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PAUL'S ATTITUDE TO DEATH IN II CORINTHIANS 5: 1-10

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MR. CASSIDY, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, tackles the subject of the following paper not only as a New Testament student and member of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, but also as a Christian minister who finds himself obliged to speak words of comfort to mourners as part of his pastoral responsibility. There is nothing so well calculated to bring speculation (exegetical or philosophical) on this subject down to earth as the necessity of communicating the Christian hope in simple terms to ordinary people when they most urgently need to hear such words of hope, spoken with conviction and authority.

I. INTRODUCTION

A VIEW commonly held among students of Paul's theology is that his eschatological thinking showed a significant development in his later years. C. H. Dodd¹ argues that in his earlier letters Paul is driven by the belief that the Parousia was imminent, in his own lifetime, so that his attitude to the world was characterized by asceticism. Yet his later writings show a shift of emphasis. Paul has become more positive in his attitude to the world, as the idea of the Lord's return in his lifetime faded into the background. It is not our purpose here to evaluate this general thesis, except to say that in our view a more accurate representation of this shift of emphasis is to say that whilst Paul did not cease to believe in an imminent Parousia, he became less and less certain that he would be alive to see it. In the course of his missionary work he rubbed shoulders with death so often that the conviction began to grow that death was to be his lot. Paul was therefore compelled to reflect more and more upon death, and what lay on the other side for him. The Corinthian Epistles, and especially 2 Corinthians 5, present some of the results of this reflection.

1 Corinthians 15 deals with the subject of resurrection, both of Christ and of the individual Christian. The seed must first die before the new creation can be formed. Death followed by resurrection will be the experience of many Christians, although "we shall not *all* sleep";² some will survive to meet the Lord at His

¹ "The Mind of Paul", *New Testament Studies* (M.U.P., 1953), pp. 67 ff.

² I Cor. 15: 51.

coming. The keynote of the passage is triumph, reaching its climax in the challenge: "death, where is thy sting?"³ Although Paul shares the general New Testament view of death as an enemy,⁴ something alien to God's plan, it is a vanquished enemy, and cannot prevent or spoil the ultimate triumph of those who are united to Christ by faith.

In 2 Corinthians 5, however, the mood is somewhat different. Paul is more subdued, more reflective. Death has become much more personal, something he must shortly face. He longs for the day when he will be at home with the Lord, clothed in the heavenly dwelling prepared for him. We see in this passage something of Paul's feelings towards death, feelings which reveal a very human apostle, coming to terms with his mortality.

This passage is worth our study, since it deals with a subject of practical concern to everyone. The New Testament paints a bright picture of heavenly bliss beyond death, and yet leaves unanswered many of the questions we would want to ask. Do we receive our heavenly inheritance immediately upon death, or do we experience a period of waiting? If so, how long and in what form do we wait? The practical relevance of these questions is understood by every minister who has to deal with the anxious enquiries of bereaved people. We cannot assume that the New Testament sets out to satisfy our curiosity on every point concerning life after death, or to answer all the questions we should like to ask. Indeed Paul admits "we see in a mirror dimly".⁵ Yet if we have a pastoral concern in our work, we have a unavoidable duty to answer these enquiries as far as the New Testament allows. Since many have sought these answers in 2 Corinthians 5, we make this our starting point.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE THOUGHT OF II CORINTHIANS 5

Several scholars have seen a significant development in Paul's thinking between 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5. Several claim that when Paul began to think of death as a personal reality, his thought moved in a Hellenistic direction. This idea is usually

³ I Cor. 15: 55.

⁴ See also on I Cor. 15: 26; Romans 5: 12; 6: 23. The New Testament speaks of death as the result of sin (I John 5: 16, Rev. 2: 11, Matt. 25: 41); the sphere in which the devil holds power (Hebrews 2: 14); something conquered by Christ (Acts 3: 15, Revelation 21: 4, John 5: 24; 8: 51, I John 3: 14).

