

### **What is the soteriological significance of the Resurrection and how does it relate to the Cross?**

The cross alone was a naked failure, but the crucifixion, death and resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ is salvation.

Whilst the cross is central to the apostolic Christian gospel of salvation, the Resurrection is also crucial. These two great saving events are inextricably linked in the one definitive saving work of Christ.

The relationship between the cross and the resurrection is a vexed question. In recent times, some evangelicals have begun to think that their tradition has been neglecting the resurrection and have sought to shove the pendulum in its favour.<sup>1</sup>

It would be interesting to explore further whether or not evangelicalism at its best really has down-played the resurrection. Certainly Calvin seems to give it due weight, as the later quotations show. But I am inclined to think that there is *some* justice in the criticism of *some* evangelicals in this regard. It is surprising, for example, that Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*<sup>2</sup> apparently gives only three pages to the resurrection of Jesus and Wayne Grudem in his large-scale *Systematic Theology* likewise passes over its saving significance rather lightly<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, writing at a fairly popular level and as self-conscious conservative evangelicals, Jensen and Payne comment on the current scene: “for many Christians belief in the resurrection has become an appendix to their theological thinking. The doctrine of God and Sin and Christ’s atoning work on the cross, even of his return and of our repentance and faith, have dominated Evangelical understanding of the gospel. The resurrection is a little like the virgin birth – something that we believe in, but that is not fundamental to our gospel thinking. It is an appendix that we can omit without disturbing the logic of our gospel... The resurrection seems to be little more than tying up the loose ends of the gospel story.” They go on to counter: “Allocating the resurrection to a backwater of theological thinking is out of step with the New Testament, just as out of step as reinterpreting or denying it.”<sup>(The Blueprint)</sup> Peter Head further highlights the importance of re-considering the soteriological significance of the resurrection: “Jesus Christ’s victory over death and sin, his elevated status as Lord, the coming of the Spirit, the blessings of salvation and the sure hope of eternal life are among a host of theological truths which are dependent upon the resurrection and need to be explained and appreciated in its light”

<sup>2</sup> IVP Contours of Theology Series

<sup>3</sup> pp614-616

Assuming for a moment that there is a measure of validity in this criticism, it is relevant to our present study to look briefly at the possible reasons for this neglect: it will reveal significant truths which must be retained and begin to open up the relationship of the cross and resurrection.

It is plausible to think that the full saving import of the resurrection has often been undervalued by Evangelicals who have felt rightly constrained to defend the actuality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus<sup>4</sup>. Whilst this is essential and in itself has soteriological significance (as we shall see below), arguments about evidence and the probability of dead men rising have often eclipsed an exposition of the doctrinal place of the resurrection. Evangelical thought has been pushed onto the defensive here and must proceed to a positive articulation of its credos<sup>5</sup>.

Further, one of the fundamentals of Evangelicalism, which has also required much defence, is the centrality of the cross<sup>6</sup>. This proper affirmation has sometimes nudged the resurrection of Jesus out of centre stage, whereas it is afforded great prominence in the NT (see below). Indeed, *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary* goes so far as to say: "The resurrection of Jesus is the principal tenant of the New Testament"<sup>7</sup>.

In this discussion we must aim for synthesis, rather than being too subject to the perhaps necessary dialectic of thesis and antithesis. It is crucial that we also avoid the equal and opposite error of so emphasising the resurrection that the cross becomes less important. Such a move is by no means necessary, although it is a pitfall, and in fact both cross and resurrection together can lie at the heart of the Bible's gospel.

Evangelicals have often wanted to argue very strongly that the cross is a completed and effective salvific work for all those who will be saved, for example, in controversy against the Roman Catholic dogmas of a propitiatory sacrifice in the mass or the penal (temporal) sufferings of purgatory<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> cf. the arguably similar phenomena in the inerrancy debate.

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<sup>7</sup> A questionable statement!

