n.31.

a third resurrection *tagma* involving unbelievers, or any aspect of the so-called “millennium.” Those concepts all have to be read into the text, not gleaned from it.<sup>33</sup>

Contrary to such premillennial eisegesis, both the grammar and the context of the passage explicitly teach what is taught elsewhere by Paul and the other NT writers, namely, Christ is reigning from heaven now, and this phase of his reign is marked by conflict. However, there is coming a day, the *parousia*, when he will return to earth. In connection with that event (not 1000 years thereafter) the dead shall be resurrected, conflict will be ended, the new heavens and new earth which will last forever will be ushered in, and death will be swallowed up in victory.

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<sup>33</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline*, 557-58.



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