

The Trinitarian Structure of Resurrection Faith

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*Rise heart; thy Lord is risen.
Sing his praise
Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise:
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more just.
George Herbert, "Easter"*



At the beginning of the twentieth century, biblical scholars discovered that the entire New Testament is written from the view point of faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹ They found that it was impossible to get behind the resurrection faith of the New Testament to discover a gospel that was not about the crucified and risen Jesus. The implications of this discovery had a profound effect on both biblical and systematic theology for much of the middle part of the twentieth century as theologians consciously made the attempt to pursue biblical studies and theology from the point of view

of the resurrection of Jesus. Scholars like Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey stated that all theology must begin from the standpoint of the resurrection.² Similarly, the biblical scholar Floyd Filson affirmed that since “[t]he entire New Testament was written from the post-resurrection viewpoint . . . the way to present the biblical message is to accept this clue, take seriously this fact, recognize it as the illuminating center of New Testament thinking, and move out from this tremendous witness of faith to state what the biblical gospel is.”³

What this discovery means is that it is impossible to read the New Testament without making a theological commitment. If we choose to allow the narratives and symbols of the New Testament to be normative for our own understanding of God and the world, and of our own place in the world, then our understanding of God and the world will be shaped profoundly by the realization that the God of the New Testament is the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and the resurrection of Jesus will shape not only our understanding of who God is, but how we read the New Testament texts.

However, we may find ourselves at odds with this central affirmation of biblical faith, and if we do not believe that raising Jesus from the dead is the kind of thing that God would do, the New Testament will become a rather puzzling document for us. In order to find out who Jesus really was, and what Christian faith is all about, we will need to separate out what we can discover about the historical Jesus from the interpretive framework of resurrection that pervades the entire New Testament. Since the New Testament texts, written entirely from the standpoint of resurrection faith, are our only substantial historical sources for any information about the Jesus who really lived, we are going to have to develop some fairly sophisticated critical tools to separate out all the dross of resurrection faith from the true gold of a historical Jesus who really was not about

resurrection. So it is not all that surprising that biblical scholars like those associated with the Jesus Seminar and others, who try to reconstruct a non-resurrected "historical Jesus," can find so little in the gospels that actually goes back to Jesus; it is also no surprise that when we hear their interpretations of the Christian faith adapted for post-modern people who do not believe that God does things like raise Jesus from the dead, they sound so unlike what most Christians for 2,000 years have understood to be Christian faith.

We need to be clear that the decision we make here is a theological one, and not a question of historical-critical scholarship. The theological decision has to do not with what we derive from the New Testament documents, but how we approach them, whether we allow ourselves to enter into and be transformed, to be converted, by the central New Testament assertion that God is the one who raised Jesus from the dead, or rather, to the contrary, whether we try to make some kind of sense out of the New Testament after we have put aside its most fundamental premise. We either read the New Testament and approach Christian living through the lenses of resurrection faith, or we believe that the New Testament and Christianity are fundamentally distorted by faith in the resurrection. There is no third alternative.

Assuming then that Christian faith is primarily resurrection faith, what does it mean to believe that God is the God who raised Jesus from the dead?

It means that Resurrection faith has a trinitarian structure.

First, Resurrection is the act of God the Creator.

Second, Resurrection is the vindication of Jesus Christ the Son of the Father.

Third, Resurrection is the re-creation of sinful humanity through the presence of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to the risen Christ.

Resurrection and Creation/Eschatology

Resurrection is the act of God the Creator.

It is a commonplace in biblical studies that resurrection has to do with eschatology, the end of the age. It is well-known that at the time of Jesus, there was a radical division between the Sadducees, who said there was no resurrection, and the Pharisees, who believed that on the last day all human beings, or at least the righteous, would rise to new life.

New Testament faith would make no sense apart from the conviction, shared with Pharisaic Judaism, that there would be a final resurrection at the end of the age. What distinguishes Christianity from Pharisaic Judaism in this regard is the conviction that, in the case of one man, Jesus of Nazareth, this resurrection has already taken place.

