

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 15

The Case for a Three-Stage Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

The context of 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 is Paul’s lengthy discussion in defense of future bodily resurrection and the nature of the resurrection body (see discussion on resurrection in chapter 3 of *The Fathers on the Future* as well as Go Deeper Excursus 3). In the opening verses, Paul rehearses the traditional testimony regarding the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection as proof that Jesus himself had been raised bodily (1 Cor 15:1–11). Because Christ was consistently proclaimed from the beginning as having been raised bodily from the dead, Paul marveled that certain people among the Corinthians—ἐν ὑμῖν τινες suggests a noticeable minority—claimed that there was no such thing as bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:12). If bodily resurrection were impossible, then Christ himself had not been raised, which meant the apostolic testimony was also false and the foundation of their salvation was vacuous (15:13–17). Not only this, but those who had died “in Christ”—that is, deceased Christians—were utterly lost with no hope of salvation from sin (cf. 15:17) and no hope of future resurrection (15:18). The only benefit anybody would receive from following Christ would be whatever tangible or intangible gains in this present life, in which case Christians are to be pitied above all people (15:19).

On the heels of this sobering reckoning, Paul transitions to his fundamental teaching on resurrection. He begins by stipulating as a foundational fact of the Christian faith that “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20). He then draws a contrast between Adam and Christ in the form of problem and solution: just as death came through a human being (“for as all die in Adam”), the resurrection of the dead also comes through a human (“so all will be made alive in Christ”) (15:21–22). There is a real question about the scope of resurrection intended in verse 22 with the phrase “so all will be made alive in Christ (ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ πάντες ζωοποιηθήσονται).” To whom does the πάντες refer? Is it limited to those “in Christ”—that is, those in union with him in a soteriological sense (e.g., Rom 8:1; 2 Cor 5:17)?¹ Perhaps this

¹Gordon Fee forcefully argues “there can be *no* question that his concern is with the resurrection of *believers*,” asserting that nothing of the general resurrection of both righteous and wicked is in view at all in this passage, that the

would be more certain had Paul used the simple ἐν Χριστῷ instead of ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ. In other instances when Paul includes the article—ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ—it may have the force of a dative of agency.² This would parallel the previous phrase, in which the emphasis is the one through whom (διά) something is accomplished, not the one in union with whom it occurs (δι’ ἀνθρώπου θάνατος, καὶ δι’ ἀνθρώπου ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν).³

In this case, we would understand verse 22 as “all will be made alive by the Christ.”⁴ This is Paul’s affirmation of the common Jewish and Christian expectation of a general resurrection of

problems with Paul asserting a general resurrection are “several and insuperable,” and that such a notion is really just the product of modern dispensationalism (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014], 749–50n19).

² Moulton and Turner note that the instrumental ἐν “is more used than plain dat. in Biblical Greek” (James Hope Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol 3, *Syntax* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963], 240). The instrumental use with ἐν + article + noun is fairly well-attested (see, e.g., Matt 9:34; 12:24; Mark 12:36; Luke 2:27; 4:1; Rom 1:9; 3:7; 3:25; 1 Cor 12:9). In particular, ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ probably falls in this category. In 2 Cor 2:14, God leads the believers in triumphal procession by means of Christ (ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ). In Eph 1:9, God set forth his good plan by means of Christ (ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ). In Eph 1:20, God worked his great might by means of Christ (ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ) when he raised him from the dead. And in Eph 3:11, God realized his eternal purpose by means of Christ (ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ). On dative of agency, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, Benjamin L Merkle, and Robert L. Plummer, *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2023), 134–35.

³ Godet suggests that whereas the phrase δι’ ἀνθρώπου θάνατος, καὶ δι’ ἀνθρώπου ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν expresses a relationship of causality, Paul’s shift to ἐν does not intend causality but the intimacy of “moral solidarity,” yet he still argues that πάντες has the same force in both cases, arguing that even the unsaved dead are raised ἐν Χριστῷ in a sense (Frédéric Louis Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol 2, trans. A Cusin, [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1893], 352–53). Vos rightly rejects this interpretation of Godet (Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], 238), but Vos himself, not considering a difference between ἐν Χριστῷ and ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, operates under a false choice—the ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ (=ἐν Χριστῷ) must be taken in its full soteriological sense, and thus the passage must refer strictly to the resurrection of the righteous *or* it must result in universalism. (Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 238; cf. Andreas Lindemann, *Der Erste Korintherbrief*, HNT, vol. 9/1 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000], 344). The third choice, that ἐν Χριστῷ may not actually be the same as ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ, solves the exegetical and theological conundrum. On the perennial “false choice” appearing in the commentaries, see Wilber B. Wallis, “The Problem of an Intermediate Kingdom in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28,” *JETS* 18.4 (1975): 234. Though Schenk considers the possibility that ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ means “everyone will rise because of Christ, some to everlasting life and others to everlasting judgment,” he opts for the view that it refers to those who are “in Christ” (Kenneth Schenck, *1 & 2 Corinthians: A Commentary for Bible Students* [Indianapolis: Wesleyan, 2006], 217). In short, I view verses 15:21 and 15:22 to be parallel; because the genitives of 15:21 express a causal relationship, so also the datives in 15:22 do the same.

