

**Hope for Today and Tomorrow: G. C. Berkouwer's Doctrines
of Providence and Resurrection with Regard to the Current Topics
of the 9/11 Terrorism Attack on America and the Rise of Hyper-Preterism**

by

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I declare that *Hope for Today and Tomorrow: G. C. Berkouwer's Doctrines of Providence and Resurrection with Regard to the Current Topics of the 9/11 Terrorism Attack on America and the Rise of Hyper-Preterism* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Summary

This dissertation argues for the hope that is found in G. C. Berkouwer's doctrines of providence and bodily resurrection in relation to the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and the rising pervasiveness of the doctrine of hyper-preterism among American Reformed circles.

In Part I of the dissertation, Berkouwer's doctrine of providence is explained and then evaluated and applied. By way of explanation and exposition, Berkouwer's knowledge of providence is examined, along with his theology of providence in sustenance and government, in relation to miracles, and the dilemma of the existence of God and evil. Following that is an evaluation and application of the doctrine to the 9/11 terrorist attack on America.

In Part II, a theological/doctrinal study is undertaken concerning the doctrine of resurrection. Hyper-preterism is examined, along with its leading proponents, and placed into interaction with Berkouwer's views of the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body at the *eschaton*.

Key Terms

Gerrit C. Berkouwer; Providence; Theodicy; 9/11 terrorist attack; "Studies in Dogmatics;" Resurrection; Hyper-preterism; 1 Corinthians 15; Parousia; Eschatology

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Introduction

Gerrit C. Berkouwer developed a twentieth-century confessional theology in the Dutch Reformed tradition which presented a creative evangelical alternative to liberalism, scholasticism, and neo-orthodoxy.

Berkouwer was born on June 8, 1903. He studied theology (1922-27) at the Free University of Amsterdam, founded by Abraham Kuyper. The reigning Dutch Reformed theology was that of Herman Bavinck, which Berkouwer brought into dialogue with the new German dialectical theology on which he published his dissertation in 1934. Following two pastorates, Berkouwer lectured on contemporary theology at the Free University (1940-45) and became professor of systematic theology, retiring in 1973.

Berkouwer's theological method has been described as functional or relational. The function or purpose of Scripture is to reveal how God is related to us. In his fourteen-volume *Studies in Dogmatics*, Berkouwer set forth his methodology:

Theology is relative to the Word of God. This relativity is decisive for the method and significance of theology. It means that theology is occupied in continuous attentive and obedient listening to the Word of God. And since listening, unlike remembering, is always a thing of the present moment, theological questions must have relevance and timeliness. Theology is not a complex system constructed for their own entertainment by scholars in the quiet retreat of their ivory towers. It must have significance for the unquiet times; but it can achieve its proper relevance only in obedient attentiveness, not to the times first of all, but to the Word . . . [T]heology, being ever relative, must be ever relevant—and is relevant only when duly relative.”¹

In doing theology, Berkouwer emphasized the Reformed principle of *sola scriptura* which states that Scripture is its own interpreter. The clarity of Scripture is directed to its message of salvation in Jesus Christ, to whom we are

¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, *Studies in Dogmatics*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 9.

called in personal relationship. The human literary form of Scripture can be understood in all its time and culture-related limitation without damaging reverence for its universally valid message. With this theological methodology and view of Scripture, Berkouwer laid down a multi-volume systematic theology in his *Studies in Dogmatics*.

Argument

In the New Testament biblical concept, hope is not wishful thinking; hope is not a whim. When the Bible uses the word *hope*, it speaks of a certainty about the future. It is a certainty about the future that creates such enduring strength within a person that it seemingly pulls that one into the future based upon the realities of what lie before them as they are united to Christ.

This hope is characteristic of believers, but not of unbelievers. In Romans 12:12, we read “τη ἐλπίδι χαίροντες” of Christians; however, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, we read “μη εχοντες ἐλπιδα” concerning unbelievers. Bultmann states that ἐλπις (*hope*) “endures . . . , for hope is not concerned with the realisation of a human dream of the future but with the confidence which, directed away from the world to God, waits patiently for God’s gift, and when it is received does not rest in possession but in the assurance that will maintain what He has given. Even in the consummation Christian existence, in accordance with the concept of God, is inconceivable without ἐλπις.”²

I do not suppose that there are any two biblical doctrines that have a greater impact on Christian hope than the doctrines of providence and resurrection. In point of fact, were one to gut these doctrines, the question could

² Bultmann, “ἐλπις” in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964; reprint 1993), 532.

be asked “where could hope be found?”. Hope is one factor that makes providence and resurrection relevant. If there is no doctrine of sovereign providence, what hope does one have temporally when it seems that the bottom is falling out of their world? If there is no doctrine of the physical resurrection of Christ, what hope does one have eternally when at the end of her life, she goes down to the grave? Providence and resurrection are not just theoretical doctrines constructed so that academics can play “theological ping pong,” hitting these doctrines back and forth over the “table” of theological journals. No, these doctrines must descend down from academic articles and find their place next to the home that was razed by fire, the termination notice an employee just received, the phone call from the doctor stating that the cancer is malignant, the spouse that just discovered the infidelity of the other, the hospital bed, the funeral home, the graveside service, and the gravestone.

The aim of the two parts of this dissertation is to argue for the hope that is found in G. C. Berkouwer’s doctrines of (1) providence and (2) bodily resurrection against two contemporary events in America—the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and the rising pervasiveness of the doctrine of hyperpreterism among American Reformed circles, respectively. These events tempt observers to *pragmatically* doubt the sovereign providence of God and *theologically* doubt the future bodily resurrection of the righteous. The terrorist attack on America makes one look at the real world event and ask “was God in control?”. The doctrinal attack on the confessional view of the resurrection makes one look at the arguments put forth and ask “is there no future, bodily resurrection?”.

As Berkouwer brought the *magnum opus* of Dutch Reformed theology that was Herman Bavinck’s four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* into dialogue with the German dialectical theology and other theological and practical issues of his

day, so I will seek to pull Berkouwer forward and let his published writings on providence and resurrection speak to these modern-day issues. At the end, we will see that Berkouwer's doctrines of providence and resurrection not only stay intact in relation to these events, but also provide a relevant hope for the soul that has influence on the *now* and the *not yet*.

PART I

Introduction

The second volume of Berkouwer's series in "Studies in Dogmatics," titled *The Providence of God*,³ appraises the Reformed doctrine of the providence of God in the framework of twentieth-century skepticism. Contemporary circumstances are perceived as a complication to the doctrine in the opening chapter. The volume involves a rehearsal of the doctrine of providence in all incidents. In succeeding chapters, providence is related to knowledge, sustenance, government, concurrence, history, and miracles. The concluding chapter faces the problem of theodicy as against the liberal doctrine of a limited God who cannot control evil. The volume on the whole sustains the Reformed conservative position (such as found in the Westminster Standards) of providence and thus furnishes a constructive recapitulation of these wonderful truths in a modern setting.

In this part of the dissertation, the effort will be made to address Berkouwer's doctrine of providence in the light of our present world with special regard to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America. Does the doctrine

³ Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952; reprint, 1983).

of providence give meaning to a life that is riddled with suffering? Or is life actually meaningless? Can a world that is ravaged by wars and conflicts make sense? What categories are we to bring forth when sorting through these deep issues of life?

I will attempt to give an answer to the aforementioned questions by examining Berkouwer's doctrine of providence in four areas. First, I will examine the knowledge of providence. Second, I will examine providence as sustenance and government. Third, I will examine providence in regard to mystery and miracles. Fourth, I will discuss how Berkouwer tackles the theodicy question. Once I have put forth these aspects of Berkouwer's doctrine of providence, I will then examine and evaluate it and conclude by applying it practically, utilizing one of the most catastrophic events in American history– the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Berkouwer's Doctrine of Providence

The subject of providence is often discussed in theory. However, Berkouwer does not formulate his providence doctrine in a vacuum. From the very beginning, he endeavors to couch this doctrine right in the middle of the human experience. Often, the doctrinal confession of providence seems light years away from the very reality that providence affects. To avoid this danger of theologizing, Berkouwer sets up the doctrine *within* the world that would seem to deny it. Berkouwer maintains, "Contemporary scientific and philosophical thought—as well as that of the ordinary man—is engrossed in the question of the meaning and purpose of the world and its history, of human life."⁴

⁴ Ibid., 7.

This world is ravaged with evil. Wars, inhumanity, atrocities, crime, suffering—it is all too commonplace all over the planet. How does God relate to such a world? “We hear of sorrow and desperation, of distress and estrangement, of fate and death. The old optimism has made room for a new realism; but this new realism by itself is not the real crisis of the awareness of and confession of guilt. The real crisis lies in the meaning of the reality of God to this shattered world.”⁵

Chapter 5.1 of *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy Providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.” But is this too simplistic, Berkouwer asks. He comments, “It seems as though this confession—God’s rule over all things, more than other confessions—were thrown into the crucible of the times.”⁶

Berkouwer makes the important point that the providence doctrine is usually discussed in abstract and timeless terms.⁷ However, the human experience has reached its hands upwards to grab providence, bring it down, and force it to reckon with real life. As a result, our concepts of God’s providence, which we received from the old confessions, seem to clash with the devastating events of our time. It seems as if the tragedy of our time has “won over” the thinking of the *hoi polloi* so that providence is disregarded. As a result, Berkouwer sums up, “In this situation the confession of God’s Providence over all things seems the last thing which could justly pretend to answer the basic

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Ibid.

questions of human existence. The confession of God's Providence has become, now more than ever, a stone of stumbling."⁸

Though our world is full of tragedy and dread, this is where providence operates. These are the very things to which providence stands over and controls. Providence was never intended to be an abstract functioning in a world that would never make its understanding difficult. The real world—complete with all its pain and suffering—is the arena of providence. According to the Scriptures, this is providence's *modus operandi*. Berkouwer writes, "But we see here how the Scriptures frankly reveal that the Providence doctrine is not set in a mold, is not a calm and tensionless constant. They tell us how this belief can go through the crucible, even be lost for a time and be rediscovered in the way of prayer and confession of guilt."⁹

Everything hangs on whether humans can go beyond and transcend (through faith) their crises. Can we get past our crises while still being within them? Can we have the "perspective that overcomes the world and fills the heart with honest, though mysterious, repose?"¹⁰

Berkouwer explains that man is a stranger to God and also a stranger in God's world. He delineates three motifs which have played a role in man's secularization: 1) the scientific motif, 2) the projection motif, and 3) the catastrophic motif.¹¹ I will briefly describe each of these.

