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Christ as Life-giving Spirit in 1 Corinthians 15:45

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Abstract

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul tells his readers that because Christ corresponds in a significant way to Adam as the progenitor of a race his resurrection is a foretaste of the believer's own. Paul's assertion in v.45 that "as Adam became a living soul, Christ became a life-giving spirit," means that by virtue of his resurrection Christ now has a supernatural, spiritual body in the heavenly realm and is able not only to impart new life to the believer, but also to grant the believer a heavenly or spiritual resurrected body in which that life will be lived eternally.

The incarnation and Paul's Adam-Christ paradigm

The first generation of Christians was profoundly gripped by the concept of the incarnation, the mystery of how a holy God took on human form to save sinful humanity. We find hints of this awe throughout the New Testament epistles, especially in certain short, rhetorically balanced expressions, possibly taken from sermons, creeds or hymns, that communicate fundamental beliefs by way of contrasting two elements in very compacted form.¹ Themes that are set in antithetical contrast are: flesh and spirit, divinity and humanity, the eternal and the temporal, the immortal and the mortal, life and death, holiness and sinfulness, salvation and destruction, humiliation and exaltation, incarnation and glorification, and Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. These are found in such

¹ Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption* (78), comments that the semantic function of words, phrases and even clauses in this section of 1 Corinthians 15 is governed by their place in the *contrast* that is running through these verses.

passages as Rom. 1:3–4, Rom. 4:5, Rom. 14:8–9, 2 Cor 5:14–15, 2 Cor 5:21, 2 Cor 8:9, 2 Cor 13:4, Gal 2:19–20a, Gal 4:4–5, 1 Thess 5:10, 1 Tim. 3:16, 2 Tim. 2:11–13, 1 Pet 1:20, 2:24, 3:18–19, and others.² In Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 Paul also delves into similar kinds of issues, but in a much more protracted expository form. In these two passages, in which he develops his Adam-Christ paradigm, Paul reflects on what it means that Christ took on human flesh, and not only experienced the pain, temptations and death that human beings experience, but did so as a proxy-representative of humanity, another Adam as it were, and able in that role to redeem those who are his by faith.

Paul's Adam-Christ paradigm posits two natures on the two sides of the comparison. Christ is described as "spirit" or as "spiritual," a topic to which we will turn in the next section. Adam is described as "natural" or ψυχικός, a word that is a cognate of the word ψύχη, or "soul." Adam, whose body was ψυχικός or natural, became a living soul when God breathed the breath of life into him. All who are "in" Adam, that is, all human beings, have the kind of life that is derived from Adam. There are two aspects to this life; by virtue of creation, it *is* life, and corresponds to God as having been made in his image. It was also "natural" in that it was not supernatural; as in its origin, so also in its continuance his life depended on God. Then because of the fall, it also became mortal in the sense of having become subject to death.³ When Christ took on human existence he took on a body and an existence that was natural in the sense that it was not immortal, though he was without sin. As Adam's only true successor, he reversed the course that Adam took and thereby reversed the consequences of the fall for those who are subsumed in him. He lived and ministered in the power of the Spirit and by virtue

² Abernathy, "Translating 1 Peter 3:18-22," 31-32; Martin, 236.

³ Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption* (82), says that even before the fall Adam's somatic existence seems to be pointing to another, higher form of somatic existence, by virtue of the creation of his "psychical" body, and not because of sin.

of his atoning death and resurrection became the endower of the Spirit for the believing humanity he represents.

Christ and Spirit

Gaffin has said that Christ's death and resurrection form the center of Paul's theology, and that his statements in 1 Cor 15:42-49 open up a perspective that is "without parallel in his writings in terms of its cosmic and history-encompassing scope."⁴ He also contends that the statement in v.45 that the last Adam became a life-giving spirit is critical to understanding Paul's Christology and pneumatology and his understanding of the relation between the Holy Spirit and Christ in his glorified state. For Paul, there is no activity of the Holy Spirit in the believer that is not also Christ's activity, and vice versa, and no relationship with Christ that is not also fellowship with the Spirit.⁵ But in order to understand what Paul may mean by saying that the last Adam "became a life-giving spirit" we must consider the semantic range of the term "spirit." We must also examine what is at stake in asserting that Christ "became" anything, because such a notion may challenge how we deal with the concept of the immutability of God as it relates to the deity of Christ. Finally we should consider what Paul is saying about Christ's relation to the Holy Spirit and what that relation means to the believer.