⁵ I Cor. 13: 12.

associated with R. H. Charles,⁶ Albert Schweitzer,⁷ and W. L. Knox.⁸

Charles argues that there is a contradiction implicit in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul is speaking in the chapter of final resurrection, when "we shall be changed".⁹ Those who die fall asleep, waiting for this day, when "the dead shall rise imperishable".¹⁰ Alongside this Paul uses the analogy of the seed being sown. Charles¹¹ interprets this as implying that the death of the material husk, the physical body, sets the "vital principle" free to form a new body adapted to its new environment. Thus the new body is formed immediately on death. Only so can there be continuity between the *σῶμα ψυχικόν* and the *σῶμα πνευματικόν*. Paul became aware of this contradiction, and in 2 Corinthians 5 changed to a full doctrine of resurrection following death. It is not necessary to assume, however, that the seed analogy implies the immediate formation of the resurrection body upon death. The Rabbinic use¹² of this analogy is quite compatible with resurrection on the Last Day, and fits into the thought of 1 Corinthians quite well. Nor can we assume continuity between the earthly and heavenly bodies. There is a continuity of personality, but this is not necessarily a continuity in time.

More thoroughgoing is the view of W. L. Knox, who claims that 2 Corinthians 5 represents a "complete revision of Pauline eschatology in a Hellenistic sense".¹³ The two chapters under review, if not actually contradictory, represent a shift in emphasis between waiting for the General Resurrection and receiving the Resurrection Body on death. This shift of emphasis, says Knox, is best explained as a Hellenization of Paul's thinking. Knox tries to show that the ideas of 2 Corinthians 5 can be paralleled in Hellenistic sources. So he says (a) for Paul his body is a burden which he longs to lay down, and yet his Jewishness forbade him to speak of a bodiless existence. Therefore instead of speaking of the soul leaving the body he speaks of the soul putting on a new, glorious body. (b) Paul's concept of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee, a present posses-

⁶ R. H. Charles, *Eschatology* (London, 1899), pp. 394 f.

⁷ A. Schweitzer, *Paul and his interpreters* (E.T., London, 1912), pp. 69 f.

⁸ W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge, 1939), pp. 128 ff.

⁹ I Cor. 15: 51.

¹⁰ I Cor. 15: 52.

¹¹ Charles, *op. cit.* p. 395.

¹² W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1948), p. 310, cites R. Meir's use of the seed analogy.

¹³ Knox, *op. cit.* p. 128.

sion, parallels the divine *afflatus* of Hellenistic belief. We might reply however that other passages indicate that Paul's concept of the Spirit is in fact far removed from that of Hellenism. (c) The idea of the Christian life in this world as an exile is basically Hellenistic. This last idea is so widespread however that there is no need at all to seek a specifically Hellenistic source. Knox himself admits that the idea of Judgement in v. 10 is Jewish and not Greek. We can add that the concept of the earthly body as a σκηνή would be perfectly familiar to Jews. Some scholars, e.g. T. W. Manson,¹⁴ have seen the background as the Feast of Tabernacles. Paul speaks of the Christian dispensation as a 'new Exodus' in chapter 3, and as a transitory existence in the body of flesh in chapter 4, so that there is a link in thought between σκηνή and the temporary dwellings of the Jews in the Wilderness. The Christian lives in a 'booth' before reaching the 'Promised Land'. 2 Corinthians 5 can be clearly understood therefore without recourse to Hellenistic sources.

W. D. Davies¹⁵ sees as the transforming factor Paul's concept of the Age to Come as having dawned in the Resurrection of Christ. The Christian hope is not postponed into the distant future, but is received in its first instalment now. Paul was already being transformed and the new body in process of being formed, so that the putting on of the Heavenly Dwelling is the completion of a process already going on. We would contend that Davies goes astray in asserting that this process is completed at death; the New Testament emphasis seems to be rather that our transformation is complete on the Day of Resurrection (see Phil. 3: 20, 21). But he has performed a great service in anchoring Paul's thought in 2 Corinthians 5 firmly in his Jewish background. He describes the passage as a "reconciliation to experience" rather than the reinterpretation of a Jewish message into Hellenistic terms.

III. EXEGESIS OF II CORINTHIANS 5

As we have already stated, the context of this passage is that of Paul's expectation that death is very near for him. In 4: 10-12 he describes himself and his fellow evangelists as men continually under sentence of death, who might at any time see the sentence carried out. More directly he asserts in 4: 14 that "He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence", numbering himself with those for whom resurrection (and therefore death) waits. His whole theme in the chapter is that constant affliction and persecution is bringing about the dis-

¹⁴ T. W. Manson, article "Hilasterion" in *J.T.S.* (Jan.-April 1945), vol. XLVI, pp. 1-10.

¹⁵ W. D. Davies, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-318.

solution and decay of his earthly body (4: 16), although this is accompanied by a corresponding inner renewal.