However, at the same time, eschatology makes no sense without being related to creation, for eschatology is simply the affirmation that the God who created the world is going to bring it to completion, that God will not allow his creation to end in failure. Eschatology has to do with the goal of the created order, with what Medieval theology called its *telos*, the teleological end or final cause of creation. Resurrection has to do with creation because resurrection is the vindication, completion, and re-creation of the world that God had created but that has fallen into sin.⁴

We see this close connection between creation and resurrection in Col. 1:15-20, where we read about Jesus Christ that not only “by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth,” but that through Christ’s resurrection the creation is reconciled to God: “He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead,” and, “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” so that “through him,” God might “reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” (ESV)

Two fundamental affirmations lie at the heart of the Christian doctrine of creation. First, there is the distinction between God and the world he has created. God is not to be identified with the world, he is not an item in the world, and the world is radically contingent. This radical contingency means that the world did not have to be, that God did not have to create it at all, and so its existence is a sheer gift. God has created the world without compulsion, out of sheer love, as an expression of his eternal goodness.⁵

Second, God's creation is not only a free act, but it is an intentional act of knowing and loving that results in an ordered creation. Creation is not an illusion. It is not a mirage. The created world has a real integrity and an ordered existence because it reflects God's goodness, and God is not capricious, not arbitrary.

There is a danger in forgetting either one of these central affirmations. In the late Medieval period, the scholastic movement called "Nominalism" tended to emphasize God's freedom to the neglect of the creation's inherent purposefulness and order. One of the results of that choice is that Western thought ever since has tended to think of law in voluntarist terms, as the expression of capricious divine or human decisions rather than as reflecting the inherent order of the created universe. When Christian salvation is interpreted in terms of this kind of voluntarist understanding of law, the notion of resurrection as re-creation tends to disappear. So in Western theology, both Catholic and Protestant, theological thought since the Reformation has often focused primarily on the cross as a means of satisfying an offense against divine justice conceived as honor, and the resurrection becomes somewhat of an afterthought. Exaggerated Protestant theologies have understood justification to be *merely* a legal declaration, but this tendency affected post-Medieval Roman Catholic theology as well. As recently as 1961, a Catholic author writing on the place of resurrection in Paul's theology

of salvation could note that he had been unable to find any significant modern Catholic discussion of the role of resurrection in salvation until around 1950.⁶

Liberal or "Progressive" Christianity is, as often as not, a reaction to this affirmation of divine freedom without created order. Liberalism also embraces the voluntarist understanding of law, but as a result tends to reject the divine freedom in creation, which liberal Christianity views as capricious. Since liberal Christianity (influenced by Kantian epistemology) tends to believe that inherent divine order within creation itself is unknowable, the special location of God's provenance becomes human consciousness. In liberal theology, law divorced from cosmic order becomes either moralism, as one embraces the latest political or sociological cause, or relativism, as one rejects appeals to divine order that seem capricious and arbitrary. In contemporary discussions of sexuality, liberal Christians respond to appeals to created order with consternation. That such appeals are automatically rejected as examples of something called "essentialism," and as disguised covers for coercive power-grabbing, illustrates well the divorce between ethics and created order that is characteristic of much modern and post-modern thought. Accordingly, the primary criteria for moral decision making become either personal experience, that is, human consciousness, or "liberation," understood abstractly as deliverance from any structures that are perceived as alienating or oppressive.

The connection between resurrection and creation has been lost, and, in consequence, resurrection is rejected as an arbitrary and unjustified miracle. Marcus Borg, for example, interprets what he calls "supernatural theism" as believing in a "God out there," a God who normally "isn't here." Since God is normally absent, the only way in which God can be present is to "intervene" in the natural order. Borg rejects the traditional Christian doctrines of the incarnation of God in

Christ and of Christ's bodily resurrection as " unique intervention[s] of an absent interventionist God, . . . unparalleled insertion[s] into the natural order."⁷

This rejection is based on a caricature of the classical Christian understanding of the relation between God and the world. Thomas Aquinas argued, for example, that God is never absent from the world because God is intimately present to everything he creates in the very act of creation itself.⁸ Creation is the act by which the God who exists necessarily, freely and continually gives existence to each contingent created thing. If God were to be absent from the world for even a millisecond, the world would cease to exist. It would blink out like a burnt-out light bulb.