A. The semantic range of πνεῦμα "spirit"

The term πνεῦμα "spirit" is used in a variety of ways in the New Testament. It can refer to the innermost character (1 Peter 3:4), to spiritual beings such as angels or demons, to the realm of the supernatural (1 Tim 3:16, 1 Peter 3:18), or most often to the person and power of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, there are times when the boundary between one aspect of the semantic range and another is blurred. For example, when John the Baptist is said to have come in the spirit and power of Elijah, does that mean that he, like Elijah,

⁴ Gaffin, "Life-giving spirit," 575.

⁵ Gaffin, *ibid.*, 584.

is anointed and empowered by the spirit of God, or that his disposition and nature are like Elijah's, or possibly both? And when Peter says that Christ was put to death in the flesh and made alive in the spirit, does he mean made alive *by* the spirit, or with reference to the spiritual realm as opposed to the realm of the flesh? When Paul says in 1 Cor 5:3-4 that he is present with the Corinthians "in spirit" to judge the incestuous man, does he mean that somehow the Holy Spirit reinforces Paul's verdict, or that he and the Corinthians have a common bond in the spiritual realm, or simply that he will be thinking about them?

Likewise, when Paul says that Christ became a life-giving spirit, does he mean that Christ became an immaterial spirit as opposed to being a flesh and blood human? Does he intend perhaps to associate him in the fullest way possible with the person and work of the Holy Spirit? Or does he mean that Christ now has a supernatural existence in the spiritual realm which includes a supernatural body? Paul is not splitting hairs semantically here, and it should be recognized that in the short, rhetorically balanced statements referred to in the previous section our primary exegetical focus needs to be on the *contrasts* presented. Consequently we should give less consideration than we otherwise would to other elements, including prepositions, case relations, and even semantic precision of the words involved. With that in view, I would contend that in v.45 Paul primarily means that Jesus now exists bodily in a supernatural existence in the realm of the spirit, that is, a spiritual mode of existence in heaven, but also that everything about that existence is in such full harmony with the Holy Spirit that Christ and the Spirit are functionally though not ontologically identified. In other words, Jesus, the second Adam, who has existed in this world in a human body, now exists in the heavenly realm in a glorified and supernatural human body, and that all he is and does is communicated to the church as the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit, who is known as the Spirit of God as well as the Spirit of Christ.

This means that it is not Paul's intent in v.45 to say that Christ became a spirit; rather, it is the *contrast* between "soul" and "spirit" that provides the key to understanding what he is saying. Paul is contrasting the ψύχικος or natural existence of the first Adam with

the πνευμάτικος or supernatural existence of the second Adam. The first Adam is ψυχικός (that is, “soulish” and “natural”), which means that his life is animated by the soul (ψύχη) for existence in this natural world. Adam’s body is not supernatural, so it dies and is subject to corruption or decay. The second Adam is now described in terms of πνεῦμα “spirit,” which stands in contrast to ψύχη, the soul which characterizes the natural life. But the contrast is not just that of soul and spirit, but of that which is living as opposed to that which is life-giving. For Adam, to be “living” means to have received the totality of his existence from God who gives life, but to be “life-giving” of course means to be God, who alone is the life-giver. The contrast between Adam and Christ is therefore a contrast between that which is natural and mortal on the one hand, and that which is supernatural and divine on the other. It is the difference between mortal man and immortal God.

B. “Becoming” and immutability

Paul is not teaching adoptionism when he describes Christ’s “becoming” a life-giving spirit any more than he is doing so in Rom 1:3-4 where he says that Christ was appointed (ὀρισθέντος) son of God in power through his resurrection from the dead.⁶ He is not saying that Christ became a spirit; he is saying that *the second Adam*, the human being who is also the eternal son of God, experienced a dynamic change through his resurrection, and as a man who has died and who has been resurrected now has a supernatural somatic existence that no one else in all eternity has ever experienced. He is God who became human and who died as a human, now existing in a *human body* that has been resurrected to a glorious state and condition. A man, once having a body that was ψυχικός now has a body that is πνευμάτικος. Rom 1:3-4 can be seen in a similar way; although he was always the Son of God, Christ incarnate (“descended from David,” i.e., as a man) died and

⁶ Many English version translate ὀρισθέντος as “designated” or “declared (to be),” but this word is not used in this sense anywhere else in the NT. “Appointed” is the normal usage and should be retained.

was raised to life, and by virtue of his resurrection from the dead was appointed to be the son-of-God-in-power.⁷ That is, just as his physical existence as son of David in v.3 has an historical beginning, so also his enthronement in heaven as the descendant of David who became the son-of-God-in-power – with due emphasis on the phrase “in power” – has an historical beginning, which is the resurrection.⁸ In Romans Paul goes to great lengths to explain his gospel, which he describes as being for “the Jew first and also for the Gentile,” and his description of Christ as the subject of the gospel is spelled out in terms of the same Jew-Gentile contrast. Christ is validated as Messiah to the Jews by virtue of his descent from David at the incarnation, but his validation as savior for the whole world is that he has become the-son-of-God-in-power through the event of the resurrection from the dead, a fact that is testified to by the Holy Spirit (κατὰ πνεῦμα ἁγιωσύνης, “according to the spirit of holiness”). As Moo has commented, in Rom 1:3-4 Paul is dealing with the transition to a new era in salvation history in which Jesus has moved from being the earthly Messiah (with respect to his life in the realm of the flesh) to reigning as the life-giving son of God, powerfully active to bring salvation to all who believe.⁹