The *scientific motif* deals with the effect of science on man's faith in God. The typical scientific mind views the providence doctrine seemingly as a mere platitude which flourished in some pre-modern, pre-scientific age. However,

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

now such a doctrine would be rendered unacceptable by the enlightened, modern mind.

The *projection motif* has previously been defined in Marxism. Marx maintained that religion was just simply constructing a chimera. It was a comfort which man subjectively “summoned” to cope with life. Along those same lines, providence is viewed in the projection motif as humanity simply subjectively projecting such a ‘truth’ as a coping mechanism associated with the difficulties of life.¹² Berkouwer sums up the projection motif by saying, “Belief in providence becomes, in fact, a very dangerous affair; it is nothing but the other side of a lust for safety and protection against the threats to our existence. It is a system of a bourgeois escapism in which man seeks to banish, above all things, fear.”¹³

The *catastrophic motif* investigates the immensity of pain and suffering in the human experience. Humanity sees itself as helpless to the pains and struggles of its existence. As a result, people retire to areas of sensuality, nihilism, or simple apathy to cope with their life situations. In the view of these individuals, the providence doctrine fails to give an explanation to the dreadful

¹² Added to Marx, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Freud also advanced a projection motif. Feuerbach defined religion as subjective, egoistic, and replete with wish-projection. He eventually came to the conclusion that the gods (whomever they might be) were simply objectivized, projected wishes. In short, he depicted religion as “anthropologic.”

Nietzsche couched religion in a sort of Platonism. In fact, he used that very term (Platonism) by asserting that religion did not have an earthly reality. Instead, religion projects an ideal, supernatural world that is separated from and devalues the real, earthly existence.

Freud, similar to Feuerbach, saw religion as a projection of humanity in their attempts to deal with the pain which the world gave. Due to the hurt and pain, humanity searches for a place of refuge. As a result, the projection of a world was conjured up to provide a place where humanity might seek comfort while living in a world that seemingly did not provide any comfort. “We can see how the views of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud form an important factor in the present crisis of the Providence doctrine” (G. C. Berkouwer, *Providence*, 21).

¹³ Ibid.

reality that clutches existence in its grasp. Berkouwer writes, “Raw reality assaults this comforting and optimistic confession (of providence).”¹⁴

The Knowledge of Providence

How can we *know* God’s providence? This is the question which Berkouwer sets before us. It is not a bare knowing *of* the doctrine of providence, but a knowing of providence as being true, as actually being extant. How do we know that the things which befall us humans have providence as its cause?

Berkouwer embeds the knowledge of providence within the sphere of faith. Right at the start, Berkouwer makes it clear that any knowledge we have concerning the providence of God is rooted in faith. We have the knowledge of God’s providence by way of His revealing it to us. And that very same doctrine is received and believed by us *in faith*.

But is faith simply just a re-hash of the projection motif? Berkouwer deals with this issue. He couches the argument within the confessions of the Church.¹⁵ These confessions, according to Berkouwer, seem to receive the accusation of being “anthropocentric.” Why? It is because the creeds and confessions of the church hold forth the council, comfort, and care of God *for man*. Sure, the creeds and confessions maintain the cosmic control of God over all things—yet, the statements on providence in these documents seem to give an emphasis to humanity.

Berkouwer answers the charges of anthropocentrism with a definite “no.” He writes, “The answer to all these questions must be simply that the confessions

¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵ The final Article (Art. 7) in *The Westminster Confession’s* chapter on providence would be one example: “As the Providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof.”

are *not* anthropocentric.”¹⁶ Berkouwer maintains that the providence doctrine as formulated in the church’s confessions is *theocentric* which, as a result, calls attention to humankind. Because the confessions are theocentric, they bring out the soteriological aspect. This soteriological facet has to do with God *and* man. Therefore, providence is set forth as *theocentric*, yet including the *soteriological* inclusion of man. However, *soteriological* does not equal *anthropocentric*, Berkouwer would assert.

Berkouwer points out that the confessions continually present the providence of God in connection with the believer and the gift of salvation. He goes on to say, “This relation between salvation and Providence is so close that it must have definite significance for our question as to our knowledge of Providence.”¹⁷

Can providence be known through natural theology? Can one come to the knowledge of providence through natural means outside of special revelation *in faith*? Berkouwer believes that the providence doctrine of the God of Scripture cannot be concluded outside of Scripture and faith. He traces the opposing systems of Catholic and Barthian theology. Catholic theology asserts that one can arrive at a certain level of knowledge concerning providence. With what is lacking, special revelation fills. Contrary to this, the Barthian doctrine of providence purports over against any natural theology that any knowledge of providence is to be found in revelation (i.e., revelation of God *in* Jesus Christ). Berkouwer, although objecting to Barth identifying providence with free grace and the idea that our knowledge of God defines and limits its nature, basically

¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

agrees that the doctrine of providence is attained by way of faith, which the Church's confessions faithfully present.¹⁸

¹⁸ To further make his point that the providence doctrine is ascertained by faith rather than natural theology, Berkouwer incorporates the examples of two theological giants: Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 38-45).

Bavinck, after a discussion concerning the "witness of all peoples," concludes that "the doctrine of God's Providence is one of the 'mixed articles' made known to all men through God's revelation in nature" (38). Now this sounds strangely similar to the Catholic doctrine of the knowledge of providence which maintains that a kind of general knowledge is possible outside of faith, a knowledge that is first general and natural, and is later completed soteriologically. Is this the idea to which Bavinck aligns himself?

Berkouwer makes it clear that Bavinck's position is one that does not undermine the rational knowledge of God. In other words, Bavinck (along with the majority of the Reformers) saw the validity of a *perception* of God's providence outside the faith. However, the end result of this would be a suppression and rejection of the truth of that natural revelation due to the radical sin nature of humanity, as Rom. 1 states. Hence, though the providence doctrine of God might be *perceivable*, it can never be attained aright outside of faith. Berkouwer writes, "Bavinck is searching for a clear formulation of the Christian Providence doctrine. This faith, he says, relies not only on God's revelation in nature, but far more on His covenant and promises. Bavinck adds that the Christian faith is not a cosmological theory, but a *pure confession of faith*" (39, emphasis his). Berkouwer goes on to sum up, "It is clear now that Bavinck does not underwrite a rational knowledge of God. Rather, he insists on a faith-knowledge rooted in Scripture" (40). So why did Bavinck speak of the doctrine of providence as a 'mixed article'? Berkouwer answers, "The only explanation we can offer is that he did so, not from a misunderstanding of the uniqueness of the Christian Providence doctrine, but from a desire to forestall a rejection of the equally Christian doctrine of general revelation. He was not among those who considered Providence as an article of natural theology, to which the believer could then *add* the other articles unique to Christian theology" (41, emphasis his). Bavinck's concern in the issue was to hold the providence doctrine equal with the doctrine of general revelation.

Berkouwer sees Kuyper wrestling with an issue similar to that of Bavinck. For Kuyper, he hesitated to see the doctrine of providence being formulated into an *exclusive* Christian doctrine to the negation of it in any sort of general understanding. Kuyper did not want it to come to the point where it was claimed that there is *no* general perception of providence at all. However, Kuyper believed that we should be careful here and not give the providence doctrine away so that even the natural perception which Kuyper admitted might be allowed to erect an edifice which led to a general, universal 'God-concept.' Though Berkouwer acknowledges that this type of thinking might admit of an epistemological dualism on Kuyper's part, Berkouwer injects that Kuyper "repudiates" such a dualism. Berkouwer admits that it is difficult to understand Kuyper's anxiousness of the providence doctrine as being construed as exclusively Christian. Berkouwer goes on to explain, "We gather that what Kuyper feared was a one-sided denial that there was even a vague God-concept still resident in natural man, an effect of general revelation. It was in the interest of refuting this denial that he hesitated to call Providence a specially Christian doctrine" (44). So Kuyper, in agreement with Bavinck, presents us with a knowledge of God's providence which comes *from faith*. Kuyper, similar to Bavinck, speaks of

Berkouwer's doctrine of providence is exclusively found within the soteriological caste of the Church's confessions. Providence, according to Berkouwer, is not some bare destiny or chance. It is not the outworking of a 'God-concept' apart from special revelation and faith. Against the background of the pagan 'God-concept' (e.g., phantoms, idols, conjecture, reasoned conclusion, a final or first cause, a mysterious 'X,' Guidance, etc.), Berkouwer writes, "For this reason, the soteriological orientation of the Providence doctrine in the confessions is decisive. It is decisive, not as an anthropocentric abridgment of God's truth, but because the atonement through the cross of Christ points the way to 'the only comfort in life and death,' yes, the comfort of Providence."¹⁹ He succinctly makes the point by saying, ". . . no one can believe in the Providence of God without knowing the way to God through Jesus Christ."²⁰ Therefore, for Berkouwer, the key to the providence doctrine is found in Christ. Providence, for the believer, is no mere projection motif. Instead, it is knowledge derived by faith.²¹

Providence as Sustenance and Government

The overriding aim of Berkouwer in discussing providence with regard to sustenance and government is to keep these two aspects distinct, yet aligned. He

'mixed articles,' yet only in point of fact to uphold *both* the doctrines of providence *and* general revelation.

¹⁹ Ibid., 46.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Berkouwer expounds this point by writing, "If we are to know God's Providence, and if our knowledge is to stand against the attacks of the scientific-, projection-, and catastrophic-motifs, then the decision must fall here, with the Scriptures. There will always be a conflict, not only between the orthodox and modern christologies, but between the orthodox and modern confessions of the Providence of God" (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 49).

defines government as “the purpose or end to which God leads all things.”²² As to the aspect of sustenance, he depicts it as the “maintenance or preservation” of all things.²³ After thus defining the two, Berkouwer then launches out to expound upon the aspect of sustenance.

In Berkouwer’s discussion of sustenance, he maintains that the creature must rule out any “talk of outright independence.”²⁴ There is nothing within the compass of creation which is self-contained. Everything exists within the *immediate* relation to God as regarding sustenance. All creatures and their very reality abide within the hand of God.

Berkouwer then goes forward to distinguish the divine acts of creation and sustenance. Though he distinguishes the two, He wishes to keep them closely related as actually two aspects of one activity.²⁵ Creation brings into being that which is then sustained.