If we understand resurrection as an act of re-creation, it can no longer be seen as either arbitrary or interventionist. Borg and Dominic Crossan both ask why, if God performs miracles like the resurrection, he does not do so more often. But the resurrection of Jesus, like creation itself, is a unique once-for-all event, at least until the very end of creation, when all human beings will be raised. God does not resurrect people more often for the same reason he does not create the world more often. The resurrection of Jesus is unique because it is both the vindication of Jesus as the Son of God, through whom the universe was created, as well as the unique re-creation of the world that had fallen into disorder. Thus resurrection is neither a violation of the natural order, nor an intervention in the natural order. It is not an interruption of the natural order, for creation itself is the act by which that order comes to exist, and the resurrection of Jesus is the re-creative act by which that very order is restored, perfected, and brought to its completion. As an act of re-creation, the resurrection of Jesus is the unique goal or purpose of what God is doing everywhere in the original act of creation.⁹

The proper understanding was articulated as long ago as the

second century, by the Athenian Christian philosopher Athenagoras in his treatise on "The Resurrection of the Dead."¹⁰ Athenagoras addressed pagan objections to the resurrection in his own day, and he realized that the proper issue had to do both with creation and with the ordered nature of God's action in creation. Athenagoras insisted that God's power to raise the dead is shown to be the same power by which he creates the universe. God cannot have created humanity in vain because God does nothing that is not ordered or guided by wisdom. At the same time, God cannot have created humanity to satisfy a divine need, since God is in want of nothing. Accordingly, Athenagoras wrote, God created humanity for our sake, not his, so that we might bear the image of God and share in his wisdom and purpose. That God's power is capable of raising bodies from the dead is shown in that he first created those very same bodies in the first place. At the same time, it cannot be shown that raising the dead would be unworthy of God. Since the very purpose of human creation was that humanity might share in God's wisdom and life, resurrection most appropriately fulfills human nature, which was created as a union of soul and body. Resurrection preserves that harmony, demonstrating that humanity's final end is consistent with its beginning.

Athenagoras's point about the unity of body and soul has two further implications. First, bodily resurrection emphasizes humankind's unity and relation to the created world in a way that survival of the soul does not. Resurrection affirms the goodness of matter and of embodiment, and allows for no dualism between spirit and body, between the human mind and the rest of the created world. Accordingly, both Platonic dualism of spirit and matter, and the Liberal Protestant understanding that God's actions are limited to the psychological realm of human experience must be rejected as compromising God's intention for the material created world as the realm in which salvation takes place. In creation, God produces the material world. In the incarnation, God redeems

the world through taking on of a material human body. In the resurrection, God re-creates the material world as Jesus' material human body is transformed and glorified so that we might come share in the divine life and wisdom.^{[11](#)}

Furthermore, bodily resurrection means that God redeems the fallen creation through creating anew, not by abandoning his creation. By appearing to the disciples on Easter morning in the very body that sinful human beings had tortured and crucified, now raised to new life, Jesus demonstrates that God's way of overcoming human evil is not through abandoning this sinful world, but through himself enduring the evil that we have created, and transforming that evil to create a new world in which that evil is overcome. The resurrection of the crucified body of Jesus thus becomes the ultimate word of forgiveness and hope for renewal and transformation for a sin-filled creation.^{[12](#)}

Resurrection and Christology

Resurrection is the vindication of Jesus Christ the Son of the Father.

When we turn to the discussion of Christology, the first thing we note is that Resurrection declares to us Jesus Christ's identity. It tells us who Jesus is. In Rom 1.1 and Phil. 2.5, we find that Jesus' resurrection and exaltation to God's right hand declares that he is the Son of God, the one who has been given the name that is above every name. After the resurrection, Hebrew monotheists made the audacious move of worshiping Jesus Christ as Lord (κύριος). So resurrection is the vindication of Jesus Christ as the Son of the Father. Resurrection reveals Jesus' identity as God incarnate.