<sup>8</sup> E.g., cf. Boetner, *Roman Catholicism*

Evangelicals have pointed out that Jesus himself cried out on the cross “it is finished” (tetelestai)<sup>9</sup> immediately before he died<sup>10</sup>. But wouldn’t it have been better for Jesus to have said this after the resurrection? If this cry on the cross is taken to mean that the work of salvation was finished, accomplished, completed and fulfilled<sup>11</sup> on the cross, then the resurrection is clearly not part of Christ’s saving work. But such an interpretation is not necessary and is contrary to the testimony of Scripture. In addition to the texts which speak of the necessity of the resurrection (below), the testimony of Scripture regarding the ongoing work of salvation in Christ’s heavenly intercession<sup>12</sup> would also tell against this exegesis.<sup>13</sup> Rather, John 19:30 need only mean that the penal work of Jesus as our sin-bearing substitute is done. In fact, the financial and legal flavour of the word<sup>14</sup> is also suggestive of this. His cry could also be to signify that his judicial abandonment by the father<sup>15</sup> is over and that the penalty of the wrath of God against sin is fully spent. John 19:30 does indeed overturn the Roman notions of the mass and purgatory, but it need not cause us any nervousness in speaking about other aspects of the life-death-resurrection-(inter-mediate state<sup>16</sup>)-ascension or heavenly session of Christ as saving events. However, as we have begun to see, the text is of further relevance in analysing the precise nature of the saving significance of the resurrection. If we have understood John 19:30 correctly, then we can say that it is the cross (or possibly the cross and the prior life of Jesus) which effects the penal atoning work of Christ, not specifically the resurrection. Other aspects of his person and ministry have other saving significance, if any at all.

This discussion leads us to consider more fully and directly the methodological and theological principles at work as we draw up our soteriology. It has been fashionable in some circles to move away from speaking exclusively of the cross as the saving

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<sup>9</sup> John 19:30

<sup>10</sup> . cf. Blueprint, p65

<sup>11</sup> the word is tricky to translate but has these overtones

<sup>12</sup> e.g., Romans 8:34

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note, however, that the mediatorial priesthood and heavenly intercession of Christ are bound to his incarnation – he must be the God-man to be an effective mediator \*\*\* - but also to his saving death as he intercedes as the crucified one on the basis of his own sacrifice of himself once offered. We will observe, likewise, that the resurrection of Jesus should not be thought of as an entirely discreet event divorced from the cross

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew 27:46 and parallels. Although one might argue that he was still for a time abandoned to the grave, which raises the whole question of the intermediate state

work of Christ<sup>17</sup> – a move which must be partly necessary if we are to emphasise the significance of the resurrection.

One alternative is simply to speak of “the Christ-event” as salvific. This could have important and genuine insights (as we will see), but on its own it is not a very helpful statement. What precisely is meant by “the Christ-event” – what is included and excluded as savingly weighty? We are still required to ask the basic question: what is that saving significance of the Christ-event and how is it accomplished and applied. One fears that a shift to speaking of the Christ-event as saving may often be the product of theological liberalism which dislikes excessive doctrinal proscription. The preference is to speak mysteriously of, for example, new being in Christ<sup>18</sup>. This is a corollary of the rejection of propositional revelation and probably also reflects a desire to marginalize penal substitution as a supposedly immoral construct which is abhorrent and incomprehensible to modern man.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps Evangelicals are sometimes tempted to retreat to this more general form of speech<sup>20</sup> either through laziness, ignorance of the exact import of the resurrection or a desire to avoid controversy.

James Orr comments, however, on the necessity and value of holding the cross and resurrection together at the heart of the gospel: “In the history of such a Christ as the gospels depict the resurrection from the dead has its natural and necessary place<sup>21</sup>. To the first preachers of Christianity an indissoluble connexion subsisted between the resurrection of Jesus and the gospel they proclaimed”. He continued later: “In the New Testament Scriptures, it will not be disputed that these two events are always

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<sup>16</sup> ? Cf Grudem p593

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<sup>18</sup> Tillich et al

<sup>19</sup> Eastern Orthodox accounts of salvation, both old and new, also tend to lead to a lack of interest in the saving necessity of either the cross or the resurrection, because it is the assumption of humanity by the divine Christ in the incarnation that allows saving divinization. Whilst the cross and resurrection are retained, they are not emphasised, their saving import is not particularly expounded and it is not clear why they logically belong to the system of salvation which seems to imply the saving of humankind through the logos becoming human is all that is necessary.