⁴ Lietzmann suggests, “Sieht Paulus bei diesem ‘Rest’ von der engeren (mystischen) Beziehung des ἐν Χριστῷ ab und meint eine durch Christi Befehl bewirkte Auferstehung der Nichtchristen zum Gericht?” (Lietzmann, *Korinther I/II*, 80). Most commentators, though, do not consider the possibility of an admittedly rare dative of agency here and point to parallels that use ἐν Χριστῷ to support his restrictive reading of the text (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 750–51; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], 705–7, 775; Charles E. Hill, “Paul’s Understanding of Christ’s Kingdom in 1 Corinthians 15:20–28,” *NovT* [1988]: 306; Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985], 206; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 1224–28). They then rest many of their subsequent arguments against a span of time between the second and third stage of resurrection upon this conclusion, which I suggest was hastily drawn. In any case, his conclusions do not warrant the definitiveness with which he proceeds in his argument. Garland follows Fee in this, assuming Paul is arguing for a “union with Adam” and “union with Christ” contrast rather than a “by means of Adam” and “by means of Christ” contrast. Thiselton, too, points to the Adam-Christ contrast in Rom 5:12–21 as a parallel to Paul’s “in Adam” and “in Christ” imagery in 1 Cor 15.

all—the righteous and the wicked (Dan 12:2; Matt 25:46). And it is consistent with the fact that both the righteous and wicked will be raised to life by Christ’s command (John 5:28–29). In fact, Paul himself is recorded as testifying, “I have a hope in God—a hope that they themselves also accept—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous” (Acts 24:15).⁵ It is worth noting that much modern exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 tends to proceed on the basis of limiting this passage to an account of the resurrection of the righteous based on a soteriological understanding of ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ. This is used to narrow the sense of the ἕκαστος and τάγμα in 5:23, pushing a resurrection of the wicked outside of the scope of Paul’s treatment.⁶

Paul is most likely affirming the universal resurrection—the righteous and the wicked—by Christ (not “in Christ”) in 1 Corinthians 15:22. At this point, Paul enters into a detailed explanation concerning the order of the resurrection of “all” (πάντες) the dead. That Paul is concerned with an order of events is evident in the next verse. All will be made alive by means of Christ, “but each in its own order (ἕκαστος δὲ ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι).” The term τάγμα here can refer either to “a clearly defined group” (as in a military rank) or to “a stage in a sequence.”⁷ Either meaning makes sense

⁵ This final point needs to be emphasized and its implications drawn out, to wit, the person who wrote 1 Cor 15:20–28 and discussed the order classes of resurrection by means of Christ firmly held to the resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous (Acts 24:15). By “the End” of Christ’s victorious, enemy-crushing reign (1 Cor 15:24–25)—however this is conceived—death itself will be deemed defeated (1 Cor 15:26). Therefore, in the reckoning of Paul, sometime between the parousia and the defeat of death, the resurrection of the unrighteous must take place. If this occurs at the time of parousia precisely at the same moment as the resurrection of the righteous, why does Paul restrict the category of those who are raised to “those who belong to Christ” (15:23)? Perhaps he simply does not want to discuss the resurrection of the wicked unto eternal condemnation in a hopeful context. But is it reasonable to assume that Paul’s firm belief—indeed “hope” (Acts 24:15)—of the resurrection of the wicked makes absolutely no appearance in a passage intended to clarify the order of resurrection? Would it not be more reasonable, given Paul’s belief in double resurrection as the means by which death itself is defeated, to expect Paul to accommodate the resurrection of the wicked in this passage? And if Paul were intending to focus attention on the glorious resurrection of the righteous, one would expect that the second resurrection of the wicked would appear in a subdued background, treated indirectly, most likely leaning on his readers’ previous understanding of the subject to bring it to the text. If these things are reasonable and preferable to an inexplicable silence on the matter, then Paul’s cryptic and ambiguous reference to “the End” at which time death itself is ultimately defeated suits his purposes. It accommodates the resurrection of the wicked unto condemnation without highlighting it. Hans-Alwin Wilcke, *Das Problem eines messianischen Zwischenreichs bei Paulus*, ATANT, vol. 51 (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1967), 150. Wilcke’s insistence that Paul has no room for the resurrection of the wicked in 1 Cor 15:20–28 or anywhere in his writings, ends up pitting Paul the author against Paul the speaker in Acts, a solution I will not entertain.

⁶ So, Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 241–243; For a survey of the history of interpretation of this text and a list of most modern exegetes who take this the “all” as restricted to those who are soteriologically “in Christ,” see Wilcke, *Das Problem*, 71–72. The situation has not changed significantly since Wilcke, and Kreitzer notes, “Since its publication in 1967, Wilcke’s monograph has remained the dominant authority for those who reject the idea of a messianic ‘Zwischenreich’ as derived from 1 Cor. 15.20–28. This is despite the fact that, to a certain degree, the monograph falls into the trap of circular argumentation in its rejection of the doctrine. Quite clearly, the reason why τὸ τέλος is equated with the parousia is because such an interpretation is seen to be consistent with Wilcke’s ideas about the meaning of the πάντες phrases in v. 22” (Kreitzer, *Jesus and God*, 144).