Berkouwer then goes into an extended discussion of the creation-rest motif. In this discussion, Berkouwer brings to the fore the soteriological aspect of creation and sustenance.²⁶ Thus, the rest of God, being primarily in view, becomes closely related to the rest which remains for the people of God. Berkouwer goes on to point out, “If the Sabbath has eschatological significance and if it was from the beginning a sign pointing to the rest that remains for God’s people, then the historical report that God rested on the seventh day is

²² Ibid., 50.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

²⁵ Here, Berkouwer cites Bavinck as speaking in the spirit of the confessions when he says that creation *passes over* into sustenance This is not to say that sustenance is a less might or less divine act than is creation” (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 54).

²⁶ “[T]his resting of God implies much more than a mere transition from creating to sustaining. The Scriptures bring the resting of God into the same context as the salvation of the Lord It illustrates pre-eminently the close relationship existing between creation and redemption” (ibid).

determinative for all that follows."²⁷ Therefore, there is an important relation between the creation Sabbath and the abiding Sabbath in regard to the soteriological aspect.

Berkouwer rejects the thought of sustenance as a continual creating out of nothing. He summarizes the creeds as maintaining the God's primal act was the one and only which was *out of nothing* (*ex nihilo*). Hence, afterward there is no more *nothingness*. As a result, Berkouwer alleges, "Through divine sustenance the possibility of a nothingness into which the world could fall, be it for an atom of an instant, is absolutely excluded."²⁸ Berkouwer therefore rejects any theory of a 'continuous creation.' Sustenance is not a continuous calling of the word out of nothingness. The sustenance aspect of providence presupposes an extant creation. Speaking of Bavinck's description of sustenance and creation, Berkouwer writes, "Each is a calling, though of a different nature. Creation calls out of nothing into existence; sustenance calls to continued existing."²⁹ So Berkouwer sees a distinction between creation and sustenance, yet nevertheless rejects the idea of renewed acts of creation *ex nihilo*.

Berkouwer goes on to discuss sustenance in regard to grace. Is the sustenance of creation *gracious* towards man or is it just merely a necessary backdrop by which God works soteriologically with the elect? In this discussion, Berkouwer brings forward the views of Abraham Kuyper, Klass Schilder, Herman Hoeksema, Cornelius Van Til, and John Murray.³⁰ Berkouwer believes

²⁷ Ibid., 57.

²⁸ Ibid., 61.

²⁹ Ibid., 63.

³⁰ Kuyper insists that common grace must be seen in regard to God's longsuffering and forbearance. Schilder, contra Kuyper, sees no grace in the sustenance and continuance of life, nor in its cultural development. Hoeksema held a similar view to that of Schilder in regard to grace. Coming to the discussion from a supralapsarian point of view, he maintains that there cannot be a favorable disposition nor any grace offered to the non-elect whatsoever. Murray and Van Til hold that Scripture shows the gifts of God reflecting His disposition. Therefore, to give a good

that to disregard common grace is to view sustenance as just a mere mechanical maintenance of creation. Only as we see God *soteriologically* can the confession of Providence as sustenance be made.

The issue of providence as government views government emphasizing the purpose or aim which God proposes and then goes on to achieve. God's purpose is within all His activities, which would include primary and secondary causes.³¹ Though the Lord's purpose comes through in all human activity, His power is not seen as an all-consuming energy that rules out all human movement. However, just as important to note is that the use of human means is not a limiting factor to the scope or purpose of God's activity. How does this square? Berkouwer writes, "Man's activity falls, as the smaller of two concentric circles, completely within the greater circle of God's purpose."³² Even in sin, God's activity is not limited. As Berkouwer says, God is "conqueror even *in* man's sin."³³

Berkouwer brings the providence doctrine into a christological understanding. He brings the ruling of God into the realm of the kingship of Christ. Berkouwer, admitting that this area can be problematic, writes, "The problem of whether governments rule as subject to God the Father or as subject to Christ as crowned by the Father has been subject to debate in non-dialectical Reformed circles."³⁴ Berkouwer sees the rule of God as existing *within* the rule of

gift is to have a gracious God as the giver. Therefore, Murray and Van Til would agree that God does extend a measure of common grace to the reprobate.

³¹ "Earthly and human factors play their part, but the problem of first and second causes is not experienced as a real difficulty in the light of the overshadowing power of God" (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 86).

³² *Ibid.*, 92.

³³ *Ibid.*, 93 (emphasis his). "God acts *in* men's acts: in Pilate's sentence, in Judas's betrayal, yea, in everything that men do with Christ. God's activity embraces all these and leads them along His mysterious way" (96).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 107. Berkouwer broaches this subject by tracing the thought of Kuyper. Kuyper made a distinction between the *regnum essentiale* and *regnum oeconomiam*. The *regnum essentiale* is that to

Christ since His historical ascension. God the Father, whose providential reign was immediate, now works His providential government *mediately* in Christ.

Berkouwer then advances his theory of *concurrence*.³⁵ The concurrence doctrine is an attempt to be balanced, an attempt to not short-change either providence nor human activity. Berkouwer writes, “He who understands well the biblical teaching of God’s government knows that it is no despotism, compulsion, or sort of overpowering which renders real creaturely activity null or impossible. He knows that it is a divine ruling *in* and *over* all creaturely enterprise.”³⁶

Berkouwer brings in Bavinck’s argument that God posits within man the ability to act, but yet the choice to use correctly or misuse this ability fall to the individual. Bavinck is not comfortable to leave the case here, yet he admits of the mystery of the conclusion of this argument. Kuyper, on the other hand, goes

which the governors of the world belong. They are the immediate means through which God works out His sovereignty as Creator. The *regnum oeconomiam* is a kingdom which has a special, mediating character. It is a mediation due to the disruption which resulted from it. Kuyper points out that “[t]he point of contact between these two kingdoms, . . . lies in the person of the Mediator, who is King in the rule of grace and, at the same time, second person of the Trinity” (108). Kuyper’s view is that God rules *in* Christ. God the Father does not abdicate His providential rule with the ascension of Christ. Instead, God’s rule is mediated through Christ. The change comes only in the *mode* of God’s rule. God’s former *immediate* providential activity becomes *mediate* through Christ. Berkouwer asserts, “The New Testament sees the ascension as historically unique, but at the same time it shows us that *God* rules the world in Christ. The rule *in* Christ is a particular mode of the divine government” (111, emphasis his).

³⁵ A possible third aspect, as Berkouwer inquires.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 129 (emphasis his). Though there is a strong attempt at a healthy balance between the providence of God and human responsibility and decision-making, I believe the point needs to be emphasized that though humans make their choices freely (anthropocentrically-speaking), those choices are governed (and dare I say ‘controlled’?) theocentrically. The factors required for choosing are contingent. This naturally leads to the question “contingent on what?” In faith, it can be said the presenting of those choices and the making of those choices derive their efficacy from God. In Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950; reprint 1978), 259, Witsius says, “Nor does God concur only in the actions of second causes when they work, He also inflows into the actual causes so that they *may* work. Because the beginning of an action depends, if not more at least not less on God than does its progress” (emphasis mine).

further by saying that God not only supplies the ability to act, but goes beyond that by He Himself being the one who acts. "It follows from God's omnipresence that 'He can never be unemployed and, further, that He cannot merely deposit a supply of power.' The influx is not a mere provision of ability, but an active, personal operation. This, according to Kuyper, brings out the specific Reformed character of the confession of Providence."³⁷ Though this seems one small step away from saying that God is in some way responsible and guilty of cooperating in sin, Berkouwer writes, "It only reminds us again that we shall never fathom the divine over-ruling, certainly not in regard to the sinful activity of man."³⁸ How is this seeming dichotomy solved? Berkouwer says it cannot be resolved rationally; it must be resolved in confession of guilt and faith. He goes on to say, "There is a solution, but it is the solution of faith, which knows its own responsibility—as it knows the unapproachable holiness of God. He who does not listen in faith to God's voice is left with an insoluble dilemma."³⁹ Berkouwer maintains that it is impossible to explain God's sovereign work and creaturely freedom. He says that we must instead direct ourselves to Scripture which reveals the almighty activity of God and also teaches human responsibility.

Providence and Miracles

Berkouwer sees as a point of departure for the discussion of miracles in relation to providence the subject of naturalism and supernaturalism. Modernism took

³⁷ Ibid., 132.

³⁸ Ibid., 133.

³⁹ Ibid. For those would attempt to put forth a "permission" doctrine to resolve this difficulty, Berkouwer writes, "He who accepts the idea of permission as a *solution* to the problem of the relation between God's work and man's sin succumbs to the natural desire for logical synthesis. He can thereupon arrive only at a dualistic division of labor between God and man. And this is to pervert the testimony of Scripture." (139).

the road of naturalism. Naturalism viewed miracles as being “natural.” In other words, God *did* work ‘miraculously’ in the world; however, that same work was *in relation* to nature. Therefore, all supposed miracles were natural because the term “nature” encompasses the entirety of this world’s interdependent relationships. Naturalism rejected the dualism of supernaturalism.

This modernistic view created a problem, however, with the concept of God working immediately within His creation. Here, Berkouwer quotes Allard Pierson as saying, “Though it may be desirable to speak kind and pleasant words from the pulpit to attentive audiences, it is better to be silent when these words have meaning only in a world which is no longer and can no longer be ours.”⁴⁰ Thus, he resigned his office within the Church due to the fact that he could not hold to a view of supernaturalism. However, Berkouwer points out that many modernists did not follow men such as Pierson. They were hesitant to travel to the ‘end’ of the road to which modernism leads. Berkouwer brings out the notion that human experience everywhere encounters a duality between what is and what ought to be, between the real and the ideal. It was this duality that monism mistakenly ignored.⁴¹

Berkouwer notes that miracles are rejected in proportion to the extension of our knowledge. The more nature becomes more ‘knowable’ and apparent to us (Berkouwer even uses the word “transparent”⁴²), the more the possibility of the supernatural and miraculous fades.

Berkouwer brings the thought of Kuyper and Bavinck forward to exposit this subject. Bavinck did not view a competition between the extension of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 191.

⁴¹ Ibid., 192. Berkouwer puts forth the foundational element on which monism rested: “The absolutism of natural science was the rock on which anti-supernaturalistic monism rested. Its influence has more recently been demonstrated in theology by the ‘de-mythologizing’ of the New Testament.”