Paul is reassured, however, by the fact that *"if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens"* (5: 1). Davies¹⁶ sees here a reflection of the Rabbinic belief that the 'Age to Come' already existed in heaven, and that souls entered on death, the wicked to punishment in Sheol, the righteous to heavenly bliss. Rabbinic theology had a dual polarity on this point, however, and there are many examples of the belief that the Age to Come was not inaugurated until after the Messianic Age and the General Resurrection.¹⁷ Some Rabbis attempted to rationalise this into a two-stage process, the preliminary stage entered upon death, the final stage after the General Resurrection. It would be dangerous to tie Paul down to these specific rabbinic concepts. In view of what we shall say below on v.3, it seems likely that all Paul is saying here in v.1 is that the heavenly dwelling is a certain hope for Christians, and not necessarily something inherited immediately. Indeed 1 Corinthians 15: 51, "we shall be changed", includes those who have died and been raised, the implication being that the dead have not yet put on their heavenly dwelling. Some have argued that the heavenly dwelling is some kind of interim dwelling, in which we await resurrection. But against this is the description as οἰκίαν . . . αἰώνιον, especially when contrasted with the οἰκία τοῦ σκήνους of our earthly life.

Paul earnestly desires to put on this heavenly dwelling: *"here we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling"*, not in the Greek sense of wishing to escape from the body, although there was the sense that being in the body meant being *"away from the Lord"*, but in the positive sense that death was the path into the Lord's presence, something to be desired above anything this life could offer. Yet Paul confesses to having another motive behind this desire to put on the heavenly body: *"so that by putting it on we shall not be found naked"* (v.3). Much discussion has taken place on this verse. It must be noted at once that, unless Paul is playing with words, this is a real fear he is expressing. Paul envisages the real possibility that after death he may be found naked. The weakness of many interpretations of these verses which assert the adoption of the resurrection body immediately upon death is that they fail to do justice to the reality of Paul's fear. But of what is Paul afraid? The most probable answer is that he will die before the Parousia, and therefore before he can put on his resurrection body.

¹⁶ Op. cit. p. 315.

¹⁷ W. D. Davies, p. 316.

This will leave him γυμνός. There are two possible lines of interpretation of γυμνός. Earle Ellis¹⁸ has argued strongly that this must be taken in a Jewish, rather than a Greek sense. He sees it in the light of Genesis 3, where the nakedness of Adam and Eve is associated with their guilt in the sight of God. To be found naked is to be found "without a wedding garment", and therefore guilty. And it is certainly true that γυμνός is used in the LXX with this meaning. The main objection to this view of Ellis is that it is difficult to associate with Paul the fear of being found guilty before God. For Paul to entertain this possibility would be a denial of everything he said on the subject of Justification. Moreover this theme would be alien to the context, as the judgement in v.10 is taken by most commentators as a judgement upon already justified Christians.

We must therefore explore the other possibility, namely that should be taken in the Greek sense of 'disembodied'. This interpretation is supported by Paul's use of the language of 'putting on' and 'putting off'. If Paul were alive until the Parousia he would be "*further clothed*", putting his resurrection body on *over* his earthly body like an overcoat. If, on the other hand, he dies before then, and consequently 'puts off' his earthly body before he can put on his resurrection body, the obvious implication is that he will therefore be unclothed, i.e. without a body. This seems to be the only satisfactory way of accounting for the genuine concern indicated by Paul's 'groaning'. It will be objected immediately that the idea of a disembodied existence is too Greek to be in Paul's mind. Yet it is being increasingly recognized that Jewish and Greek thought overlapped at many points, all the more so since the Qumran discoveries. Although we do not see soul/body distinctions in the canonical Jewish writings, there are signs of this distinction being made in inter-testamental writings, such as the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Moses. So that it cannot categorically be said that Paul could not envisage a bodiless existence, however distasteful the thought might be to him. Paul has no wish to be "unclothed", but would rather be "*further clothed*" (v.4). Yet he realised that this can only come about if he were to survive until the Parousia, an eventuality Paul considers less and less likely.

Paul's certainty of future bliss is not diminished however by any uncertainty of his condition immediately upon death. God has "*given us the Spirit as a guarantee*" (v.5) of this heavenly bliss; indeed the Spirit is the first instalment of that bliss. He is sure that

¹⁸ E. Earle Ellis, "2 Corinthians 5: 1-10 in Pauline Eschatology", *N.T.S.* vi (1959-60), pp. 211-224.

nothing can separate him from God: to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord.