⁷ BDAG, 987–988. BDAG places this text in the former category, noting, “Acc. to 1 Cor 15:23f the gift of life is given to various ones in turn . . . , and at various times. One view is that in this connection Paul distinguishes three groups: Christ, who already possesses life, the Christians, who will receive it at his second coming, and the rest of humanity . . . , who will receive it when death, as the last of God’s enemies, is destroyed.” However, Jesus is called the “first fruits,” indicating that he is categorically a member of the group of those who belong to him at his coming. So,

in the context, but the presence of several indicators of chronology and sequence make the latter more likely: all the dead will be made alive, but each in their own turn.⁸

Paul then mentions the first stage in the resurrection of “all” the dead: “Christ the first fruits” (1 Cor 15:23). In Paul’s perspective, this has already occurred (15:20). Jesus is the “first to rise from the dead” (Acts 26:23) and the “firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5). Christ’s unique, individual resurrection from the dead in a glorified resurrection body begins the multiphase process of universal resurrection of all the dead. In a very real sense, the resurrection of the dead has already begun, and regardless of one’s eschatology, every view of resurrection has *at least* two distinct phases. No view of resurrection has a single, universal resurrection of all the righteous and all the wicked at once, because Christ—a member of the category of the righteous—has already been raised.

Paul continues his explanation of the order of the different groups of “all” who will be raised with two phrases separated by two adverbs—ἔπειτα...εἶτα followed by two clauses conjoined with two adverbial temporal conjunctions: ὅταν...ὅταν. The logical and chronological relationship between these phrases is crucial to determining whether Paul is setting forth a two-stage or three-stage resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. That the relationship is, in fact, chronological is established not simply by the use of the term τάγμα (which can also mean “group” or “rank”), but also by the use of ἔπειτα...εἶτα, which means “to being next in order of time, *then, next*.”⁹ In every use of the terms ἔπειτα or εἶτα in the New Testament in contexts indicating order, they introduce completely distinct events. In no case do they indicate concurrent events affecting the same group of people.¹⁰ When two or more are used in a series (ἔπειτα/εἶτα...ἔπειτα/εἶτα), the distinction of stages is obvious. In Mark 4:28, Jesus says, “The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then (εἶτα) the head, then (εἶτα) the full grain in the head.” In Paul’s recounting of the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection just eighteen verses earlier, he distinguishes separate encounters with the resurrected Jesus with εἶτα...ἔπειτα...ἔπειτα...εἶτα: “He appeared to Cephas, then (εἶτα) to the twelve. Then (ἔπειτα) he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then (ἔπειτα) he appeared to James, then (εἶτα) to all the apostles” (1 Cor 15:5–7). Granted, the space of time between events introduced by εἶτα/ἔπειτα is not clear;

ἕκαστος δὲ ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι is better understood as primarily indicating a distinction in the chronological order of resurrection, not merely to a distinction in the categorical grouping of resurrections.

⁸ Weiss notes, “Er kommt auch in ganz abgeschächtem Sinne von ‘Gruppe, Partei, Richtung’ vor, so daß es vielleicht richtiger ist...einen ganz neutralen Ausdruck zu wählen: »jeder an seiner Stelle«, an dem Platz, an den er gehört, zumal da Christus als ἀπαρχή ein τάγμα für sich bildet.... Bei der Auferstehung sind die τάγματα zeitlich, nicht örtlich getrennt” (Johannes Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910], 357)

⁹ BDAG, 295, 361. Louw and Nida note, “εἶτα; ἔπειτα; μετέπειτα: a point of time following another point—‘then, afterwards, later’” (L&N, 634).

¹⁰ Mark 4:17; 8:25; Luke 8:12; 16:7; John 11:7; 19:27; 20:27; 1 Cor 15:46; Gal 1:18, 21; 2:1; 1 Tim 2:13; 3:10; Heb 7:27; Jas 1:15; 4:14. Cf the LXX Prov 6:11; 7:13; Job 5:24; 11:6; 13:22; 14:15; 16:5; 21:3; 22:21; 22:25; 23:6; 22:27; Wis. Sol. 14:16, 22; 17:16; 2 Macc 4:22; 15:13; 3 Macc 6:30; 1 En 89.47. It should be noted that some of these not only indicate a chronologically consecutive event but also one that logically results from the preceding condition.

sometimes it can involve a lengthy period of time, as in Galatians 1:18 (“Then after three years”), or it can involve a very brief period of time, as in 1 Thess 4:16–17 (“the dead in Christ will rise first. Then (ἔπειτα) we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds”).¹¹ In any case, Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 15:23–26 gives every indication of a chronological timing of ordered events, not merely an order of precedence, priority, or logical sequence.¹²

To sum up, by using ἔπειτα...εἶτα, Paul describes three distinct phases of resurrection of all people by Christ, as this is the subject of the ordering (ἕκαστος δὲ ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ τάγματι). The first phase was Christ’s resurrection (1 Cor 15:23); then (ἔπειτα) comes the second phase—“those who are Christ’s” (οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ), which will occur “at his coming (the parousia)” (ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ); then (εἶτα) comes the third phase at “the end” (τὸ τέλος)—presumably including those unsaved wicked dead who remain after the resurrection of those who belong to Christ. Given the normal use of ἔπειτα/εἶτα...ἔπειτα/εἶτα to indicate events separated by spans of time (whether lengthy or brief), it is certainly possible that Paul supposed a space of time between not only Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of the righteous but also between the resurrection of the righteous and the resurrection of the wicked.