The language Paul uses in 1 Cor 15:45 (εγένετο “became”) could be misconstrued as adoptionism if we do not grasp his overall Christology. He is saying that just as something unique, and to an extent incomprehensible, happened in time as well as eternity at the incarnation, so also something unique happened in time and in eternity at the resurrection. In both events Christ *became* something.

⁷ Psalm 2, a messianic psalm, speaks of the Davidic king becoming God’s son (v.7) and then ruling the nations of the earth (the Gentiles) as God’s regent. No doubt Paul had that passage in mind as he wrote Rom 1:3-5, which speaks of the son of God becoming the son of David through the incarnation (v.3), then being appointed the son-of-God-in-power through the resurrection (v.4), and whom Paul now calls the Gentiles to obey (v.5).

⁸ Murray, 9.

⁹ Moo, 50.

In his incarnation he left the eternal spiritual plane and became man, laying aside his divine power and dignity, and taking upon himself the poverty and indignity of human form; he was God-in-the-flesh.¹⁰ At his resurrection he did not just return to the same state and condition which he enjoyed before his incarnation; he is now God-in-the-flesh-having-been-raised-from-the-dead. And by virtue of his resurrection (and ascension) he now has what he did not previously have, which is a glorified humanity.¹¹

As Dunn puts it, a theology which takes the ἐγένετο of John 1:14 seriously must deal just as seriously with the ἐγένετο of 1 Cor 15:45. Both events were changes of eschatological scope.¹² Gaffin says that by the experience of the resurrection “Jesus was and remains a changed man in the truest and deepest – in fact, eschatological – sense.”¹³ But if we take the divinity of Christ seriously, which Paul obviously does, we must at least consider how the doctrine of divine immutability is to be understood theologically with respect to the dramatic changes which would have occurred at Christ’s incarnation and resurrection. Perhaps a partial answer to that question would be that the doctrine of divine immutability means that God’s essential being and character do not change, and he cannot be changed by something outside himself, against his will as it were. Christ’s incarnation and resurrection were a changes of a different sort, not of character nor a compromise of his deity, and were both acts of God initiated by God. Viewed in this light it is not inconsistent to hold to the full deity of Christ as did the NT writers and the historic Christian creeds while still acknowledging the great mystery of what occurred in the incarnation and resurrection.

¹⁰ Augustine said of Christ that “while remaining God, he who made man took manhood.” That is, he became what he never was while remaining what he always had been (*Homilies in John*, Tractate 17, ch. 7).

¹¹ Gaffin, “Life-giving spirit,” 582.

¹² Dunn, 139.

¹³ Gaffin, “Life-giving spirit,” 581.

C. 1 Cor 15:45 and Christ's relation to the Holy Spirit

It was stated above that Paul's statement that Christ "became a life-giving spirit" means that Christ now exists in human, bodily form in the spiritual realm, and is therefore able to give that same kind of supernatural bodily existence to those who are united with him. But that understanding does not exclude a reference to the Holy Spirit. In 2 Cor 3:17 Paul is willing to make the statement "the Lord is the Spirit," a statement that associates Christ (if "Lord" in v.17 refers to Christ) and the Holy Spirit so closely that they are identified as being the same, at least in some sense. But what is that sense? Obviously Paul is not saying that Christ "is" the Holy Spirit; he is free to use the verb "to be" in an associative sense, just as he does in 1 Cor. 10:4 when he says that the rock that "followed" the Israelites in the wilderness "was" Christ. I suspect that the exegetical value of Paul's statement in 2 Cor 3:17 for interpreting 1 Corinthians 15:45 is not very great. While Paul is not afraid to make the statement "the Lord is the Spirit," he probably does not expect anyone to believe that Christ (or God, if by "the Lord" he is referring to his discussion of the Exodus 34 passage) is the Holy Spirit in any ontological sense. The exegetical key to understanding "the Lord is the Spirit" probably lies, as it does in 1 Cor 15:45 and Rom 1:3-4 (and other places), in the contrast being advanced in the passage, which in the case of 2 Corinthians 3 has to do with the Mosaic economy versus the economy of the Spirit brought by Christ and administered by Paul. The old covenant was mediated through Moses and administered by means of Moses' law; by metonymy, the old covenant can be referred to as "Moses." Likewise, the new covenant of which Christ is the inaugurator is a covenant that is spirit (i.e., spiritual) as opposed to law, and confers the Spirit (i.e., the Holy Spirit) as its means of definition and propagation. By implication, if Moses and the covenant he brings and represents is "law", Christ (not Paul) with all that he brings and represents is spirit/the Spirit.¹⁴

¹⁴ Abernathy, "Exegetical problems in 2 Corinthians 3," 53-54.