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<sup>21</sup> e.g., because death could not hold such a one as this

taken together – the death and the resurrection of Christ – the one as essentially connected with and completed in the other”<sup>22</sup>. But this insight is not new:

Calvin’s comments are helpful in affording methodological guidance in speaking of the saving significance of the cross and resurrection and how the two are to be related: “So then, let us remember that whenever mention is made of his death alone, we are to understand at the same time what belongs to his resurrection. Also, the same synecdoche applies to the word ‘resurrection’: whenever it is mentioned separately from death, we are to understand it as including what has especially to do with his death”<sup>23</sup>.

Orr and Kunneth continue to concur with the Reformer on this point, making very similar statements. Kunneth adds that he thinks the point is generally agreed and beyond dispute. I have certainly come across similar statements by those from a wide range of theological positions. Taken together, they cite the following references where they see the death and resurrection of Jesus spoken of together: 1 Cor 15:1ff; 1 Thess 4:14; Rom 4:25; 8:34; 1 Pt 1:21; 2:18-22; Heb 13:20; Rev 1:8. Similarly, it was Jesus’ consistent habit to speak of his death and resurrection as events which must both take place together as of divine necessity (Mt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19 and parallels, John 10:17f).

This does not, of course, mean that that Bible writers were incapable of making any distinction whatsoever between the death and resurrection of Jesus. And neither should this argument be used to abolish the saving significance of the resurrection for the sake of logical ease. For example, in Romans 4:25, we cannot cross out, “he was *raised to life* for our justification” and read it simply as if it said, “he was *put to death* for our justification” because the two are inseparable, are always spoken of together, and we find understanding the saving nature of the cross less demanding! Even though the cross is included, the resurrection is certainly not excluded.

The Chalcedonian definition of the relationship of the persons in Christ may be suggestive as to how we might affirm that the cross and the resurrection are co-joined.

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<sup>22</sup> p267, p275

The cross and the resurrection are not to be confused, divided or separated but the difference between them is by no means removed by the union (by the fact that they belong together) but the special significance (“property”) of each is maintained and brought together in the one work of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

In seeking to analyse the saving significance of the resurrection in particular, we might begin by thinking of “soteriology” rather broadly. With the panorama of Salvation in view, the resurrection of Jesus has saving significance because it is an important event in that salvation-history which must be understood in its redemptive-historical/ Biblical theology context, as David Peterson quite properly emphasises. He writes: “the author [of Luke-Acts] sets Jesus’ resurrection within the broader context of scriptural teaching about God’s saving plan for Israel and the nations”<sup>25</sup>. It is an event which God enacted, which his word often foreshadows or highlights and which forms part of the great soteriological drama and therefore it must have great significance.

For example, in salvation history, the coming of the Spirit depends on the death and resurrection of Jesus, as the fourth gospel makes clear (e.g., John 16:7). Calvin comments pithily: “Surely, the coming of the Spirit and the ascent of Christ are antithetical”<sup>26</sup>. It is Jesus, who is enthroned by virtue of his resurrection and ascension, who sends the Spirit (cf Eph 4)<sup>27</sup>. The Spirit becomes the first instalment of the new age for believers (Rm 8:23; 2 Cor 1:22, 5:5; Eph 1:14; Romans 8:23), which the Christ-event (and perhaps especially the resurrection) has inaugurated.

Even as a lowest common denominator, it is presumably agreed that a living Saviour is more fitting than a dead one (even if in human situations we could imagine dead people who have effected “salvation”, such as a king winning a battle in which he died, although the victory of his people was secured)!

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<sup>23</sup> Institutes II, xvi, 13; cf. Comm. on 1Cor 15:3f - also, see Orr p275 and Kunneth p151.

<sup>24</sup> See Kelly, p340 for the text of the Chalcedonian Definition conveniently presented – A similar analogy is often also used when speaking of the dual human and divine authorship of the Scriptures.