Even so, he does not indicate whether the anticipated period of time elapsed after the previous event and the event following εἶτα is a day, a year, ten years, a hundred years, a thousand years, or ten thousand years. In fact, we cannot prove that Paul himself was fully aware of the chronological details. Surely, he would not have suspected a gap of almost two millennia between the first phase—Christ’s resurrection—and the resurrection of those who are his at his parousia. Yet Paul’s language does leave wide open the possibility that an equally lengthy period of time could elapse between the second phase—the resurrection of the righteous at the parousia—and the third phase—the resurrection of the wicked at the end. But it must be clearly admitted that this text does not demand a lengthy period between the second and third phases. The use of ἔπειτα...εἶτα could accommodate both a long span of two thousand years between Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of the righteous and a short span of hours or days between the resurrection of the righteous and the resurrection of the wicked. Therefore, based on the use of ἔπειτα...εἶτα alone, we cannot definitively argue conclusively for a millennial kingdom between the first and second

¹¹ In one case, where rank or order of importance seems to be in view, Paul uses the double ἔπειτα...ἔπειτα (1 Cor 12:28), though here the presence of earlier offices of apostles, prophets, and teachers separated by “first,” “second,” and “third,” suggests we cannot rule out the possibility that Paul had in mind an actual chronological order, not just order of precedence of authority. A similar logical rather than chronological use of the terms are found in Job 12:2; 24:20; Heb 7:2; 12:9; and Jas 3:17.

¹² Note: τάγματι (15:23)...ἔπειτα (15:23)...ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ (15:23)...εἶτα τὸ τέλος (15:24)...ὅταν (15:24)...ὅταν (15:24)...ἄχρι (15:25)...ἔσχατος (15:26)...ὅταν (15:28)...τότε (15:28). Gordon Fee summarily dismisses the idea that there could be a third event in the sequence without meaningful engagement with the use of ἔπειτα and εἶτα and by appealing to his previous assertion that Paul has only two stages of resurrection in mind, which begs the question. He writes, “Although the third item is prefaced with another ‘then,’ it is unlikely that Paul intends by this yet another event in the sequence begun by Christ’s resurrection. The ‘order’ of resurrections is only two: Christ the firstfruits; the full harvest of those who are his at his Parousia” (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 753). However, he does acknowledge that this has been “a matter of long debate” (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 753n36).

resurrections. Nevertheless, the text asserts some sort of chronological distinction between the two and certainly allows for a millennial kingdom if that can be established either elsewhere in Scripture or by further examination of this text.

But we must also consider that had the second εἶτα been missing, the text would almost certainly have disallowed a space of time between the resurrection of those who belong to Christ and the rest. Had Paul intended without ambiguity to communicate a simple two-stage resurrection—first Christ’s, then the rest of humanity at the parousia—he could easily have done so by omitting the phrase εἶτα τὸ τέλος. The text would have read: *But each in its own order: Christ the first fruits, then (ἔπειτα) at his coming those who belong to Christ [...] when (ὅταν) he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when (ὅταν) he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.*¹³ However, by including “then the end,” Paul at least distinguishes the resurrection of the righteous from the rest. Whether that distinction also involves a brief or lengthy period of time must be determined elsewhere.

A few lexical and exegetical considerations can help us move tentatively toward an answer to this question. The first is the likely meaning of τὸ τέλος, “the end.” Paul could simply be referring to “the end of the order of events” indicated by τάγματι (15:23)—that is, “then comes the end [of the process/sequence].” In that case, τὸ τέλος simply contrasts ἀπαρχή. Or the term τὸ τέλος could anticipate the content of the subsequent ὅταν clauses, which function epexegetically to τὸ τέλος—“the end, [that is] when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” (1 Cor 15:24).¹⁴ In this case, τὸ τέλος is used in an eschatological sense, as in pop-theology references like “the end is near.” Related to this view, the article in τὸ τέλος could be indicating a well-known or technical term, signaling an established eschatological concept in the minds of Paul and his readers. The term τὸ τέλος does appear nineteen times in the New Testament. Coupled with ἀρχή, it is used as a title for deity and for Christ in Revelation 21:6 and 22:13, respectively. In the Olivet Discourse, it refers to the culmination of specific eschatological events (Matt 24:6, 14; Mark 13:7; Luke 21:9), though in that context, the antecedent is probably the “end of the age (συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος)” about which the disciples had inquired (Matt 24:3). Peter uses it in its most absolute eschatological sense in reference to “the end of all things (πάντων...τὸ τέλος)” (1 Pet 4:7). Similarly, Paul uses the plural “the ends of the ages” to refer to the church’s penultimate place in the plan of God (1 Cor 10:11). In some cases, it simply means the end of a particular situation, circumstance, or event (Matt 26:58; 2 Cor 3:13) or the ultimate “destiny” of a person (2 Cor 11:15; Phil 3:19; Heb 6:8; 2 Pet 4:17). It can also mean the purpose, goal, or outcome of something (Jas 5:11; 1 Pet 1:9); in Romans 13:7, it refers to a revenue or tax. The Septuagint uses the term in an eschatological text only in Daniel 9:27, and