At the same time, bodily resurrection confirms Jesus' humanity. The appearance accounts of the gospels indicate that the point of the risen Christ's allowing himself to be

touched, and of his eating with the disciples, was to show that he was the same Jesus, and that he was truly human. After the resurrection, Jesus did not slough off his humanity like an old article of clothing, but preserved it. As will be discussed shortly, the permanent humanity of Christ is essential to human salvation. So the questions that is asked even today about whether it was possible or necessary for a resurrected body to be touched and to eat food is quite beside the point. As John of Damascus pointed out, the risen Jesus did not eat for his own sake—he needed no food—but for ours, as part of the divine salvific economy, to show that he was indeed the same Jesus, and that he was truly risen in his humanity.^{[13](#)}

This exaltation of Jesus Christ in the resurrection, an exaltation that confirms both his humanity and his deity, points to the reversal of *kenosis*, the self-emptying of the eternal Son of God that characterized his incarnation. This theme of *kenosis* has been a central theme in patristic theologians like Cyril of Alexandria, in the theology of Martin Luther, in Anglican theology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and in such contemporary theologians as Hans Urs von Balthasar. In the incarnation, the Son of God took on the weakness and sinfulness of our human nature. In the resurrection, that human nature has been re-created and exalted to share in the divine life. The incarnate Son of God has taken our lot in *kenosis*, and raised us up with him in glorification.^{[14](#)}

Accordingly, the resurrection and crucifixion of Jesus belong together. Jesus' Resurrection is God's Yes in response to humanity's No to God, but at the same time, it is God's No to the sin most clearly expressed in the crucifixion of Jesus. However, God's No to our sin does not mean our condemnation, because, as Paul writes in Rom. 4:25, Jesus' resurrection means our justification.^{[15](#)}

This means that we cannot talk about resurrection without talking about the atonement. In Western theology, there has been a tendency to divide over the two familiar atonement theories associated with Abelard and Anselm, the so-called exemplarist and satisfaction models of atonement. Liberals and conservatives are supposed to split rather predictably over this issue, with liberals embracing some version of exemplarism, that Jesus' death provided an example for us of God's love, while conservatives are supposed to embrace some version of the forensic theory that Jesus' death in some manner satisfied the divine justice.

I do not find this division terribly helpful. It seems to me that the real question of division hangs not on the question of exemplarist versus forensic models, but on the question of whether or not the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are constitutive of our salvation, whether Jesus actually creates and makes possible a salvation that would not be possible otherwise, or rather whether Jesus' mission is illustrative of something that God is doing elsewhere or perhaps everywhere in creation as well. ¹⁶

Here again, the crucial issue is how we see the relation between Jesus' resurrection and creation. If Jesus' resurrection is genuinely an act of new creation, then it follows that it must be not merely illustrative, but constitutive of human salvation. It creates a new humanity. Where the traditional Western understanding of the atonement as constitutive sometimes falls short, however, is precisely, I think, in its failure to hold together the central constitutive role that Jesus' resurrection plays in this re-creation of humanity.

In the modern period Anselm has received much of the blame here, and it is arguable whether this blame is wholly deserved. Forensic language about salvation does indeed play an important role in the New Testament. However, a merely

juridical doctrine of atonement and grace becomes disastrous when linked with the post-Medieval notion of voluntarist law that interprets law in terms of mere command rather than in terms of created order. Given such an understanding of law, forensic atonement language appears arbitrary and authoritarian. God the Father is portrayed as angry with human beings for violating a law that is the mere expression of omnipotent will. Instead of punishing the actual culprit, the Father instead punishes his innocent Son, which in itself appears rather capricious, and then, finally, God somewhat whimsically decides to accept that punishment in lieu of actual fulfillment of the law by sinful human beings. That is the common caricature of the post-Medieval version of Anselm's theory.