<sup>25</sup> p29

<sup>26</sup> Institutes IV, xvii, 26 – although we should note that the context is the discussion of the nature of the presence or absence of the Lord Jesus in the Supper, his physical body being enthroned in heaven not ubiquitous, as Luther held.

<sup>27</sup> It will be clear from this discussion that we regard the resurrection and ascension of Jesus as inextricably linked in the same way as the cross relates to the resurrection.

However, assuming that we take the inspired Scriptures as authoritative, further development and precision is possible:

The resurrection of Christ is a stereological necessity according to 1 Cor 15. A more than passing look at this text is necessary. We note that verse 1 gives the subject of the section as the already agreed and received “gospel” which Paul had preached and on which the Christians at Corinth were depending. It is clear, then, that the resurrection of Jesus is part of the saving (v2) proclamation of the good news. Not only that, but it is classed alongside the cross as “of first importance” (v2, NIV, Gk: *en protois*). However precisely we take that clause, the resurrection is here asserted to be a primary saving truth, with the death, burial and appearance of Jesus (and his commissioning of the apostles?). Verse 14 is particularly striking on the necessity of the resurrection: “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith”. It seems to be: no resurrection, no salvation. Verses 17 and 18 confirm this unmistakably: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost”. We must specifically note that the resurrection is included here as in some way essential to the Corinthians having been removed from their sins (and/or their consequences). If there was no resurrection then there is no effective salvation for dead believers would be *apolonto*, perished and living Christians would be *eleeinoterai*, the more pitied [ones than all people].

The saving necessity of the resurrection is a clear Scriptural dictum. It is also readily apparent from the logic of the structure of salvation: Indeed, for Christ to send the spirit, bestow salvation, intercede for the saints or come as judge he certainly must be alive! Even if the resurrection in itself were found to have no saving significance then it would be an absolute necessity for the work of salvation if any of the actions of Jesus after his death are intended to have saving import.

And yet we may analyse further and more precisely the ways in which the resurrection can be said to have been a saving necessity.

The resurrection of Jesus was a logical necessity given the person of J. It was impossible for death to hold him. (Acts 2:24)<sup>28</sup>. Because Jesus was the Immortal and Self-Existent Eternal God, it is unthinkable that the God-Man should languish dead in a tomb. Even as a man, there is no reason why Jesus should be dead because he is spotless and perfect, whereas death is the penal consequence of sin (e.g., Gen 3; Romans 6:23). In one sense at least we might say that the resurrection of Jesus was “automatic”, given who he is and what he had done. But this divine inevitability does not mean that the resurrection should be seen as a merely mechanically unavoidable event that was always bound to take place whether it mattered or not<sup>29</sup>. This is at least partly because the resurrection was the act of God who infallibly acts effectively in the most fitting of all possible ways by necessity of his perfect nature.

Was the resurrection a soteriological necessity only because it follows from an effective atonement? That is to say, could the logic of 1 Corinthians 15 be summarised just as: if J had not been raised then this would show that the atonement had not worked as it demonstrates that death must at least have some proper legal claim over J in consequence of sin, rather than because the absence of the resurrection means that something intrinsically necessary has been left undone? This former line of reasoning is no doubt true, but is it a sufficient account of the Bible’s thought?

We must explore the saving significance of the resurrection as a declaration and/or as vindication.

What does the resurrection declare?

According to Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary: “The resurrection of Jesus shows that Christ’s oblation as the sacrificial lamb was accepted by God, which is the basis for the giving of the Spirit to believers and the forgiveness of their sins.”. The resurrection is thus the accreditation, vindication and public announcement of Jesus’ effective saving work by the father. This is certainly true, but we have not yet

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<sup>28</sup> Orr comments: “Christ’s personality and claims demand a resurrection” (p273).

<sup>29</sup> A number of texts seem to suggest that it was a direct intervention of God, although there is some debate (esp. among the Puritans) as to whether or not Christ raised himself, see Heinze in *Proclaiming the Resurrection*



properly evaluated whether or not this focus of attention back on to the cross, and the cross alone, as the proper basis of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit is correct.

Bakers Evangelical Dictionary also says: “The resurrection of Jesus is a testimony to the general resurrection of all humans” (Jn 5:28-29; Rev 20:4-6).