¹³ Godet rightly observes, “The εἶτα, *then*, does not allow us to identify the time of the τέλος, *the end*, with that of the Advent. Paul would have required to say in that sense τότε, *at that time*, and not εἶτα, *then* or *thereafter*. The εἶτα implies, in the mind of the apostle, a longer or shorter interval between the Advent and what he calls *the end*” (Godet, *1 Corinthians*, 2: 357).

¹⁴ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 752.

in that case, it refers to the end of the period of the seven years (ἐν τῷ τέλει τῆς ἑβδομάδος). None of the writings of the apostolic fathers use τέλος with the article. Given these facts, it seems best to regard τὸ τέλος not as a technical concept but simply as Paul referring to the “the end” of the process of resurrection that began with Christ as the firstfruits (ἀπαρχή) and completing the series of events signaled with τάγμα. The entire context, might I remind us, is the resurrection; and the ordering described with τάγμα is the ordering of those resurrected.¹⁵

The next exegetical issue is to determine what will occur at the third phase of the resurrection indicated by τὸ τέλος. This is taught in the two ὅταν clauses immediately following τὸ τέλος, which indicate events concurrent with the end. It should be noted that the ὅταν clauses are not associated with the second phase of the resurrection—those who belong to Christ—which concurs with “his coming” (ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ) (1 Cor 15:23). Rather, subsequent to this, after an unspecific space of time, the end occurs and with it the following events transpire: when (ὅταν) Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father, and when (ὅταν) Jesus has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power (15:24).¹⁶

We have already shown that reading the two ὅταν clauses as concurring at the parousia and resurrection of those who are his is not allowed, because Paul inserts a subsequent εἶτα, thus creating a third stage in the process of resurrection. But we have also admitted that the current two-thousand-year gap between Christ’s resurrection and the second stage of those who are his at his coming does not necessarily demand a similarly long period of time between the second and third stages. Thus if an amillennial or postmillennial interpretation of this passage is to reckon responsibly with the presence of the subsequent εἶτα, the only alternative is to regard the gap between the second and third stages of resurrection—that is, between the righteous and the wicked—as one of mere moments, perhaps minutes or hours. But if there is no practical significance in the timing between the resurrection of the righteous and that of the wicked, then Paul’s second εἶτα seems unnecessary. This is further complicated by the fact that Paul asserted a gap without mentioning its purpose. It leaves the reader wondering why he even made a distinction in the first place.

¹⁵ Though essentially correct, the insistence that τὸ τέλος does not mean “the rest” with direct reference to the rest of the dead not raised at the resurrection of the righteous is beside the point, an *ignoratio elenchi* (see his discussion in Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1230; cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [New York: Harper & Row, 1968], 356; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975], 271; Hill, “Paul’s Understanding,” 308; Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 207). In any case, appealing to “a huge mass of commentators” seems to me like a not-so-subtle *argumentum ad populum*. My own examination of the usage of the terms and their syntactical relationships suggests to me that the “huge mass of commentators” make a plausible case, but the alternative is not thereby ruled out. More nuance is needed in this matter.

¹⁶ Wallis reminds us that “the aorist subjunctive of the second *hotan* clause indicates that the destruction of Christ’s enemies is prior to the event of the first *hotan* clause, the delivering over of the Kingdom at the *telos*: the delivering over follows the subjugation” (Wallis, “The Problem of an Intermediate Kingdom,” 230). This is true, but it must be remembered that the condition described by the second ὅταν clause is the completion of the destruction of the enemies, which could conceivably occur very quickly immediately after the parousia or coterminous with it.

Understanding the two ὅταν clauses as referring to the period between the parousia and the end resolves the problem of having a gap of an indefinite period of time with no description or stated purpose. That is, if we propose an extended period of time between the parousia and the end rather than a brief period of time, then the two ὅταν clauses will most naturally be taken as indicating what transpired during that intervening period, thus supplying an explanation for Paul's inclusion of the subsequent εἶτα. However, if we disallow an extended period of time between the parousia and the end and affirm that, for all practical purposes, the two ὅταν clauses simply describe what had transpired between Christ's resurrection and the parousia, then we have no good explanation for why Paul added the εἶτα clause to distinguish it from the preceding event introduced by the ἔπειτα clause. If Paul intended to associate the ὅταν clauses with events that occur in conjunction with the parousia, he should have formally included them with the earlier ἔπειτα rather than with the subsequent εἶτα.

In light of these considerations, the better explanation that results in the least unresolved problems and unanswered question and best fits the form of the text, is that just as there is a lengthy period of time between Christ's resurrection and the parousia, there will also be a lengthy period of time between the parousia and the end. If so, then two events happen concurrent with the end, indicated by the two ὅταν clauses: (1) Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, and (2) he has (previously) abolished every ruler and every authority and power (15:24).