Any more adequate attempt to articulate the doctrine of atonement has to be able to take account of four varieties of New Testament atonement language: language about law and guilt, language about sin, its power, and consequences, language about new creation, language of unity with Christ. A helpful approach is found in the theology of Anglican Reformer Richard Hooker.^{[17](#)}

Hooker was a second-generation Reformation theologian, so he understood well the forensic language of Protestant theology. At the same time, he rejected forcefully its sometimes voluntarist roots, and looked back to patristic and earlier Medieval models, especially Thomas Aquinas, to re-interpret New Testament forensic language in terms of created order. Thus, law is not seen as capricious command, but as rooted in the nature of God's goodness and wisdom, and the nature of creation as a free expression of divine goodness^{[18](#)}. According to Hooker, the primary command of the law is to love God with all our hearts, and our neighbor as ourselves. Thus law is rooted in God's nature as the Chief Good, who is to be loved because he is not only good himself, but is the source of all created goodness as well. Law is also rooted in human nature,

because, as created in the image of God, humanity's final end or teleological goal is union with God as the Chief Good. As a result of the fall, we are no longer capable of fulfilling this law to love God and neighbor.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus both validate the created order expressed in the law to love God and neighbor, and surpass it. In creating the world, God created human nature in his image, intended for love and union with himself. In the incarnation, God himself has taken on that image by becoming a human being. In the law of the original creation, we are commanded to love God and neighbor. In the incarnation and resurrection, Jesus Christ reconciles divinity and humanity to one another. In redemption, a new creation takes place, in which the requirements of the law are not only met, but surpassed.²⁰

Hooker was quite aware of the reasoning behind Protestant understandings of the atonement, and demands for forensic justification. He affirmed that Christ's death and resurrection satisfied divine justice, while he embraced the Protestant concern that it is only on the basis of the alien righteousness of Christ that I can stand before God with a clear conscience. Justification by faith does not mean that my faith becomes the ground of any standing that I might have before God – that would be works-righteousness – but that I place my hopes for vindication before God and my own conscience on what the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Christ has done in my place.²¹

But at the same time, according to Hooker, the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ's work is not without effect in my own life. Re-creation means that I am not only declared righteous, but that I actually become righteous as the righteousness of Christ becomes mine.²² Thus, the unity with God that was the goal of the original creation is now mediated

through union with the crucified and risen Christ, a union in which I am both delivered from the power of sinfulness in my own life, and come to share in Christ's own righteousness. Thus, the resurrection of Christ, and especially his ascension, in which Christ continues to mediate between God and humanity as our High Priest (echoing the language of the epistle to the Hebrews), are essential not only for my deliverance from judgment, the guilt of having failed at my purpose in creation—the love of God and neighbor—but are also essential for my re-creation, as through union with the risen Christ, I come to share in a resurrection life that enables me to love God and neighbor.²³

Resurrection and Holy Spirit

This notion of salvation as re-creation through union with the risen Christ brings us to our third affirmation: Resurrection is the re-creation of sinful humanity through the presence of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to the risen Christ.

Language of re-creation and of “union with Christ” present us with a problem. How does the past event of what Jesus Christ did in his life, death, and resurrection affect me now? Specifically, the problem of the relation between Christ's work and our appropriation of that work is that of sanctifying grace, of the sacraments, of ecclesiology.

Christian tradition has attempted to address this question in two different ways, either by talking about the corporate Christ, or by talking about the Holy Spirit. The problem is how to relate the two. One possible solution is to view the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in serial fashion. What Christ did belongs to the past. Now is the age of the Spirit. This was the solution of the Montanists, the Radical Franciscans, and some of the more extreme Anabaptist groups at the time of the Reformation. It is a constant temptation for charismatic, pietist, and renewal movements.