⁴² Ibid., 194.

human knowledge and the activity of God.⁴³ Kuyper was in agreement with Bavinck. Kuyper disagreed with supernaturalism. However, this was far from putting him within the camp of the modernists. The way in which Kuyper disagreed was that supernaturalism put forward a false system.⁴⁴ His rejection was not from a modernistic, natural design, but in an attempt to maintain the transcendence of God over *all* reality. Berkouwer summarizes:

A miracle, thus, is no occasional intervention by God into the course of natural things, for nothing operates through any power apart from God. A miracle means nothing more than that God at a given moment wills a certain thing to occur differently than it had up to that moment been willed by Him to occur.⁴⁵

Therefore, Kuyper did not deny miracles. Instead, Kuyper refused to consider nature as some abstract idea where a miracle intruded. He saw nature *and* miracles both inseparably connected to the effectual activity of God.⁴⁶

Berkouwer adds to this the soteriological aspect. He writes that miracles are “saving acts.”⁴⁷ The miracle which God effectuates is not a brute act. It is purposive. These acts of God are acts not accomplished simply for the purpose

⁴³ On this, Berkouwer goes on to assert, “The repudiation of this competition idea is of fundamental significance for the correct approach to the problem of miracles” (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 195).

⁴⁴ The “system” with which Kuyper disagreed was one which viewed nature as “a power that stands over against God with its own forces and laws, under Him, to be sure, in that He hinders it from doing anything against His will, but possessing with its powers and laws a certain independence beside, under, or over against God. And that is not a pious but an ungodly conception, which we deeply abhor and which poisons true supernaturalism” (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 195).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁶ Berkouwer, expounding on Kuyper and Bavinck’s thoughts along with an amassed Scriptural apology maintains, “A miracle is not an abnormal or unnatural occurrence presupposing the normality of nature, but a redeeming reinstatement of the normality of world and life through the new dominion of God, which stands antithetically against the kingdom of this world. Miracles are not part of a supernatural order that intrudes upon an absolutized ‘natural’ order of things, thereupon creating a tension between miracles and nature. They reveal the kingdom of God in opposition to the devil and his dominion” (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 211).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

of accomplishing the miracle. Contrary, they are acts that bring man to the point of decision—"the decision which determines life," as Berkouwer puts it.⁴⁸ Hence, miracles are salvific in purpose and soteriological in design. The miracles are signs which point toward a decision which must be made regarding Christ. He writes:

God attests the proclaimed salvation through miracles and signs, even as through the giving of the Holy Spirit. The signs form, according to Calvin, an approbation of the preaching. They undersign the apostles' teaching with a special affirmation; they are the seals of the [W]ord. Calvin put special emphasis on the witness character of the miracles. But it must be remembered that the sign is rooted in the reality—in the healing, in the raising from the dead, and in the restoration. This restoration and healing are, as realities, signs of the power of Christ and of the kingdom of redemption. It has often been pointed out that Christ did not heal nearly all the sick, but that only a few were restored or raised from the dead by His miraculous power. This absence of promiscuousness only accentuates the witness character of His miracles.⁴⁹

God brings all things into being that are. In that regard, miracles are works of God which He performs in a way not expected. It goes against not nature, but of our own understanding and expectation of nature which has been facilitated by our knowledge. Berkouwer says this "'otherwise' of God's working" is readily found evident in Scripture and also lays a solid foundation concerning the witness aspect of the act.⁵⁰ "This accounts for the arousal of amazement," Berkouwer contends.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 214.

⁵⁰ Miracles are not proofs addressed to the intellect that thereby man should be convinced. They do not make faith superfluous. On the contrary, they summon men to believe. The witness character of miracles puts before man the decision which he must make as to Christ. He who views miracles from the standpoint of the antithesis, God—natural law, has ignored the deepest meaning of miracles The Divine act in miracles does not break any natural laws, as though they were absolute. Miracles are inscrutable acts of God, which can be accepted as acts of God *only through faith*. There can be no serious talk of a conflict of science. A conflict occurs only when man abstracts nature, as an absolute, closed system of natural causes from God's

The providence of God concerning miracles leads to faith—faith in God, not in the miracles. Miracles point to the decision of faith. Berkouwer, contrasting the miracles of anti-Christ, brings forth and summarizes that “the decision of faith cannot lie in signs and wonders as such.”⁵² Miracles are God’s providential acting in unexpected ways which points humanity to a faith decision in Christ.

The Theodicy Question

Berkouwer couches the theodicy issue within the scope of pastoral concern. In a world that is inclusive of pain, tragedy, and suffering, an explanation seems to be in order. If God is sovereign and all-powerful and loving, how can these differing facts (i.e., God and the world in which we live) be reconciled?

Theodicy is the attempt by man to somehow offer a rational explanation concerning God and evil. Berkouwer writes:

Theodicy is a justification of God’s providential rule. It attempts to prove that in spite of all enigmas and all criticisms God’s governing of the world is holy, good, and just. Theodicy is an attempt to defend God against all complaints or accusations by demonstrating the meaningfulness and purpose of God’s activity in the world and in human life. It presupposes the seriousness of all sorts of doubts and criticisms and assumes that there are empirical facts which cause tensions and pose problems in connection with the Divine rule.⁵³

Theodicy is an apologetic stance by which man seeks to account for both the evil in the world and a loving, powerful God. Therefore, during times of crises (e.g.,

Providence, and considers the possibility of miracles as meaning the possibility of a supernatural breaking of natural law” (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 216 [emphasis mine]).

⁵¹ Ibid., 214.

⁵² Ibid., 230.

⁵³ Ibid., 232.

war, economic depression, famine, injustices, etc.), the theodicy issue becomes acute.

Berkouwer begins his examination of theodicy by tracing the development of five forms of theodicy which have entered onto the apologetic scene. They are 1) dualistic theodicy, 2) harmonistic theodicy, 3) teleological theodicy, 4) the theodicy of Winfred Monod, and 5) christological theodicy. I will briefly outline Berkouwer's thought concerning these.

First, Berkouwer views *dualistic theodicy* as "refusing to resolve the contradiction between light and darkness in an original monism."⁵⁴ Hence, the dualism results in a refusing to attempt to resolve the seeming contradiction for which theodicy strives to reconcile. Good and evil flow out from their differing respective fountainheads until at last the good will triumph. Good emits from an eternal principle of good as does evil from an eternal principle of evil. Berkouwer points out that this theodicy can be found in Zoroastrianism and Manicheanism. In regards to the Christian faith, Berkouwer puts forward, "A theodicy which is ultimately dualistic is . . . to be judged a sham solution of the problem of evil. In resolving evil into an eternal principle, dualism only teases the mind away from evil's present grisly reality."⁵⁵

Second, Berkouwer discusses the theodicy which is best represented in Stoicism and the philosophy of Leibniz—*harmonistic theodicy*. This theodicy maintains that "ours is the best possible world."⁵⁶ Here, we view things from a God-centered point of view. Individual situations and circumstances are seen within the greater purpose of God. In all things, there is a "cosmic unity" which

⁵⁴ Ibid., 235.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 236.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

entails that all things are set within a pre-established harmony.⁵⁷ Berkouwer finds the major flaw in this theodicy in the fact that evil is inherent in creation in this view. Evil resides in the nature and structure of the world. Evil is simply utilitarian and functions along with the whole in complete harmony with creation. Thus, the harmonistic theodicy is Leibniz's "defense of God."⁵⁸

Third, the *teleological theodicy* has similarities to that of the harmonistic. They both see evil within the scope of the entire creation as opposed to just disconnected evils. When viewed in this manner, things which appear in and of themselves evil are grouped with other events to see that the purpose was in fact good. Thus, the evil in a singular circumstance is wiped away by the plurality of circumstances which result in the greater good.⁵⁹ Berkouwer contends that this view is "limitlessly simple" and "does not really explain the purpose of pain, nor

⁵⁷ Berkouwer describes the varying evils which Leibniz delineates (i.e., metaphysical, physical, and moral evil). "Metaphysical evil is really imperfectness of development, physical evil is suffering, and moral evil is sin." Berkouwer traces Leibniz's thought to the conclusion that from metaphysical evil flows moral evil and from moral evil issues physical evil; therefore, a world without evil would be inconceivable and impossible. As a result, Leibniz could maintain that God is justified because He "has made the best possible world" (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 237-8). Celestine N. Bittle, *God and His Creatures: Theodicy* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1953), 360-1, seems to hold a similar view when she writes, "The individual being thus has its own proper end as an individual and also an end in the order of the group and of the universe. As an individual being it is less important than as a member of the group and of the universe. God's providence extends to all beings, whether they be considered as individuals or members of a higher order. But if God wanted the order of the physical world to be such that the inferior beings exist for the superior and that the well-being of the individuals be subordinated to the well-being of the groups and of the universe as a whole, then that is the way that the world should be. *And that means that physical evil is a normal feature of the world . . . the deficiencies of nature as the necessary result of the limited perfection of created nature and its powers. There must be some limitation and some deficiency somewhere. Hence, God can permit physical evil and indirectly will it as a normal feature of the order of the universe*" (emphasis mine).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁹ Berkouwer defines teleological theodicy as that which "evil is considered in connection with the purpose, the *telos*, of things. That which, when considered by itself, appears evil, takes on another color when one considers its results or the purpose to which it is directed" (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 239).

does it establish a theodicy.”⁶⁰ It’s basic failure is the deficiency of grasping the devastating existence of sin, suffering, and death.

Fourth, Berkouwer discusses *Wilfred Monod’s theodicy* theory. Berkouwer maintains that Monod takes a different view of God. By doing this, he ‘resolves’ the theodicy conflict. He divorces the “Creator God” from the “Father God” who is revealed in Christ. In doing this, Monod reveals his ‘Marcionic’ colors. Berkouwer sums up Monod’s thought by writing, “Monod, confronted by grim reality, seeks to justify the Father in the face of it by saying . . . that He had nothing to do with it.”⁶¹

Fifth, Berkouwer tackles the *christological theodicy* of Karl Barth. Barth, first of all, does not believe that God must be justified before man concerning His ways in His creation. Also, he does not believe that God could be responsible for willing what has come to be. Berkouwer says that, “Dogmatics, according to Barth, must in the nature of the case, be logically *inconsistent* here.”⁶² Berkouwer, however, points out that since Barth believes that God did not will these things to be, Barth has *ipso facto* committed himself to a theodicy. Later, Barth *did* go on to say that creaturely misery was in the will of God since He willed *not* to forbid it. Barth’s christological theodicy maintains paradoxically that “in Christ ‘the created world, here and now, is already perfect in all its imperfections.’”⁶³ This is a kind of perfectionism in an imperfect creation which can only be seen through the eyes of faith in Christ. Barth here is similar to Leibniz in considering this the “best of all possible worlds,” though there are many differences within the thought of Leibniz and Barth.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 241.

⁶² Ibid. (emphasis his).