The resurrection of Jesus is the prototypical guarantee of our bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:23).

According to the much contraverted text, Romans 1:4, the resurrection declares Jesus to be the Son of God with power. (To this we will return).

In Acts, the resurrection declares who Jesus is, confirming his Messiahship and has evidential value. In this regard, David Peterson has shown persuasively that Jesus is depicted there as the resurrected Saviour of David’s line, who fulfils David’s own prophecy of the Messiah’s triumph. The theme of fulfilment is particularly emphasised and Peterson says: “What emerges from Acts 2... is the use of Jesus’ resurrection as part of the apologetic to Jews, based on the distinctive way of looking at Scripture, apparently derived from Jesus himself.... The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus is the Christ, who fulfils a complex of Jewish hopes (c.f. 3:15, 26; 4:10-12; 5:30-32; 10:40-43; 13:30-39). He is the saviour of David’s line, who reigns forever over God’s people, bringing the blessings of forgiveness and peace with God. As the one appointed to be the judge of the living and the dead, he offers salvation and a share in his own resurrection life to the nations (cf. 13:46-48; 16:30-31). There is confirmation here, then for the use of the resurrection as an evidence for faith, which is an argument Evangelicals have long employed. We must, however, make sure that this does not dominate our preaching at the expense of other Biblical emphasises. This is the pattern of Acts. There, for example, the resurrection not only proves that Jesus is the Christ, it also appoints and proclaims him the judge (Acts 10:42; 17:31 – part of the point here is that God demonstrates his justice in rightly raising Jesus, who deserved it. This gives proof that God acts rightly and can be expected in the future to behave in the consistent way and judge the world with justice, as well as also representing Jesus’ appointment for that delegated work of God). Again, this is surely soteriologically significant, not because we have a crooked bench stacked in our

favour, but because it is specifically Jesus the risen Righteous One who will declare us acquitted on the final day, announcing and fulfilling our salvation. Further, for example, Peterson says: “The resurrection does not simply prove Jesus’ divinity but inaugurates the End time of prophetic expectation, a new world with the exalted Christ at its centre. The resurrection is also the key to a complex and comprehensive offer of salvation” (p38).

As James Orr says: “Christ’s personality and claims demand a resurrection, and, consequently, the resurrection is a retrospective attestation that Christ was indeed the exalted and divinely sent person he claimed to be”<sup>30</sup>.

What is the relevance of these declarations to the question of the soteriological implications of the resurrections?

Declarations can have saving significance even if the event is not in itself saving.

The resurrection does this in a number of ways. It is (partly) the occasion for saving faith, its incentive and evidence. Both the gospel itself and the resurrection are proclamations which include one another. That is, the message of the resurrection is clearly part of any full gospel account as we have already seen and the resurrection itself announces the good news that Jesus is the Saviour-King and that his reign of eschatological blessing is begun in a new way and so on.

Further, there is soteriological import in the resurrection in that it is also the object of faith. The resurrection is the thing hoped for and believed in. In being raised from the dead, Jesus also revealed the nature of our spiritual-body salvation that is to come (1 Cor 15).

But there is an even stronger sense in which the declaration of the resurrection could be soteriologically significant: The declaration could be constitutive of salvation in itself. Indeed, it might be argued that there is good reason to expect God’s declarations to be constitutive ones given that he is sovereign and truthful. There is

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<sup>30</sup> p273

some sense in pointing out that all God's decrees or declarations (if understood strictly and excluding e.g., proscriptions such as "you shall not murder" which do not secure what they declare, but here is exception is really more formal than logical as the sense is approximate to "you must not/ought not to murder") are effective. The ultimate cause of everything is that God decrees it. I hope it is apparent how this would relate to some of the material above. For example, in the resurrection of Jesus, God declares Jesus the Judge, but at the same time this declaration in the resurrection is God's decree appointing Jesus that he shall be the judge.

So what does the resurrection constitute?<sup>31</sup>

The resurrection *is* a victory, not just the announcement of a triumph already won.