IV. AN INTERMEDIATE STATE?

How far is it meaningful or correct to speak of an 'intermediate state' between death and resurrection? The arguments against the doctrine of Purgatory are too well known to take up space here. It is sufficient to say that neither Paul nor the other New Testament writers know any redemptive processes taking place beyond the grave. More cogent are the arguments based on the use of 'sleep' as a metaphor for death. Those who have died have 'fallen asleep' (cf. 1 Thess. 4: 13, 15; 1 Cor. 15: 20, 51; 11: 30). As well as using it metaphorically of death, Paul also uses it metaphorically of spiritual sluggishness (cf. Eph. 5: 14; 1 Thess. 5: 6, 7). In no case does Paul use it of natural sleep. Cullmann¹⁹ and others conclude that in using κοιμάομαι of death, Paul is describing death as a state of unconsciousness, analogous to natural sleep. On the other hand, "to depart (another Pauline metaphor of death) and be with Christ . . . is far better" than conscious earthly existence (Phil. 1: 23), which would seem unlikely if Paul has a state of unconsciousness in mind. Cullmann is attempting to prove too much in suggesting that κοιμάομαι carries both literal and metaphorical meanings simultaneously. Our suggestion is that κοιμάομαι is used by Paul as a conventional euphemism for death, rather like the 'pass away' or 'pass on' of modern usage. It is not intended to say anything factual about the present condition of those who have died. This finds support in the non-Pauline references to death, which all seem to imply a conscious condition. Mark 12: 23-25, in referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob states that "God is God of the living, not the dead", whilst the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16 implies a continuity of consciousness. We find therefore little strength in the argument therefore that κοιμάομαι implies an intermediate state of 'sleep'.

At this point a basic question must be asked. How far is the whole problem of an 'intermediate state' something which is presented because of our standpoint within time? From the point of view of us who are left behind, who still wait for the General Resurrection, it appears that those who have died must be waiting also. We still think of them in relation to our own time-scale. But what justification have we for doing this? Time is simply a human device, a way of relating events which we experience in our physical

¹⁹ O. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (E.T., London, 1958). For background on this passage see also O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (E.T., London, 1951), pp. 237-242.

existence. We need to beware before assuming that beyond death 'events' can be related in precisely the same way. What we do know is that God is not completely definable in temporal terms.²⁰ He is the great "I AM", the One "who was, and is, and is to come". With Him "one day is as a thousand years". He knows the End from the beginning. For Him events do not occur simply in a linear series. In a real sense all history takes place and is summed up in the One Supreme Event of Calvary. In the Cross our Redemption, Sanctification and Glorification become actualized. In a theological sense the General Resurrection can be said to have been actualized, although from our earthly standpoint it is still future. Death frees us from the restrictions of this standpoint and places us 'with Christ', in whom the 'future' becomes 'actual'.

V. CONCLUSION

The 'problem' of an intermediate state is therefore our contribution to the theology of life after death. Paul certainly has no such state in view in 2 Corinthians 5. For him death is an anomaly, something which does not fit into God's plan, something which he is striving to come to terms with. And yet any uncertainty concerning the significance of death does not diminish his certainty concerning the inheritance which God has laid in store. For him to die is to participate in this heavenly bliss, since he enters the realm where the Resurrection in Christ is actualized. This is not to say that the dead precede the General Resurrection, but that this is the 'next' event they experience 'after' death. Our role as pastors is not to encourage speculation, but to emphasize the certainty of God's promise to those who die in Him.

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²⁰Cullmann argues strongly that the New Testament view of eternity is that of "endless time", rather than the Platonic concept of "timelessness" (*Christ and Time*, p. 61). He goes on therefore to argue that although God controls the temporal process and in particular the stages of salvation-history, He does not allow them to overlap for us, so that those who die "live in a condition in which the tension between present and future still exists" (p. 240). We would give general assent to Cullmann's basic argument. And yet we are not attempting to say that those who die pass out of the temporal realm, but only out of time as we experience it in the body. To depart and be with Christ is we believe to be with Christ in His glorification. For Him death was the prelude to Resurrection two days later, and glorification. To carry the analogy of Christ as the "firstfruits" through, we must say that at Easter the day of resurrection began. For all who are "in Christ" resurrection similarly "follows" death. To die means to participate in the General Resurrection. This does not destroy the integrity of the day of resurrection, since *from our viewpoint* it is still future. Nor is it saying that resurrection immediately follows death, since this is again a comparison with our time scale.