Martin Luther remarked of the radicals of his own day that they talked as if they had swallowed the Holy Spirit, “feathers and all.”²⁴

In a different way, liberal Protestantism subsumes the work of Christ to the work of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Spirit is identified with some current movement in history, or with present religious experience. The mission and message of Jesus, far from being perceived as uniquely constitutive of salvation, are understood to be a particularly noteworthy example of what the Spirit is doing everywhere anyway.

The error made in both cases is the separation of the mission of the Holy Spirit from the incarnation and the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Luther pointed out in his critique of the radicals of his day, the Spirit is always subordinate to the Word, and never contradicts or goes beyond the Word.²⁵ Since, for Luther, the Word meant not only the inspired Scriptures, but the incarnate Christ, the point is that the mission of the Spirit is always subordinate to the work of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ.

A different error occurs in traditional Western theology, both Protestant and Catholic. In the Augustinian tradition, both the work of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing mission of the risen Christ, have sometimes become subordinate to a general doctrine of grace, reflecting concerns about original sin and righteousness, free will and predestination, of infusion and imputation. It is not at all unusual to read Western treatises on grace that do not mention either the risen Christ or the Holy Spirit. It is helpful to be reminded that grace is a shorthand word—that the point of language about justification by faith and imputation and alien righteousness is to remind us that our confidence of salvation, of forgiveness of sins, and of access to the divine presence is not based in any sense on our own efforts or moral striving, but that we look away from ourselves to the objective finished work of Jesus Christ

in his incarnation, cross, and resurrection. Similarly language about regeneration, sanctification, infusion and “created grace” is also a shorthand way of speaking about the manner in which God in Christ continues to share freely his redeeming love and resurrection life with sinful but redeemed human beings through the power of the Holy Spirit in such a way that fallen humanity is genuinely transformed as we die to sin, and begin to live a new life of righteousness, being united to, and conformed to the image of, the risen Christ.

When we look at the New Testament, we find a variety of language used to describe the way in which the risen and ascended Christ continues to communicate to us this redeeming love and resurrection life. First, there is the language of union with Christ in his death and resurrection. We see this especially in the baptismal imagery of Rom. 6:4: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Or, again, in Gal. 2:19b-20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Complementing this baptismal imagery of crucifixion and resurrection is the realistic metaphor of the “body of Christ,” applied not only to the church, but also to the Eucharist. “Do you not know,” says Paul, “that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Cor. 6:15), or again, referring to the Eucharist, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). Throughout history, most Christians have interpreted this language to mean that partaking of the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist becomes the means by which the Church is united to Christ’s continuing risen humanity—his body and blood—and so we are transformed as we

are united to that humanity, we ourselves in a very real sense become the “body of Christ.”^{[26](#)}

Then there is the indwelling language of corporate inclusion, the “in Christ” language that appears throughout Paul’s writings, and in other New Testament writers is expressed in terms of mutual indwelling, where Christ dwells in us, and we in him. The New Testament scholar C.F.D. Moule has written of the “corporate Christ,” and of incorporation into his “inclusive personality” to describe the way in which the New Testament understands the relationship between Christians and the risen Christ.^{[27](#)}

Finally, there is the High Priestly language of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The risen Christ is portrayed as having ascended into the heavenly places, there to continue to mediate on our behalf before the throne of God’s grace (Heb. 8:1-2).

All of these passages point to the centrality of the resurrected and ascended human nature of Jesus Christ as central to the communication of human salvation. Being a Christian is not merely a matter of holding certain beliefs or of following certain ethical principles. A Christian is someone who has been incorporated into the permanent humanity of the risen Christ, who has been united to Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection, who shares in his body and blood.^{[28](#)}

The necessary implication is that the resurrection of Jesus is the indispensable prerequisite for any properly Christian understanding of either grace or the Church. Any unity that the Church has depends on its union with Jesus Christ as its risen Lord. Any language about conversion, grace, regeneration, new life, spirituality, or religious experience, used by Christians can only be understood as a practical consequence of union with the risen Christ in the permanent humanity that he assumed in the incarnation, has exalted to

the right hand of God in the resurrection and ascension, and has never abandoned.