⁶³ Ibid., 243.

So how does Berkouwer view the theodicy issue? He maintains that we are not to divorce the issue from revelation, thus spiraling into a sea of metaphysical contemplations. Berkouwer's chief complaint against the Church in her attempt to construct a theodicy is that "it has assumed that the world and its events, apart from revelation, speak their own language and that their speech can be understood and translated by our natural reason. God and His righteousness take their place, not at the *beginning*, but at the *end* of this process of thought. God, as it were, the a posteriori conclusion of analytical thought."⁶⁴ As a result, the world and God are misunderstood because it does not begin with revelation.

The Scriptures speak against speaking of the reality of the world *apart* from revelation. "The decision of faith, which knows from the start that any unrighteousness in God is impossible, is decisive for any consideration of theodicy."⁶⁵ God is not to be brought before the bar of human reason and experiential reality. Contrariwise, God is to be understood as all reality existing *for Him*.

One cannot approach theodicy from reality to God because reality can only be comprehended and understood aright in light of revelation. Only the eye of faith understands correctly reality. Any other attempt to approach God *apologetically* from the basis of experiential and empirical reality "make[s] His righteousness a *deduction* of human reason."⁶⁶ When an investigation of the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 248 (emphasis his).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 250. Berkouwer further asserts, "This makes all natural theodicy, in spite of its apologetic intent, worthless and unacceptable. Instead of preparing the way for fruitful conversation, instead of erecting a dam against the secularization of thought, theodicy only suggests that we try again to reach God by way of natural understanding. It is the ironic drama of theodicy that it actually abets the progressive secularizing of thought by insisting that man can understand his world without revelation. And the fact that one in theodicy usually concludes

cosmos, extracted from revelation, becomes the foundation of theodicy, humanity conclusively arrives at an illegitimate and unpeaceful simplification.⁶⁷

Berkouwer maintains the incomprehensibility of God. Even in Scripture, one sees the incomprehensibility of God revealed. However, Berkouwer makes it clear that to not be able to comprehend God does not axiomatically mean that God is simply an 'outlaw' to whose power alone we must acquiesce. Still, we cannot bring *ultimate* resolution to the problem of theodicy and must, as Berkouwer believes, regard the boundaries of our understanding and acquire placidity with it.

Berkouwer examines the short-falls of our knowledge with regard to three areas: 1) God's wrath, 2) man's guilt, and 3) the Church's doxology. Wrath emphasizes that sin cannot be traced back to God *causally*. The church has always claimed that God is not the author of sin. Though all causes are contingent on God, the Church has maintained that God's action in sin and guiltiness are not the same as man's action. Also, Scripture speaks of God working in the event of sin not just in a reactionary manner. Because man *a priori* rules out any possibility of there being sin or guiltiness in God, He cannot be called to account to man. And God is not guilty of sin because holiness directs wrath to satisfy itself upon *all* evil. Thus, as Berkouwer puts forth, theodicy is found in the opposite of wrath—forgiveness from wrath. We are not caught

with an empty, abstract God concept is already a judgment against this method" (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 250).

⁶⁷ Berkouwer contends, "The apologete will have to advance into the struggle with modern thought from a position of faith, profoundly convinced that the logic of modern empirical thought, of neutral analysis and induction is the corrupted logic of sinful thinking. A true apologetic must begin with the awareness that unchristian thought involves an estrangement from the glory of God and suppression of the truth . . . Reality cannot be known, phenomenologically, in its deepest sense, apart from the light of Divine revelation" (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 253).

rationality between two opposing viewpoints. Instead, we must view the limits of our knowledge within the gift of forgiveness.

Next, Berkouwer considers the limitations of man's knowledge within the realm of human guilt. Here lies a conundrum—God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Berkouwer maintains, "The problem of theodicy is insoluble outside of a faith that knows the limits of human reason. According to revelation, the confidence of faith in God's holy direction of the world is possible only in the recognition of guilt. With the blessing of salvation, guilt is the more openly recognized and confessed. And in this confession it becomes possible to honor God's incomprehensible government of the world."⁶⁸ Again, we see the limits of our knowledge in regard to divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Finally, Berkouwer considers the significance of the Church's doxology. He begins by examining the praise of God's people in Scripture. Berkouwer points out that these praises and glorying do not come from a people who live without fear or misgivings. They have not escaped all of life's tragedy and suffering (i.e., evil). On the contrary, it seemed that praise increased as peril and danger came close. Berkouwer writes, "The remarkable fact is that all the questions that arise in Scripture around what we call the problem of theodicy have their profoundest and most definitive answer in a *Hallelujah*."⁶⁹ The limits of our knowing concerning the theodicy issue are drowned by the eye of faith through praise and doxology.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid., 266.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 267.

⁷⁰ Berkouwer, speaking eschatologically, writes, "The Apocalypse speaks to us with assurance that only by our participation in this humble, yet jubilant, chorus can the oppression of anxiety and dread be lifted from life in this enigmatic world. Without this knowledge of the Lamb, without this knowledge of God, then, the problems are only multiplied. They become hopelessly insoluble, because they must then be wrongly proposed. We can attempt to solve them only by

Berkouwer's Doctrine of Providence Examined and Applied

The Doctrine Examined

Berkouwer's approach to theology was a departure from many (if not most or all!) of his predecessors. De Moor points out, "When Berkhof in his 'three phases' analysis spoke about 'the revolutionary tendency' of Berkouwer's methodology, he undoubtedly expressed a general sentiment. Whether concerned or puzzled or enthused about it, all participants in the discussion about Berkouwer's way of theologizing agreed that it was a rather untraditional one, even in comparison with the way in which Kuyper and Bavinck had attempted to renew Reformed theology before him."⁷¹ An overriding theme within Berkouwer's *Providence of God* is that of "correlation." Whether the concept is brought forth decisively or revealed implicitly, in much of Berkouwer's writings, it is there. Smedes writes:

Berkouwer does not set out his methodological guidelines in any formal prolegomena to his theology, but they are not hard to ferret out of his various volumes. They can be summed up in his word "co-relationship." Though he uses the term frequently, he gives it no systematic explanation. It indicates that theology does not work according to its own inner-evolved principles, nor according to self-selected norms, nor for its own sake. Theology is in constant and dynamic relationship with faith and, hence, with the Word of

summoning a rationalistically construed God before the judgment of human reason, or, in irrationalistic reaction, by submission to the arbitrariness of the whimsical god of fate, or, as a last possibility, by turning the critique against God around and setting up a proud judgment against man himself" (Berkouwer, *Providence*, 273).

⁷¹ J. C. De Moor, *Towards a Biblically Theo-Logical Method: A Structural Analysis and a Further Elaboration of Dr. G. C. Berkouwer's Hermeneutic-Dogmatic Method* (Amsterdam: Kok-Kampen, 1980), 45.

God, on the one hand, and the Church and the pulpit on the other. Only as it lives and works at the center of this double polarity can theology be meaningful and relevant.⁷²

What is Berkouwer's idea of correlation? The correlation concept is more far-reaching than a mere endeavor to verbalize the instrumental, receptive characteristic of faith or the sovereignty/human responsibility question. Even in this very primal 'Berkouwer-ian' period, it seems to me that an anti-systematic outlook is being articulated which is commonplace in much of modern theology. 'Correlation' was being established not so much as an explanation, but rather as an abnegation of the probability of an explanation. Berkouwer sets a "real theology of the Word" over against a "beautiful system." Hence, a deflection (in my assessment) toward an experiential theology *over against* a propositional, rational, systematic theology.⁷³

When analyzing Berkouwer's doctrine of providence, we shall confront not merely theories, but realities—realities seen and understood only in faith; but, when thus perceived, definitive for our own lives and the life of the Church. Here and throughout Berkouwer's writing, the allusion is ever-present that a theory cannot (*a priori*) correspond to reality. Reality is a different dimension from logic and theories and systematics.

I do not believe that one should omit this close camaraderie with the neo-orthodox accentuation on supra-history even in this early composition. The later publication of *A Half Century of Theology* sheds some valuable light on even earlier antecedents of this unorthodox aspect of Berkouwer. He begins his reflections on his "half century" by noting that "'ethical theology' was a

⁷² Lewis B. Smedes, "G. C. Berkouwer" in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Philip E. Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 65-6.

⁷³ Of course, I would hold that theology must maintain the experiential along with the rational; however, I believe that theology must start with either one or the other. Either theology is constructed rationally and then lived out or it is ascertained experientially and then believed. I lean toward the former.

prominent concern for conservative theology in 1920.” “Ethical Theology” was distinguished by the anti-dogma slogan: “not dead doctrine, but the living Lord.”⁷⁴ In the following chapter (“The Era of Apologetics”), Berkouwer begins by criticizing the way dogmatics came “as a rounded-off and finished system,” and then states: “But later we came in touch with all sorts of doubts and uncertainty about facets of the system; problems and questions unsettled us.”⁷⁵ This anti-systematics predilection has seemed to characterize Berkouwer throughout, but seemed to evidence itself to a larger audience later in his publishing career via his subsequent writings where it seems that the seeds of this disposition came into bloom.

When Smedes sets forth Berkouwer’s correlation principle, his recapitulation seems to corroborate what I have just said regarding the faith/knowledge conflict. Paraphrasing Berkouwer, Smedes writes:

Theology is a work of faith, and all of its statements must be such as the believer can recognize as objects of faith. This is perhaps the single most influential principle in Berkouwer’s theology. It means that the object of theology is never the construction of a logically coherent system Only those matters that the believer can and ought to confess as his personal faith and which the Church can proclaim as the faith of the Gospel are the proper conclusions of theology.⁷⁶

“Berkouwer,” says Smedes, “declines the temptation to let deduction and inference determine theological conclusions: the demand for faith, not the dictates of logic, must characterize the kerygma.”⁷⁷ Such an assessment by Smedes is basically an accurate observation of Berkouwer’s position.