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary says: "... according to Paul, ... Christ's passage through the cosmos unharmed by evil spirits has placed the universe itself in his subjection (1 Cor 15:24-28)".<sup>32</sup>

But the cross is also a victory according to the Scriptures<sup>33</sup> No doubt Calvin's synecdoche is a work here, but we should not minimize the fact that the cross is specifically spoken of a victory. Indeed, we should remember the revival of interest in the so-called Classic Theory of Christus Victor which Gustaf Allun and others have been persuaded is at the heart of the Bible's soteriology. C.f. also the category of ransom. Here in Colossians 2, the cross is a victory over sin, death (its consequence), the flesh and the accusing-condemning power of the law which is occasioned by sin,

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<sup>31</sup> Almost unavoidably, much has already been said in other contexts which is relevant here. We will assume some of that material and concentrate here on those aspects which seem to require further delineation. No particular organisation of the material seems perfect, although we are indebted to Gaffin for the analysis into categories of justification, adoption and glorification.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin also agrees in attributing triumph to the resurrection of Jesus in his Commentary on Matthew 28:1: "This is the source of our lively confidence in our reconciliation with God, that Christ came forth from hell as Victor over death, and showed that the power of the new life was in his hands... Then was our adoption assured; Christ in resurrection exerted the power of his Holy Spirit and proved himself Son of God" (cf Calvin on 1 Pt 1:21)

<sup>33</sup> For example, the Apostle Paul proclaims: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all your sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Col 2:13-15).

and all the spiritual forces of evil. They have been relieved of these things which were their weapons. Christ confiscates them and puts them irretrievably beyond use!

Also ranging widely through the person and work of Christ, Hebrews 2 also speaks of Jesus' suffering and tasting death for everyone as the basis for his crowning with glory and honour (v9). By his death, we read, he destroyed him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil- thus freeing those who all their lives had been held prisoner by the fear of death.<sup>34</sup>

This stress on the triumph of the cross does not mean that the resurrection cannot also be a victory or an equally necessary aspect of Christ's cross-victory, but we must ask how we are to understand these victories or, better, the different aspects of this one victory.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The logic of Satan's use of death's claim in consequence of sin has already been explored above.

<sup>35</sup> Although we might risk talking nonsense, it may be fruitful FOR INTEREST'S SAKE (!) to ask to what extent proper distinctions can be made in assigning aspects of salvation to the cross or resurrection, although admittedly they are two sides of the same coin and must not be opposed. What did the cross effect that the resurrection could not have and did not do and vice versa?

Could the death alone have effected the penal atonement for sin? Yes, in a sense, although the rest of the matrix of Biblical Theology provides the necessary framework and prerequisites. That is, for example, the cross could only be effective if Jesus were sinless and if this were the case it seems also to entail the resurrection. Nevertheless, the effective and complete punishment of sin is proper to the cross and not the resurrection. Maybe it is not too absurd to say that the cross alone atones for sin, but a cross that is alone would not atone for sins (echoing Luther's formula on the relationship between faith alone and works in the life of the believer).

Could the death alone have saved? Would it have been a victory? It would not have been salvation and victory for Jesus who is supposed to be both Saviour and Victor! Thus Calvin comments on 1 Corinthians 15:4: "For what is there left if Christ has been devoured by death, if He has been annihilated, if He has been crushed by the curse of sin, if, finally, He has surrendered to Satan?... But in the mere death of Christ we can discover nothing but grounds for despair; for someone who has been completely conquered by death cannot effect the salvation of others" Further, it would not have been effective for us because we would still be subject to decay even though the penalty for death had been paid. We still die physically and need bringing back to God, even if the barrier of wrath were removed. Without the resurrection (if we can even think of it without the resurrection!) the cross would only be a hollow victory which would entitle the beneficiaries to escape the punishment of sin and perhaps to annihilation or existence in limbo, but they could have no claim on or experience of heavenly life. The resurrection is necessary to infuse life into our bodies and vivify us, after sin is done away with, giving us a righteous before God.