Which kingdom is it that Christ hands over to the Father? In this reading, it would be the kingdom established by Christ at the parousia, which has been advancing progressively throughout the period between the parousia and the end. In the New Testament passages already examined, we have seen that the disciples anticipated a "restoration" of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). Peter extended this same hope of a kingdom during the "times of restoration" of all things promised in the prophets at the coming of the Messiah from heaven (Acts 3:19–21). Paul advanced the same expectation of a repentance and salvation of "all Israel" in the future, after the gospel had done its full work among the Gentiles (Rom 11:25–27). Thus at Christ's parousia in the future, when those who belong to Christ (the righteous) are raised in their glorious bodies (1 Cor 15:23), the disciples who faithfully followed him will "sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28) and all who belong to Christ will fellowship with him in his kingdom (Luke 22:29). In fact, all believers who endure will "reign with him" (2 Tim 2:12). C. K. Barrett admits, "It would be possible to find room here (between the *parusia* [*sic*] and the end of all things) for the millennial kingdom which some Christian apocalypses predict (see Rev. xx. 6)... But it seems unthinkable that Paul, if he believed in such a kingdom, should pass over it without a word."¹⁷ But in this view, the "word" Barrett says is missing is, in fact, about thirty words in verses 24–25. If a span of time exists between the parousia and the end, then these verses describe precisely the kingdom Barrett thinks is missing!

¹⁷ Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, 356.

First Corinthians 15:25–26 makes the best sense when read in light of a future manifestation of the kingdom distinct from the present spiritual kingdom of the ascended Christ. In that future kingdom, “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet,” and “the last enemy to be destroyed is death.” The verb “to reign” (βασιλεύω), is used twenty times in the New Testament with reference to Christ. In Luke 1:33, the angel Gabriel informs Mary concerning Jesus, “The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign (βασιλεύσει) over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom (τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ) there will be no end.” But when will this reign take place? The construction, δεῖ...αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν (“it is necessary for him to rule”), uses a present active infinitive as complement to δεῖ. Such a construction can be used in reference to something that will happen in the future from the perspective of the speaker or writer, as in Acts 9:6: “But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do (δεῖ ποιεῖν).” It can also refer to something that is already ongoing at the time of the speaker or writer, as in John 9:4, “We must work (δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι) the works of him who sent me while it is day,” or Acts 19:16, “I myself will show him how much he must suffer (δεῖ...παθεῖν) for the sake of my name.” Whether the δεῖ phrase refers to a present or future condition cannot be determined by the use of the present or aorist infinitive complement; it must be determined by context. For example, in both cases in which δεῖ + a present infinitive refers to future events, this is clear by the use of future verbs: “you will be told (λαληθήσεται)” (Acts 9:6) and “I will show (ὑποδείξω)” (19:16). Though the more common way of expressing a yet-unrealized future necessity is δεῖ + an aorist infinitive complement, that can also refer to a circumstance that is a present reality, as in Acts 3:21: “who must remain in heaven (δεῖ οὐρααν...δέξασθαι) until the time of universal restoration.” In that case, Jesus was already present in heaven, which had to continue until a future time.

Returning to the phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:25, we have no clear language in the context to determine definitively whether Paul had in mind a future reign or a present reign, or even a present heavenly reign that becomes a future earthly reign. Any of the following interpretations fit the grammar and syntax:

1. “It is necessary for him to reign [now] until...”¹⁸
2. “It is necessary for him to reign [both now and in the future] until...”
3. “It is necessary for him to reign [in the future] until...”

So, again, Paul’s language allows for a lengthy span of time between the parousia and the end, in which a future kingdom is established that will result in the ultimate defeat of all enemies, including death (a premillennial view); but it also allows for a brief gap of time between the parousia and the end, in which all the enemies of Christ are vanquished in judgment (an amillennial or postmillennial view).¹⁹ Some may appeal to 1 Corinthians 15:54–55 as proof that

¹⁸ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 755.

¹⁹ This is the best alternative in the amillennial or postmillennial interpretations if the ἔπειτα...εἶτα construction is taken seriously. One may conclude that a brief span of time between the parousia and the End is a time during which

Paul had in mind only one event of resurrection concurrent with the resurrection of the saints at the parousia in which death is defeated—that is, swallowed up in victory. But in that place, Paul has only the resurrection of believers in mind, and the language of victory over death is applied only to them. This would fit comfortably with a view that, for the saints, death is defeated by life at the parousia, while death for the unbelievers is defeated in another sense in their eternal judgment at the end. One could also argue that Paul’s statement that mortal “flesh and blood” cannot inherit the “kingdom of God” in 15:50 means that the kingdom of God cannot begin until the parousia, when Jesus raises the saints with immortal bodies (15:51–52). But this also goes too far, because Paul could easily have had in mind an already-existing heavenly kingdom that will transition to an earthly eternal kingdom at the parousia, not necessarily to an intermediate kingdom between the parousia and a distant end. In short, only if we already know what Paul meant by “the kingdom” in 1 Corinthians 15:24 and whether he held to an earthly establishment of that kingdom prior to the final defeat of all enemies can we be certain whether this passage asserts a premillennial eschatology.