⁷⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 11. It is interesting to note that Berkouwer and those who follow him seem not averse to throwing this slogan at Old Princeton theologians and their contemporary counterparts.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁶ Smedes, “Berkouwer” in *Creative Minds*, 65-6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

Again, I find an up-to-date attestation of Berkouwer's convictions in this regard in *A Half Century of Theology*—especially in a chapter titled “Faith and Reasonableness.” Berkouwer is dejected with antecedent settlements and again finds sympathy with the same conflict in recent Roman Catholicism. In rejecting the classical Reformed method, as well as a subjective, existential “leap,” I believe he sometimes confounds faith with knowledge of God and at other times seems to disconnect them. In representing the issue as it developed in the “half century,” it sounds very much like a description of Berkouwer's view: “Faith . . . is not against reason, though it is *above* reason Faith becomes defenseless, in a sense. It has no defenses for itself; it has no apologia, maybe no way of giving answers—except private ones.”⁷⁸ Here, a parallel to the reference above of subjectivism in Berkouwer is evidenced. Words like “tension” and “paradox” are favored over “argument,” “logic,” and “good and necessary consequences.” There seems to be a congenial posture in Berkouwer toward the philosophy that a faith founded upon truth that is rational would cause faith to lose its dynamic and abolish true freedom. Against this background, Berkouwer's disavowal of faith as a subjective leap sounds to me somewhat hypocritical.

Given this increasing devotion to faith versus logic, correlation versus systematics, it is not demanding to ascertain why Berkouwer has increasingly been at odds with classical Reformed orthodoxy, whether seventeenth-century or the Princeton theologians.⁷⁹ He is frequently affirming what I think to be a false

⁷⁸ Berkouwer, *Half Century*, 147.

⁷⁹ I am well aware that some have and will seek to avert the impact of this by suggesting a clear disagreement between Calvin and “Calvinism,” with truth and Berkouwer on the side of Calvin. However, something is not true simply because Calvin said it. And furthermore, it is a highly debatable judgment that Calvin, and possibly the *Westminster Confession*, were substantially different from the Reformed orthodoxy of the seventeenth century or of the “Princeton theologians.” It is a highly suspicious trend that sees Calvin as a post-Kantian existentialist or neo-orthodox, depending on one's perspective. On the contrary, as Henry Krabbendam, “B. B. Warfield vs. G. C. Berkouwer on Scripture,” *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids:

dilemma between “logically coherent systems” and matters one confesses as “personal faith,” between “the dictates of logic” and “the demand for faith.” The hypothesis of their incompatibility is unwarranted. For those who function with that assumption, or for those who see a contradiction because they are aware only of an abused or errant system (which would not then be “logically coherent”), Berkouwer gives the appearance of a solution via the venture to thrust theology out of the sphere of logic and reason and into the noumenal domain of Kantian philosophy.

Berkouwer is not apprehensive of the complex and challenging issues when it comes to the doctrine of God’s providence. He addresses them “head-on” and struggles with them each in turn. He does not avoid the contentions of church history. Yet at the close of the discussion, when each group has been brilliantly critiqued, Berkouwer seems to assert in effect: “You’re both incorrect ultimately. If you consider it ‘in faith,’ you can see the answer is more deep-seated than you contemplated.” At the risk of sounding polemic and maybe even a bit acerbic, it seems that the pith of what Berkouwer is saying is, “Arise with me from the confines of the ‘phenomenal’ cosmos of *Historie* to the ‘noumenal’ cosmos of *Geschichte*. It is an archetype which, once detected, becomes increasingly conspicuous in all his labors.

As I stated earlier, the section where Berkouwer’s correlation principle of viewing all theology “in faith” (as I have defined it above) seems most apparent is in the area of providence.⁸⁰ These are crucial domains which invite some special consideration at this point. In a chapter entitled “A Third Aspect,”

Zondervan, 1980), 415, points out: “There is every reason to believe that, according to Warfield, Berkouwer’s emphasis upon, and usage of, the concepts of ‘correlation’ would betray a strand in his thinking that would place him in the climate of Schleiermacher’s theology—and of neo-orthodoxy.”

⁸⁰ I would also point out that it seems Berkouwer’s *Divine Election* (trans. Hugo Bekker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960]), manifests his correlation view almost as much as *The Providence of God*.

Berkouwer considers the concept of “concurrence” as a manner to communicate God’s exercise of providence in the world.⁸¹ This is a determining chapter. The complication arises of “whether total human dependence upon God leaves room for significant creaturely activity”⁸² Berkouwer’s interest is to avoid “speculation.” Given the biblical *a priori* that “God is not the author of sin,” how does one “conceive of Divine cooperation in sin?” “Is sin wholly a product of the first as well as the second cause?”⁸³ According to Berkouwer, “the dilemma is usually understood as determinism or indeterminism.”⁸⁴

Berkouwer, not fancying indeterminism, is reacting against what he feels is a logical outcome of all determinism—i.e., a kind of causality that disregards human responsibility and makes God the author of sin.⁸⁵ In this reaction, he makes several compelling affirmations. “The essential error of identifying the providence doctrine with determinism is the de-personalization of the God-concept.”⁸⁶ “The Reformed confession of Providence does not argue from the concept of causation. It simply acknowledges the invincibility of God’s sovereign activity.”⁸⁷ “. . . the use of the terms first and second causes implies that God is only the most important cause among equal causes This brings God even . . . less disguisedly down into the world-process.”⁸⁸ For Berkouwer,

⁸¹ Berkouwer, *Providence*, 125-60.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ De Moor writes, “Berkouwer also objected in his monograph on Divine providence to the often used distinction between first and second causes as a way of describing the relationship between God and man. This distinction also reflects a polar way of thinking. ‘As soon as man begins to schematize on the basis of causality, he immediately begins to grope in darkness.’ Then one either ascribes everything to God as the *first* cause in a deterministic fashion, or one emphasizes the idea that man is at any rate a second *cause*, next to God” (*Towards a Bibilically Theo-Logical Method*, 130, emphasis his).

⁸⁶ Berkouwer, *Providence*, 152.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

there seems to apparently be a contradiction between Creator and cause. Concerning the biblical reference to Jehovah as the “first and the last,” he says, “The word first points to the absolute Creator, not the first cause of all things.”⁸⁹ At best, one can admit these statements if qualified. At worst, one sees overstatements and false dilemmas.

Berkouwer apparently is assured of the inescapable dilemma, however, since he attempts a way out, a ‘third’ or middle way. The problem, he says, is not properly delineated as determinism-indeterminism.⁹⁰ The alternatives (determinism or indeterminism) are true alternatives only on a horizontal, anthropological echelon. They pose a dilemma which is reconciled in the relationship that man sustains to God. This vertical relationship between God and man alone gives possibility to a correct understanding of the problem of freedom. Both determinism . . . and indeterminism neglect the religious aspect of the problem.⁹¹ “Faith knows its boundaries,” says Berkouwer. “Rational conclusions . . . give way to living faith in Him.”⁹²

The problem is concluded, though not rationally, in confession of guilt and in faith. There is a solution, but it is the solution of faith, which discerns its own responsibility—as it perceives the inaccessible holiness of God. He who

⁸⁹ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 145.

⁹¹ Ibid., 146. The Kantian roots of this mentality are illustrated in a summary of Kant’s agnosticism in Norman L. Geisler, “Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy,” *Inerrancy*, 323: “Hence, I can know the ‘thing-to-me’ but not the ‘thing-in-itself.’ One can know what *appears* to him but not what really is. The former Kant called *phenomena* and the latter, *noumena*. Between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms there is an impassable gulf fixed by the very nature of the knowing process” (emphasis his). Another reason “we must remain forever ignorant of reality-in-itself” is this: “Whenever one attempts to apply the categories of his mind (such as unity or causality) to the noumenal realm, he ends in hopeless contradictions and antinomies.”

⁹² Ibid., 159.

does not attend in faith to God's expression is left with an enigmatic dilemma.⁹³ I am again impacted by the conclusion that Berkouwer's solution—the "religious" method "in faith" contra "rational conclusions"—has culminated in the subjective, noumenal sphere: *neither* determinism nor indeterminism! Berkouwer has appealed to a third way. What that way is appears to me to remain ambiguous and fortified in the "storm-free harbor" of supra-history.

The Doctrine Applied

Now that I have examined Berkouwer's doctrine of providence, I will seek to apply that doctrine to the catastrophic events which befell America on September 11, 2001.⁹⁴ The Center for Cooperative Research⁹⁵ meticulously details and chronicles the events leading up to 9/11 along with its aftermath. The web-site gives detailed, 'time-stamped' entries of these events allowing one to see how the entire situation unfolded. I will point out those that are most germane to that day's tragic events and our discussion of Providence:

8:46 a.m. Flight 11 slams into the north tower, 1 World Trade Center. Investigators believe it still had about 10,000 gallons of fuel and was traveling 470 mph Approximately 2,662 people are killed on the ground between this crash and the crash of Flight 175.

8:48 a.m. The first news reports appear on TV and radio that a plane may have crashed into the W[orld] T[rade] C[enter] Many reports don't come until a few minutes later. For instance, ABC first breaks into regular programming with the story at 8:52.

8:50 a.m. Rich "Doc" Miles, manager of United's Chicago system operations center, receives a call from a mechanic at an airline maintenance center in San Francisco that takes in-flight calls from flight attendants about broken items. The mechanic says a

⁹³ Ibid., 133.

⁹⁴ Hereafter, "9/11."

⁹⁵ Paul Thompson, "September 11: Minute by Minute," Center for Cooperative Research [homepage on-line]: available from <http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/timeline/main/dayof911.html>; Internet; accessed May 30, 2007.

female flight attendant from Flight 175 just called and said, “Oh my God. The crew has been killed, a flight attendant has been stabbed. We’ve been hijacked.” Then the line went dead. A dispatcher monitoring the flight then sends messages to the plane’s cockpit computer but gets no response.

8:55 a.m. A public announcement is broadcast inside the WTC South Tower, saying that the building is secure and people can return to their offices . . . Such announcements continue until a few minutes before the building is hit, and may [have led] to the deaths of hundreds of people. No one knows exactly what is said (though many later recall the phrase “the building is secure”) or who gives the authority to say it.

Between 9:01 – 9:03 a.m. Flight 175 is an unmarked blip to flight controllers in New York City. One controller stands up in horror. “No, he’s not going to land. He’s going in!” “Oh, my God! He’s headed for the city,” another controller shouts. “Oh, my God! He’s headed for Manhattan!”

9:03 a.m. Flight 175 hits the south tower, 2 World Trade Center. Millions watch the crash live on television. Approximately 2,662 people are killed on the ground between this crash and the crash of Flight 11 . . .

9:38 a.m. Flight 77 crashes into the Pentagon. Approximately 125 on the ground are later determined killed or missing . . . Flight 77 strikes the only portion of the Pentagon that had been recently renovated. “It was the only area of the Pentagon with a sprinkler system, and it had been reconstructed with a web of steel columns and bars to withstand bomb blasts. The area struck by the plane also had blast-resistant windows—2 inches thick and 2,500 pounds each—that stayed intact during the crash and fire. While perhaps 4,500 people normally would have been working in the hardest-hit areas, because of the renovation work, only about 800 were there . . .” [Los Angeles Times, 9/16/01]

9:59 a.m. The south tower of the World Trade Center collapses. It was hit by Flight 175 at 9:02.