What then of the Holy Spirit? It is necessary to emphasize that the New Testament does not speak of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit in the same way. For example, where the LXX Old Testament Wisdom literature uses λόγος (Word) and σοφία (Wisdom) and πνεῦμα (Spirit) interchangeably to describe the intermediary function of divine Wisdom in the creation and preservation of the world, the New Testament almost without exception reserves πνεῦμα (Spirit) language for God's activity among Christians through Christ rather than applying "Spirit" language to the risen Christ himself. Similarly, while the New Testament applies cosmic functions of the Old Testament wisdom literature to the pre-incarnate Christ in Colossians, Hebrews, and the prologue to John's gospel, it gives the Holy Spirit no such cosmic or creative roles.²⁹

At the same time, if we take seriously the real humanity of Jesus Christ in his earthly life and in his resurrection and ascension, we have to take seriously as well the role of the Holy Spirit in that human life, and in the communication of the power of that human life to us. The subject of the incarnation is the Word made flesh, the Son of God become a human being. According to the gospels, it is the Holy Spirit through whom the incarnation was enabled (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35). The incarnate Son of God, the earthly Jesus, had a real human mind and will, and lived out his human life with all the limitations of human knowing and willing that are implied by that affirmation. The Son was dependent on the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in his own life to enable him to love God and neighbor. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at the time of his baptism to enable him to fulfill his mission (Mark 1:10). Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted (Mark 1:12), and cast out demons through the power of the Spirit (Matt. 12: 28). After the resurrection, the Son sends the Holy Spirit so that we might be united to

the crucified and risen Christ, and so to share in his resurrection life (John 14:15-18; 16:7). Finally, Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit plays a central role in our own future resurrection (Rom. 8:11)..

Thus it is evident that the Holy Spirit has no independent role in the economy of salvation. The Spirit is not simply another way of describing divine providence or generic religious experience. At every point, the mission of the Holy Spirit is coordinated to, and subordinate to that of the incarnate Christ, both during his earthly life, and after the resurrection. In the words of the Roman Catholic theologian, Yves Congar, the Spirit is the “principle [of] realizing the Christian mystery,” the mystery of the Son of God made human.³⁰ It is the indwelling Spirit, received through faith, in baptism, who unites us to the crucified and risen humanity of the ascended Christ. It is the same Spirit who descends on the consecrated elements of bread and wine, making them the body and blood of Christ so that we may dwell in Christ and he in us.³¹

Sanctifying grace is thus communicated to redeemed human beings in a trinitarian manner, from God the Father, through the mediation of the risen and ascended Christ, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who makes the humanity of the risen Christ present to us to remake our own humanity in the divine image.

Conclusion: Resurrection and the Trinitarian Structure of Redemption and Grace

In summary, resurrection faith has a Trinitarian structure.

Resurrection is the act of God the Creator. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the God who has freely created the world to share with us his goodness and love, who has

created humanity in his own image, has anticipated the eschatological completion of that world by an act of new creation. The order of creation, marred by human sin, is being restored and will reach its final completion through participation in Jesus' resurrection. As Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (2 Cor. 5:17)

Resurrection is the vindication of Jesus Christ as the Son of the Father. In the incarnation, the Son of God the Father has truly taken on our condition in his humanity. In his crucifixion, he endured the full consequences of our having abandoned the original purpose of our creation—to love God and neighbor. In his resurrection, he has overcome human evil not by abandoning us to our own wickedness, but by reconciling us to God in an act of new creation in which we are not only forgiven, but raised with him to share in his resurrection life.

Finally, Resurrection is the re-creation of sinful humanity through the presence of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to the risen Christ. Through this union with Christ's risen humanity, we are transformed as we are re-created in the divine image, living a life of grace in which we are enabled to love God and neighbor. Thus, all Christian spirituality and all Christian ethics are resurrection spirituality and resurrection ethics. Grace is the shorthand word for the manner in which God in Christ not only forgives our sins, but continues to share freely his redeeming love and resurrection life with sinful but redeemed human beings through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And, of course, the ultimate goal of this re-creation will be our own resurrection on the last day, when we will be changed to see God as he is, and to be united to him as our Chief Good, when the union with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which we anticipate now in earthly pilgrimage will be brought to its final goal and completion, and we will enter as fully as it is

possible for created beings to do into the harmonious unity of the trinitarian divine life.