Enough! Such a separation of cross and resurrection is hypothetical and risks being non-sensical as the resurrection must follow from an effective atonement. This is the logic of salvation as God has set it up and we might even say the logic of the universe! We struggle to peek outside of the system to comment on what might have been

Calvin seems to capture the Biblical contours. After commenting on the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, he says: “Next comes the resurrection from the dead. Without this what we have said so far would be incomplete. For since only weakness appears in the cross, the death and burial of Christ, faith must leap over all these things to attain its full strength... We are said ‘to have been born anew to a living hope’ not through his death but ‘through his resurrection’ (1 Peter 1:3). For as he in rising again, came forth victor over death, so the victory of our faith over death lies in his resurrection alone [presumably with the emphasis falling on the fact that it is the resurrection *of Christ* alone which saves and not *the resurrection* alone!].... For how could he by dying have freed us from the death if he himself succumbed to death? How could he have acquired victory for us if he had failed in the struggle? Therefore we divide the substance of our salvation as follows: through his death, sin was wiped out and death extinguished; through his resurrection, righteousness restored and life raised up so that – thanks to his resurrection – his death manifested its power and efficiency in us” (Institutes II, xvi, 13 cf. Peterson, p77 see also Comm. on Mt 16:20; 2 Tim 2:8).<sup>36</sup>

This final sentence of Calvin’s presents a very helpful framework for answering both these important questions: the cross does the negative work, pays the price for sin, hence undoes the power of death and destroys the old order which was characterised by the reign of sin and death; the resurrection does the equally necessary positive work: it bestows righteousness and life and ushers in the gospel reign of Christ.

Perhaps the most stimulating recent work from an evangelical on the resurrection is that of Richard B. Gaffin<sup>37</sup>. Insights provoked by his study have been incorporated above, but it remains to mention explicitly the structure of his argument which illumines the way in which the resurrection of Jesus has saving significance and how it is saving *for us*.

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<sup>36</sup> It seems that in both expounding and agreeing with Calvin, Hall very boldly says: “Substantially, Christ’s resurrection is in itself a conquest, in fact, the resurrection may be thought of as *the* victory which includes in itself the triumph of Christ’s passion and death” (Hall, *With The Spirit’s Sword: The Drama of Spiritual Warfare in the Theology of John Calvin*, Richmond: John Knox, 1970 – quoted in Peterson, p77-8, footnote 26). This seems to me to misrepresent Calvin and fail to emphasise the triumph of the cross.

<sup>37</sup> Gaffin, R. B., *Resurrection and Redemption*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Philipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987)

The resurrection is the justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification of Jesus. Because of the solidarity of Jesus and his people (by faith/Spirit union), which the Bible explicitly connects at certain points to the resurrection,<sup>38</sup> Jesus' resurrection constitutes the justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification of believers.

It is readily apparent that Jesus' resurrection is his glorification. It is at his resurrection that he acquires the outward splendour which he laid aside in the humiliation of the incarnation and atonement (c.f. Philippians 2:6-11). Further, it is at the resurrection that Jesus' earthly body is transformed to become a glorious resurrection body. (1 Cor 15:42ff; 2 Cor 3:17f; 4:4-6). Gaffin summarises: "the pneumatic transformation experienced at Christ's resurrection involves the final and definitive investiture of his person with glory" (p125f). Believers who are united with Christ have been and will be glorified with him. (cf. Romans 8:29f; Phil 3:21; 2 Cor 3:18). Gaffin concludes: "the plain implication is that what Christ is by virtue of his resurrection, believers will become at their resurrection; as his resurrection is his glorification, so their resurrection is their glorification"<sup>39</sup>.

It may seem bizarre to speak about Jesus' sanctification, his growth in personal holiness, given that he is morally perfect! However, the word sanctification is here used not in this conventional systematic sense but, as it is often used in the New Testament, to refer to a distinctive, definitive setting apart and consecration to God (Acts 20:32; 26:18; 1 Cor 1:2; 6:11; Eph 5:25; 2 Tim 2:21; 1 Thess 4:7; 2 Thess 2:13). The resurrection, then, marks a definitive transfer, as we have already seen, from one realm to another. Commenting on Romans 6:1ff, Gaffin unpacks the fact that believers have died and risen with Christ and therefore must not continue to live in sin. He says: "Their freedom from the dominion and power of sin resides specifically in their having been raised with Christ. In other words, (definitive) sanctification is defined expressly in terms of resurrection... The pivotal role of the solidarity factor in this passage would appear to warrant the conclusion at this point