As Gaffin says, trinitarian identities and relationships are outside of Paul's view in 2 Cor 3:17; his focus is on "the conjoint *activity* of the Spirit and Christ as glorified."¹⁵ Nevertheless, in light of what he says in Rom 1:3-4 and 2 Cor 3:17, there is very definitely a connection in Paul's mind between the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the role of the resurrected Christ. As Ellis puts it, the relation between Christ and the Spirit includes both "distinction and identity, and the oscillation in terminology is reminiscent of that between Yahweh and the Spirit of Yahweh in the Old Testament."¹⁶ While not intending an ontological confusion between Christ and the Holy Spirit, Paul nevertheless implies that Christ's resurrection effects what Gaffin calls "a spiritual qualification and transformation so thorough and an endowment with the Spirit so complete that as a result they can now be equated. This unprecedented possession of the Spirit and the accompanying change in Christ result in a unity so close that not only can it be said simply that the Spirit makes alive, but also that Christ *as Spirit* makes alive."¹⁷ (Gaffin clarifies that this equating of identity is economic or functional with respect to their activity, not their ontological being.) In terms of the efficacy of the covenant and their redemptive activity Christ and the Spirit are identified as one in a functional and dynamic identity.¹⁸ As Dunn puts it, "Christ is now experienced as Spirit...because the Spirit is now experienced as Christ."¹⁹

Dunn may go too far when he says that immanent Christology is for Paul pneumatology, since "in the believer's experience there is *no* distinction between Christ and Spirit," and Dunn himself readily admits that this does not mean that Paul does not distinguish

¹⁵ Gaffin, "Life-giving spirit," 584, italics mine.

¹⁶ Ellis, 273-274.

¹⁷ Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 87.

¹⁸ Gaffin, *ibid.*, 95, 97.

¹⁹ Dunn, 141.

between Christ and the Spirit.²⁰ But the point he is making, as was noted above, is that for Paul an experience of Christ is of necessity an experience of the Holy Spirit.²¹ Christ is the *life-giving spirit*, which in 1 Cor 15:45 primarily means that he exists bodily as a human being in the spiritual realm with a spiritual or supernatural body and is able to impart the same kind of life through the Holy Spirit to those who believe in him. If he is supernaturally able to grant life to new physical bodies in the eschatological future he is also able by that same life-giving power to infuse dynamic spiritual life in the eschatological present.

Conclusion

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul has undertaken to challenge the skewed belief about the nature of spiritual life and eschatological existence that some in Corinth held. Influenced as they were by Hellenistic culture, it was natural for some Corinthians to view bodily existence as being incompatible with spiritual existence, since body and spirit were thought to be incompatible opposites. Others had concluded that they themselves were “spiritual,” living the full spiritual, πνευματικός existence in the present life. Paul had to show them that both ideas were wrong, that there is a future existence that is both corporeal and spiritual, an existence in which we will have supernatural bodies and share the essential life of Christ himself. That life will come from Christ the second Adam, who through his resurrection not only has become alive again, existing in a spiritual body, but also has power as a life-giving spirit to impart that same life to those who trust in him. That life will be imperishable in eternity, but even now it has a dynamic and transforming quality to it that enables the believer to live a qualitatively different life in the present age.

²⁰ Dunn, 139.

²¹ Dunn, 141.

The Adam/Christ contrast in 1 Corinthians 15

	ADAM	THOSE IN ADAM	THEIR BODIES	CHRIST	THOSE IN CHRIST	THEIR BODIES
21	Death came through a man			The resurrection of the dead comes through a man		
22		All die			All will be made alive	
23				The first fruits (first to rise)	Those who belong to him (rise next)	
40			Earthly			Heavenly
42			Perishable			Imperishable
43			Buried in dishonour			Raised in glory
44			Natural			Spiritual
45	First			Last		
45	Living Soul			Life-giving spirit		
47	First			Second		
47	Of the dust of the earth			From heaven		
48	Earthly	Of the earth		From heaven	Of Heaven	
49		Born the image of the earthly man			Bear the likeness of the heavenly man	
50			Flesh and blood – alien to heaven			
51						Will be changed
52						Raised imperishable
53			Perishable and mortal			Clothed with imperishable immortal

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