Though we cannot achieve certainty, we can make a case that tips the scale in the direction of a premillennial understanding of the text. But even this will include a both/and picture of the reign of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15 in connection with a view of the progressive spread of the kingdom of God throughout the earth after the parousia in keeping with the Old Testament promises and the theme of the gradual edenification of creation. In this text, Paul alludes to particular Old Testament passages treated elsewhere in the New Testament with eschatological import. In 1 Corinthians 15:25–26, he says it is necessary for Christ to reign “until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Then, in verse 27, he explains, “For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’” In light of how the New Testament itself treats these passages in reference to the present and future aspects of Christ’s kingdom, a both/and approach makes the best sense.

The phrase “until he has put all his enemies under his feet (θῆ πάντα τοὺς ἐχθρούς ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ)” in verse 25 is drawn from Psalm 110:1 where the Lord promises the Davidic king, “Be seated at my right side until I set your enemies as a footstool for your feet (κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἕως ἂν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου)” (Ps 109:1 LXX). In the Synoptics, Jesus interpreted Psalm 110:1 messianically, as applied indirectly to himself (Mark 12:36), and he associated it with the vision of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13, when he said, “From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven”

Christ “has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power”—that is, the final judgment on the wicked following the resurrection of the righteous. This approach is far superior to that of many modern commentators who simply collapse the ἔπειτα and εἶτα into one single event without distinction. However, the problem with such an approach that allows for an amillennial or postmillennial eschatology and takes the language seriously, is that it results in something like a pre-wrath or pretribulation resurrection and rapture of the church in the context of a non-premillennial eschatology, a view highly distasteful to many. Vos notes, “Of course, a brief interval in logical conception at least, must be assumed: ‘τὸ τέλος’ comes, speaking in terms of strict chronology, after the rising of οἱ τοῦ χριστοῦ” (Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 243).

(Matt 26:64; cf. Mark 14:62). Luke’s version omits the quotation from Daniel 7:13, possibly suggesting Matthew and Mark both envisioned two events: the enthronement of the Messiah at the right hand of God (Ps 110:1) and a later coming of the Son of Man on the clouds (Dan 7:13). This is consistent with the post-ascension portrayal in Acts 2:33–36: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”’”

Thus Christ is portrayed as already sitting at the right hand, where he will remain until God makes the enemies of the Messiah his footstool—a condition that will be met at some later, unspecified time. Peter reiterates this view in his testimony before the council of leaders of Israel: “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). In Stephen’s vision, too, Jesus is seen enthroned at the right hand of God: “[Stephen] gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” (Acts 7:55–56). Paul affirms that in his present session, Christ is “also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Rom 8:34), and that “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Eph 1:20–21; cf. Col 3:1).

Ephesians 1:20–21 is significant for two reasons. First, it implies an already/not-yet aspect to the exaltation of Christ to the Father’s right hand, where he is enthroned over all authority and all power, “not only in this age but also in the age to come (οὐ μόνον ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι) (Eph 1:21). Second, in 1:22, this image is also connected to God having placed all things under Jesus’ feet: “And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church”—a quotation of Psalm 8:7. This is the same passage Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 15:25, 27. This implies that Paul saw at least some aspect of Christ’s present enthronement after his resurrection and prior to the parousia as his reign.

Yet things get a little complicated when we look at other places where Psalm 8:7 and Christ’s exaltation above all powers are discussed. In Hebrews 2, the author contrasts the authority of angels to that of humanity in general, apparently in reference to their purpose of exercising dominion as those created according to the image of God: “What is man, that you remember him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a short time lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor; you subjected all things under his feet” (Heb 2:6–8 LEB). The original context of Psalm 8:5–7 has no direct christological referent; the psalmist is marveling at the high position humanity has in the created order, which is why the NRSV translates Hebrews 2:6–8 as “humanity” and uses a plural pronoun in reference to people, switching to the third-person singular when the general promise of exercising dominion shifts from humanity to Jesus as the representative human (Heb 2:9; cf. NIV).

Hebrews 2:6–8 follows the meaning of Psalm 8:5–7 with reference to “humanity” in general, turning attention to Jesus as the forerunner who is already exalted over all things, though not all things are yet subjected to him. Hebrews 2:8 says, “For in subjecting all things, he left nothing that was not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him.” That is, all things in creation—including animals, birds, and fish (cf. Ps 8:7–8)—have been rightfully placed under the dominion of humanity when God created them in his image and likeness. Genesis 1:26 says, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’” Psalm 8:7 reflects imagery from Genesis 1:26 when it says, “You have given them dominion (תמשילוהו) over the works of your hands, you have put all things under their feet.”