[1](#) Martin Kähler's *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), trans. Carl E. Braaten, published in German in 1896, was the seminal work.

[2](#) Michael Ramsey, *The Resurrection of Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946).

[3](#) Floyd V. Filson, *Jesus Christ The Risen Lord* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 29.

[4](#) Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986, 1994), 31 ff.

[5](#) See especially Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982; Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1995); Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (T & T Clark, 2005).

[6](#) David Michael Stanley, S.J. *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology* (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1961), 9.

[7](#) Marcus Borg, (with N. T. Wright), *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 147; "The Irrelevancy of the Empty Tomb," *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?: A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan*, ed. Paul Copan (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 127. For similar arguments, see Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 59-60; John Dominic Crossan, *Who is Jesus?: Answers to Your Questions about the Historical Jesus* (NY: Harper, 1996), 95-97.

[8](#) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 8, a 2.

[9](#) Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, & Resurrection* (Grand

Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 77.

[10](#) Athenagoras, "The Resurrection of the Dead," *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), reprint ed., 2: 149-162.

[11](#) Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1983), 128.

[12](#) O'Collins., 127.

[13](#) John of Damascus, "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," 4.1. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff & Henry Wace (Peabody, Mass., 1995), reprint ed., 9: 74.

[14](#) The use of the term *kenosis* does not imply endorsement of the questionable ontologies of certain nineteenth century "kenotic" Christology, especially the notion that, in the incarnation, Jesus Christ ceased to be fully God, or, that, in the incarnation, the Son of God somehow "abandoned" various divine attributes, or that a divine nature in some way turned into a human nature. Many of the nineteenth-century metaphysical theories are incompatible with Chalcedonian orthodoxy. The point is that, in the incarnation, without ceasing to be fully God, the Son of God, took on complete humanity, with all of its limitations and weaknesses.

[15](#) Torrance, 71-85.

[16](#) For this distinction, see especially Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation: An Essay in Universalism and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[17](#) There are numerous editions of Hooker's *Laws*.. I refer to Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Christopher Morris (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1907, 1954), 2 vols.

[18](#) *Laws*, Bk. 1, II-III.

[19](#) *Laws*, Bk. 1, VIII.

[20](#) See both Hooker's discussion of Christology in *Laws*, Bk. 5, 51-56, but also, his "A Learned Discourse on Justification."

[21](#) "A Learned Discourse on Justification," 33.

[22](#) "A Learned Discourse on Justification," 3, 21.

[23](#) "Of the Personal Presence of Christ," "Union of Christ and His Church," *Laws*, Bk. 5, LV-LVI.

[24](#) "Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments." *Luther's Works*. Vol. 40. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1958) 83.

[25](#) See, for example, *The Smalcald Articles*, III.VIII, 3-9.

[26](#) Hooker is, of course, just one such example: "Is there any thing more expedite, clear, and easy, than that as Christ is termed our life because through him we obtain life, so that parts of this sacrament are his body and blood for that they are so to us who receiving them receive that by them which they are termed? The bread and cup are his body and blood because they are causes instrumental upon the receipt whereof the *participation* of his body and blood ensueth." "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ," *Laws* 5, LXVII [5].

[27](#) C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[28](#) Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 77; E. L. Mascall, *Christ, The Christian and the Church: A Study of the Incarnation and its Consequences* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1946), 77.

[29](#) Moule, 154-155.

[30](#) Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (NY: Crossroad

Publishing Co., 1997), 2: 68.

[31](#) The point is made well by Thomas Cranmer's Prayer of Humble Access in the Eucharistic rite of The Book of Common Prayer: "Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the Flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his Blood, in these holy Mysteries, that we may continually dwell in him, and he in us, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body, and our souls washed through his most precious Blood."

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