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<sup>38</sup> Romans 6:5 – as we are united with Jesus in his death, we will certainly be united with him in his resurrection. Similarly, Colossians 2:12 says: "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead"

<sup>39</sup> p126

that by analogy Christ's resurrection is his sanctification." This comes to the surface in verses 9 and 10. Christ in his incarnate life had taken up temporary residence in this world of sin and death, and was indeed handed over to death at the cross. Christ's resurrection transforms and accomplishes his liberation (made possible by the cross) from the old aeon, the fallen pre-eschatological world order. (Cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Romans 3:8; 2 Cor 13:4).

But how can Jesus the just one be said to have been justified? Surely he did not need to be! If we take justification to mean public vindication, the announcement of the eschatological acquittal<sup>40</sup>, then it is clear that Jesus' death was his justification. It was necessary for Jesus to be thus announced righteous before the watching world as his death on a tree as a common criminal had made it appear that he ought to be under the curse of the law and that his character was in question. If this line of reasoning is correct, as it appears to be, then it helpfully explicates the way in which Jesus' resurrection is for our justification (Romans 4:25). In him we are justified with him.

The most difficult aspect of Gaffin's presentation to tie down is his argument that the resurrection is Jesus' adoption (based on Romans 1:4). Here one has the sense that Gaffin is straining to do justice to the full weight of Scripture, to give it real and substantial meaning, but also to avoid Christological heresy. A noble endeavour! Gaffin also wants to take 1 Corinthians 15:45 seriously and comments: "... because Christ's resurrection is the indispensable foundation for others to share in resurrection life, he functions as a life-giving spirit only on the basis of his resurrected state. Specifically, the resurrected Christ is the life-giving Spirit. The plain implication, then, is that the last Adam became life-giving Spirit at his resurrection". This functional view seems persuasive, although Gaffin properly wants to maintain that there was transformation in Jesus' mode of being (as we have already seen, e.g., in the fact that he received a glorious-spiritual resurrection body). Well might the Apostle Paul say, "Behold! I show you a mystery". Whilst the open-secret of the resurrection has now been revealed, it is still necessary for theological students to remember that

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<sup>40</sup> i.e., forensic, rather than a constitutive view of justification imparting intrinsic righteousness by transforming the believer

the secret things belong to God and that the things which are revealed are spoken that we might obey and teach others (Dt x:x).<sup>41</sup>

Finally, we might also note that the resurrection has soteriological significance in that it is used in the process of sanctification (taking the word in its traditional dogmatic use) as an ethical imperative. The believer is to live the resurrection life. Paul exhorts his readers: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, then you will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:1-4). It is good for us, then, to write essays on the resurrection but...

In the midst of these heady theological affirmations, lively debates and intricate speculation, it must be remembered that all doctrinal reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus is not an end in itself. The saving work must be appropriated by Spirit-given faith-union if it is to have any lasting and ultimate significance for the believer. Essays on this theme must become trust, obedience and praise or they are only a wrong-headed sham.

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<sup>41</sup> Gaffin also points out that the life-giving nature of the resurrection has soteriological implications for the traditional reformed doctrine of regeneration and offers some very tentative conclusions which merit further consideration, although not here!



Love's redeeming work is done;  
Fought the fight, the battle won:  
See, our Sun's eclipse has passed;  
See, the dawn has come at last!

Vain the stone, the watch, the seal:  
Christ has burst the gates of hell;  
Death in vain forbids him rise –  
Christ has opened paradise:

Now he lives, our glorious King;  
Now, O death, where is your sting?  
Once he died, our souls to save –  
Where's your victory, boasting grave?

We raised where Christ has led,  
Following our exalted head;  
Made like him, like him we rise –  
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies:

Hail the Lord of earth and heaven!  
Praise to you by both be given;  
Every knee to you shall bow,  
Risen Christ, triumphant now.

Charles Wesley

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