Though humanity has been given this authority and dominion over all things, that dominion is not fully realized in the world today: “Now (νῦν) we do not yet see all things subjected to him” (Heb 2:8 NASB). That is, in the present, the *imago Dei* mandate by which humanity will fully rule over all creation has not been manifested in this world; God’s will has not yet been done on earth as it is in heaven. However, in heaven the situation is different. The very “image of God” incarnate—Jesus Christ, the second Adam—is exalted on high with authority over all creation. The author of Hebrews writes, “But we see Jesus, for a short time made lower than the angels, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor” (Heb 2:9 LEB). This language asserts a fully received—but not-yet-manifested—authority over all creation in the person of Christ, but it anticipates a time when all creation will be subdued by Christ and the *imago Dei* mandate fully realized in “the world to come (τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν)” (Heb 2:5). The NET Bible note for Hebrews 2:5 says, “The phrase *the world to come* means ‘the coming inhabited earth,’ using the Greek term which describes the world of people and their civilizations.”²⁰ That foresees an earthly reign that will follow the present heavenly reign.

Thus while the world is already subjected by decree and by rights to humanity, and this subjection will be fully realized in “the world to come,” at the present time, Christ alone is in the position of absolute authority over all creation because of his glorification and exaltation to the right hand of God. In the future, when Christ returns and resurrects those who belong to him, then will that glorified portion of humanity also be exalted to a position of authority over all things with Christ. At that time, they will be able to take up the dominion by which they will subject all things in creation, consistent with their decreed right as humans created according to the image of God. This seems to be the idea behind Philippians 3:20–21, which also alludes to Psalm 8:7: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” This tension, too, makes

²⁰ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible: Full Notes Edition*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019).

sense of Paul’s language in Ephesians 1:21: “not only in this age but also in the age to come (ὁ μόνον ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι).”

In sum, all authority has been decreed and promised to all humanity in the original *imago Dei* mandate (Gen 1:26). This should have been progressively realized throughout all creation through Adam and Eve and their descendants, as they should have extended the conditions of paradise throughout the earth, gradually subduing and exercising authority over all things. However, their fall placed them in a position of exile and failure to realize this mandate, which nevertheless continued to be theirs by right and responsibility. With the coming of Christ, the second Adam and image of God par excellence, this right and responsibility has been restored to humanity. With his unique resurrection, glorification, and exaltation, the full manifestation of the *imago Dei* is presently realized in Christ alone in the heavenly realm and partially in his redeemed people; yet it will be fully manifested and realized in the earthly realm in the future. That future full realization of the right and responsibility of humanity awaits the parousia, when Christ will resurrect those who are his and begin a process of complete restoration and progressive edenification of the world. That process will eventually culminate in the full manifestation of the subjection of all creation to glorified humanity and the utter banishment of sin, suffering, death, and devil.

Returning to the question of the identification of “the kingdom” in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, it seems best to see the language of verse 24—“for he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet”—not only as a reference to his present enthronement as a partial realization of this promise in a spiritual sense in heaven but also with a view toward a future fulfillment of the expectation in a physical sense in this world. Thus the end must come many generations after the parousia. Though Paul does not specify how lengthy the span of time will be between the parousia and the end, it must be enough time to allow for resurrected humanity to liberate all creation progressively from its bondage to corruption described in Romans 8:19–23,²¹ which is contrasted with the “present time” (8:18) and associated directly with time of our resurrection (8:23). The process of subduing all creation and terraforming the world will take centuries, not decades, but Paul does not specify exactly how long; in fact, it is possible that at the time he himself did not know. Nevertheless, the time between the parousia and the end will need to be sufficiently long so that at the end, Christ, along with his resurrected co-regents, will have edenified all creation, subdued all enemies, destroyed all forms of death, and handed over that new, paradise-infused creation to the Father as a *fait accompli*. I do not take the phrase “when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father” (1 Cor 15:24) as indicating that the eternal kingdom comes to an end. Rather, it signals that the responsibility given to humanity to edenify creation will be fulfilled; the Son will offer up creation to the Father as a “mission accomplished”—just as all things had been handed over to the Son by the Father (Matt 11:27).

²¹ Cf. Dom Cyril Pasquier, *Approches du millénium: Et si Irénée de Lyon avait raison?*, *Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia*, no. 103 (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2021), 11: “Ce règne peut être considéré comme une sorte de « jugement inchoatif », où le mal est progressivement éliminé.”

Though the language of 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 could plausibly be read in keeping with amillennial, postmillennial, or premillennial eschatologies, the amillennial and postmillennial interpretations leave Paul’s purpose in supplying the subsequent εἶτα clause without a good explanation from the text. That is, there is no reason for Paul to have included a second “then” unless he intended for the language of victory over all enemies including death, in verses 24–26 to explain the events accomplished between the parousia and the end, during the course of the future, earthly manifestation of the coming kingdom following Christ’s return. This reading, too, is in keeping with the original *imago Dei* mandate, the picture of the coming kingdom in the Old Testament, and the reiterations of those promises of restoration in the coming age seen in the New Testament. Therefore, the premillennial interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:20–28, though not provable from that passage, is preferrable simply because it makes the most sense of the εἶτα clause and its concurrent ὅταν clauses. This interpretation also alleges that Paul affirmed a present, heavenly, spiritual aspect of the kingdom embodied in Christ, which would become manifested in the world at the parousia and realized throughout the world by means of the new humanity resurrected and glorified in him.