10:03 a.m. According to the US government, Flight 93 crashes at 10:03.

10:10 a.m. All US military forces are ordered to Defcon Three (or Defcon Delta), the highest alert for the nuclear arsenal in 30 years.

10:13 a.m. Federal buildings in Washington begin evacuation. The UN building evacuates first; others follow later.

10:15 a.m. The section of the Pentagon reportedly hit by the crash of Flight 77 collapses . . . A few minutes prior to its collapse, firefighters saw warning signs and sounded a general evacuation tone. No firefighters were injured.

10:28 a.m. The World Trade Center’s north tower collapses. It was hit by Flight 11 at 8:46 . . . The death toll could have been much worse—an estimated 15,000 people made it out of the WTC to safety.

11:00 a.m. Evacuations are ordered at the tallest skyscrapers in several cities, and major tourist attractions are closed, including Walt Disney World, Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, Seattle’s Space Needle, and the Gateway Arch in St. Louis.

11:30 a.m. General Wesley Clark, former supreme commander of NATO, says on television, “This is clearly a coordinated effort. It hasn’t been announced that its (*sic*) over . . . Only one group has this kind of ability and that is Osama bin Laden’s.”

12:16 p.m. US airspace is clear except for military and emergency flights. Only a few transoceanic flights were still landing in Canada . . . At 12:30, the FAA reports about 50 flights still flying in US airspace, but none are reporting problems.

1:27 p.m. A state of emergency is declared in Washington.

4:10 p.m. Building 7 of the WTC complex is reported on fire.

5:20 p.m. Building 7 of the WTC complex, a 47-story tower, collapses from ancillary damage. No one is killed.

8:30 p.m. Bush addresses the nation on live TV In what will later be called the Bush Doctrine, he states, "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."⁹⁶

Just the recounting of these events is horrifically breathtaking. Even for those who would hold to a postmodernistic philosophy of no absolutes, one is hard-pressed not to call such an event *absolutely* evil.

How would those who believe in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, loving God give an apologetic for these events? Also, how would other religious leaders and pundits seek to explain the events of this tragic day? I have selected a representative sampling of these views from the Cable News Network's⁹⁷ news show *Larry King Live*.⁹⁸ Host Larry King introduces the show by asking, "Seeking meaning; in the aftermath of September 11, can faith heal shattered hearts and lives?" He then names the guests, which include Deepak Chopra, a spiritual adviser and best-selling author of *How to Know God*; Rabbi Harold Kushner, best-selling author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*; Bruce Wilkinson, best-selling author of *The Prayer of Jabez* and founder of Walk Through the Bible Ministries; Dr. Hathout, a scholar of Islam and senior adviser to the Muslim Public Affairs; and John MacArthur, the pastor of the Grace Community Church and also president of the Masters College and Seminary. The show begins by asking theodical questions such as the following:

KING: Rabbi, if God is omnipotent, he could have prevented this, could he not?

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Hereafter, "CNN."

⁹⁸ CNN Larry King Weekend, "September 11: Where Was God?," CNN.com [homepage online]: available from <http://www.cnn.com/transcripts/0109/29/klw.00.html>; Internet; accessed May 30, 2007.

KUSHNER: No, because I think at the very outset God gave human beings the freedom to choose between being good people and being bad people. And at tremendous risk to God's creatures and God's creation, he will not take that power away from us, that freedom, because we stop being human beings if he does. I don't find God in that terrible accident—in that act of cruelty. I find God in the courage of firemen and police. I will continue to find God in the willingness of the survivors to rebuild their lives. Remember, Larry, God's promise was not that life would be fair, God's promise was that even if life is unfair we would not have to face it alone, for he will be with us in the valley of the shadow.

KING: Bruce, didn't you at least for a moment say to yourself: I question my faith?

WILKINSON: I did not find myself questioning my faith. I began to put myself in God's shoes and thought to myself, how would I feel if I was up there next to God with the people that are there, the angels that are there; what would I see on God's—you know, his personality. You remember in the Old Testament when the great flood occurred, according to the Torah of Scriptures, it says that God was grieved in his heart because violence filled the earth. And I really believe what God felt at that moment is tremendous grief. It was so bad at the beginning that he said I'm sorry that I made man; this isn't what I had in mind for man. I can't imagine the grief that he must have felt.

KING: Doctor Hathout, when we read and learn of those letters yesterday—the letter written by one of the people who caused this horror—and he's a Muslim—and he proclaims [Allah]—that he was going to God. How do you balance that?

HATHOUT: Well, everybody can proclaim whatever he or she might want. But the reality of the matter is God does not condone or accept that his creature could be destroyed in this way, and does not accept cruelty. God is mercy and is love.

KING: So where were they getting that from?

HATHOUT: Well, look at how many people kill and get killed in the name of democracy or liberty or . . .

KING: Or Christianity.

HATHOUT: Or Christianity or patriotism, or what have you. So people have that twisted behavior sometimes.

KING: Nowhere in the Koran does it say: You should kill to go to heaven?

HATHOUT: Absolutely not.

KING: John, do you question it? I mean, do you question whether there is a God?

MACARTHUR: I don't question whether there is a God. I don't even question what God chooses to allow. It's not a matter of my opinion. As a Bible teacher and one who believes that the Bible is the authoritative word of God, Scripture tells us that God is absolutely sovereign; that everything that occurs occurs within the framework of his purpose. That is not to say that God creates evil. The Bible says He does not, nor does He do evil, nor does he tempt anybody to do evil. But evil exists. It's everywhere. And God can overrule that for his own purpose. The question is, what is his purpose in this? And that's a big question.⁹⁹

These views are a sample representation of commonly held sentiments after the tragic events of 9/11. Some believe that God was uninvolved in those events.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Still others believe that He would have prevented it if He could; however, He granted us free will to do what we may.¹⁰⁰ Still others would hold a view similar to Berkouwer (and MacArthur's above) that God governs and sustains all and everything occurs "within the framework of [H]is purpose."¹⁰¹

With 9/11 firmly in mind, Berkouwer's searching question seems to plague us: "A long series of revolutionary and catastrophic events has made an almost undeniable empirical fact of the meaninglessness of human life. Not only has this country been ravaged by global wars of incalculable destruction but, with the descent of peace, new tensions and new fears have possessed our tired generation. Can life then, still make sense? Dare one call this life meaningful?"¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ In my opinion, it seems that most of today's American evangelical churches fall into this position. Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 61, describes the typical Arminian mindset when it comes to thinking theologically in regard to tragic events, such as 9/11. Even though writing in regard to open theism, I believe that Ware's points can be applied to those who are predominantly Arminian in their theology, yet would not describe themselves as open theists. Ware writes:

Here we have, then, a fair sampling of the openness response to human tragedy, suffering, and pain. Consider this listing of the most important facets of open theism's approach:

1. God does not know in advance the future free actions of His moral creatures.
2. God cannot control the future free actions of His moral creatures.
3. Tragic events occur over which God has no control.
4. When such tragedies occur, God should not be blamed, because He was not able to prevent them from occurring, and He certainly did not will or cause them to occur.
5. When such tragic events occur, God feels the pain of those who endure its suffering.
6. God is love, and He may be trusted to always do His best to offer guidance that is intended to serve the well-being of others.
7. At times, God realizes that the guidance He gave may have inadvertently and unexpectedly led to unwanted hardship and suffering.
8. At times, God may repent of His own past actions, realizing that His own choices have not worked out well and may have led to unexpected hardship (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:11).
9. Some suffering is gratuitous and pointless, i.e., some suffering has no positive or redeeming quality to it at all, so that not even God is able to bring any good from it.
10. Regardless of whether our suffering was gratuitous, or whether God may have contributed inadvertently to our suffering, God always stands ready to help us rebuild our lives and offers us further grace, strength, direction, and counsel.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Berkouwer, *Providence*, 7.

I believe the answer to this question is “yes.” This life is meaningful. Why? I believe the answer can be found in the theodicy which Berkouwer advances. This is the pressing question: How can God *and* 9/11 exist? Can an explanation be given?

An explanation can be given, but must be accepted by faith. Similar to Berkouwer, I would also maintain that an omniscient, omnipotent, loving God presiding over a world which contains events like 9/11 is nonsensical outside of revelation. I do not believe that we can simply take the events of that day and seek a resolution through philosophical and metaphysical speculation. An event of terrorism on the level of 9/11 conducted against a free nation which is largely naive to such cruelty is assumed to be able to be understood, translated, and explained by our natural reason. Instead of God and His righteousness taken *a priori*, they are considered at the end after the facts of 9/11 are put together. The question of God and the meaning behind His activities are not at the beginning, but at the end of this process of rationalization. God then becomes the final factor at the conclusion of analytical thought.¹⁰³ Because of this, the thinking of the world concerning 9/11 sets itself off on an incorrect trajectory and therefore can never find its way to the correct conclusion (i.e., a correct theodicy).

To view the events of 9/11 aright, Berkouwer would have us view that evil from the eyes of faith. We are not to alienate 9/11 from revelation. “The decision of faith, which knows from the start that any unrighteousness in God is impossible, is decisive for any consideration of theodicy.”¹⁰⁴ The tribunal of human reason does not have God stand before it, call Him to account, and then assess Him. We must begin with Scripture that reveals “for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom. 11:36, NASB). God is sovereign

¹⁰³ Ibid., 248.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

and there is no sin or evil in God; we must acknowledge this *at the beginning* of our thinking. Therefore, we could never conclude nor even investigate the possibility that God might have done some evil thing concerning 9/11, whether bound up in apathy, a lack of love, a lack of power, etc. Whatever the case, we cannot conclude that there is disservice on God's part in regard to 9/11 when we believe *a priori* that it is impossible to ascribe evil to Him.

Not only should 9/11 be viewed in faith, I believe Berkouwer has a very strong point concerning the doxological aspect of 9/11 for the Church. Though we have misgivings, a lack of understanding, and possibly even a bit of fear, our faith in God as He is revealed in Scripture should evoke our praise and glory. I will adapt a phrase from Berkouwer by pointing out, "The remarkable fact is that all the questions that arise in [regard to the tragic events of 9/11 and the justification of God] have their profoundest and most definitive answer in a *Hallelujah*."¹⁰⁵ Queries, hesitations, anxieties, and reservations concerning 9/11 and other similar occurrences in our world should be resolved and engulfed by the focus of faith through the praise and doxology of the Church.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 267.

PART II

Introduction

G. C Berkouwer, on the first page of his chapter simply titled “Resurrection” in his *The Return of Christ*, states: “The reason that the confession of the resurrection of the body found a place in the creeds of the church so early is that this doctrine receives clear and emphatic attention in the New Testament.”¹⁰⁶ That being the case, the reaction of the Christian believer on first discovering that the hyper-preterists are, like Hymenaeus and Philetus, “saying that the resurrection has already taken place” (2 Tim. 2:18)¹⁰⁷ is one of astonishment and puzzlement. Any attempt to place the eschatological resurrection in the past seems to run aground on the fact that the Bible consistently speaks of that resurrection as a resurrection of the *body*, and who can reasonably affirm that such a resurrection has already happened? Hyper-preterists refer scornfully to this as the “bones-are-still-in-the-graves” objection,¹⁰⁸ but it is clearly biblical and destructive of hyper-preterist theology. As G. C. Berkouwer notes, “Against the background of these tensions (the denial of the resurrection in Corinth and the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus) the expectation of the resurrection is clear and imposing.”¹⁰⁹

Thus we may sympathize with Geerhardus Vos’s judgment: “Bodily the resurrection certainly is, and every attempt to dephysicize it . . . amounts to an exegetical *tour de force* so desperate as to be not worth losing many words

¹⁰⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. James Van Oosterom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 170.

¹⁰⁷ Perhaps most hyper-preterists today would insist that 2 Tim. 2:18 does not fairly represent their teaching, because, although the general resurrection took place in A.D. 70, each Christian still experiences a certain kind of “resurrection” at his or her death.

¹⁰⁸ This is the title of chapter 6 in John Noë, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion* (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 2000), 141-50.

¹⁰⁹ Berkouwer, 171.

over.”¹¹⁰ Readers of 1 Corinthians 15, e.g., have agreed for two thousand years that the apostle Paul obviously writes in that chapter about a future *bodily* resurrection of believers grounded in the reality of the *bodily* resurrection of their covenant Head and Savior. That being the case, why are hyper-preterists now denying this?¹¹¹

To understand the motive behind the hyper-preterists’ novel reinterpretations of the New Testament teaching on the resurrection, we must remember what is their starting point and why it is their starting point. Then we will be in a position to examine the hyper-preterist reinterpretations of the various elements of the New Testament picture of one constituent part of the consummation, the resurrection.

The Starting Point and Apologetic Motive of Hyper-Preterism

The all-controlling starting point of hyper-preterists is succinctly summed up in this statement by Walt Hibbard:

The Second Coming promised by Jesus Christ in Matthew 24 and scheduled for fulfillment within that first century generation actually happened when Jesus said it would, and was immediately followed by the long prophesied redemptive events including the Resurrection of the Dead, the Judgment of the Nations, and the New Heavens and New Earth.¹¹²

We shall see that hyper-preterists disagree among themselves about the correct method of harmonizing such passages as 1 Corinthians 15 and 1

¹¹⁰ Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994), 102.

¹¹¹ Of course, hyper-preterists would deny that they are *denying* the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. They would insist that they are simply *reinterpreting* it.

¹¹² Walt Hibbard, “A Courteous Response to Dr. Gary North’s Vitriolic Essay,” at www.preteristarchive.com.

Thessalonians 4:13-18 with this overriding metanarrative. However, there is no disagreement about the metanarrative itself. In fact, it is their unifying doctrine.

They insist on this metanarrative and interpret every biblical text in accordance with it. They think that without it, Christians have no satisfactory answer to the charge of religious liberals and the irreligious skeptics that the two-millennium “delay” of the promised Parousia has proved Jesus and the New Testament writers to be mistaken about the future. Thus, the motivation behind their theology and their exegesis is apologetic. That theme is continually emphasized in their writings. E.g., Ed Stevens states:

If Jesus and the apostles taught immanency (as in fact they did), then a non-fulfillment destroys the inspiration and integrity of Christ and the apostles. However, if it was fulfilled and the church only failed to understand it,¹¹³ then we can charge the mistake to non-inspired churchmen and leave the integrity of Christ and the apostles intact.¹¹⁴

Our NT teaches that “the” Parousia, “the” resurrection and “the” judgment were all interconnected events that would occur in the lifetime of some of those listening to Jesus . . . The skeptics remain, rapping their fingertips on the table, smiling at our refusal to answer their challenge.¹¹⁵

A bit later, he adds “unbelieving Jews” to those whose “charge of ‘unfulfilled prophecy’ must be answered”:

The Jews connected the Parousia, Resurrection and Judgment with the full arrival of the Messiah’s eternal kingdom. They can’t buy the idea of thousands of years of transition period between the Messiah’s coming in humility (the Suffering Servant) and His return in glory and victory.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Amazingly, from that very time on!

¹¹⁴ Edward E. Stevens, *Stevens Response to Gentry*, 2nd ed. (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 1999), 32.

¹¹⁵ Edward E. Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife* (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 1999), 2-3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

Stevens is well aware of the intramural debates among hyper-preterists about the proper understanding of the resurrection accompanying the Parousia, and he frankly admits that “we may have difficulty explaining exactly what the nature of the event was.” Nevertheless, he insists that

the time of the event cannot be sidestepped without unraveling the integrity of Christ and the NT. Time defines nature. Since the resurrection event must have happened then, and since it didn’t occur in the physically literal manner that we have expected, we are forced to reinterpret the nature of fulfillment as defined by the creeds.¹¹⁷

John Noë agrees:

The necessary first step toward enhancing one’s understanding of resurrection reality is to grasp its biblically pinpointed time frame.

. . . We should allow the immanency of expectations of Jesus and all New Testament writers to correct our understanding of the time, nature, and fulfillment of all kingdom realities, including this one resurrection event.¹¹⁸

Note well the flow of thought. It is not the case that a careful exegetical study of a key resurrection passage of the New Testament has caused the hyper-preterist to step back and say, “Oh my! The inspired Paul was not teaching a bodily resurrection of believers at the bodily return of the Lord. His words do not say that at all. The entire church has misunderstood Paul throughout her history!” Rather, “the necessary *first* step” (see Noë above) is to decide that the second coming of Christ and all that was to follow immediately upon it, including the resurrection of “those who belong to Him” (1 Cor. 15:23), happened in A.D. 70. Then the *second* step is to reinterpret all the biblical

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁸ John Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life Here, Now, and Forever* (Fishers, IN: The Prophecy Reformation Institution, 1999), 27, 56.

passages that speak of the coming resurrection in a way that could plausibly have happened at that time.

Obviously an orthodox Christian response to hyper-preterism must address the prophetic “time texts” of the New Testament; however, that specific issue is outside the scope of this dissertation. But it is also important to reverse the hyper-preterist methodology, as it were, and to see that a careful reading of the New Testament teaching regarding the *nature* of the resurrection renders impossible the notion that this event occurred two millennia ago.

Now, this indeed means that our understanding of the so-called “delay” of the second coming of Christ will be different from that of those who have long referred to it by that term. But is that so surprising? The apostle Peter faced such scoffers, and his reply to them in 2 Peter 3 is another of many New Testament passages that are so difficult to harmonize with hyper-preterism. Stevens insists that “the only alternative” to the hyper-preterist proposal that the Parousia and the resurrection occurred in A.D. 70 “is to walk into the skeptics’ camp, lay down our armor, and unconditionally surrender to their attack on the credibility of The Faith.”¹¹⁹ Instead, he proposes that believers *join* the skeptics in not believing that there is yet to be a personal, visible, bodily return of Christ, the resurrection of the body, a final judgment, and “a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness,” as described in 2 Peter 3:13. The believer is called upon to beat the skeptic by joining him, by becoming himself a skeptic. Surely Berkouwer’s counsel is wise and biblical at this point:

But does the NT really present a crisis or impasse or disappointment? . . . [T]here are surely traces in the NT that indicate that His coming had been expected sooner. But it does not necessarily follow from this that a crisis is inevitable. A crisis will arise only if faith in God’s promises about the Parousia is lost.

¹¹⁹ Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*, 16.

In order to comprehend the meaning of the nearness concept, we should make it clear that again and again the NT stresses the fact that the time of the Lord's return remains unknown to us This unknown quality demands watchfulness throughout the four watches of the night. The danger lies in being unprepared for the coming of the Lord.¹²⁰

Note well that when Ed Stevens refers sardonically to “the skeptics [who] remain, rapping their fingertips on the table, smiling at our refusal to answer their challenge,” it is the skeptics who really control his interpretation, not only of the resurrection, but of virtually the entire New Testament. That is because his “presupposition” is that the skeptics are correct about what the New Testament teaches about the timing of the events of the consummation. And because of that presupposition the New Testament is radically transformed by the hyper-preterists into a canon for the church living in the transition period between Christ's resurrection and His return in A.D. 70. As a result, its teaching on almost every page must be “transposed into a different key” before it can speak with relevance to believers living after the year A.D. 70.¹²¹

Perhaps most of what should be said by way of exposition and critique of the hyper-preterist doctrine of the resurrection of the body can be organized most conveniently around an examination of 1 Corinthians 15, the most extensive treatment of the resurrection in the entire Bible. First, however, by way of background, it will be helpful to review the meaning of “resurrection” in the Old Testament, in first-century Judaism, and in the Greco-Roman world in which the apostle Paul was ministering.

¹²⁰ Berkouwer, 73, 84-85.

¹²¹ Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*, vi.

*The Meaning of "Resurrection" in the Old Testament, First-
Century Judaism, and the Greco-Roman World*

The key to a proper understanding of the Old Testament teaching about the believer's life after death and bodily resurrection is found in the *New Testament*, in 2 Timothy 1:9-10, where Paul speaks of the gospel and the power of God, "who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace." The apostle then goes on to say, "[This grace] now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Berkouwer writes, "The message of the gospel is not a 'spiritual' thing, but good tidings applied to man's entire existence, his total experience."¹²²

Many Christians have been puzzled by the meagerness of Old Testament revelation about what lies ahead for believers when they die,¹²³ and many false teachers have taken advantage of this paucity of information to fashion elaborate tales of the shadowy world of Hades and of Christ's "harrowing of hell" after His death. But attempts to establish a contrast between the afterlife of Old Testament saints and that of New Testament saints are misguided. The simple truth is that very little was revealed about the afterlife before our crucified and risen Savior conquered death and "brought to light" what had been previously shrouded in deep darkness.

¹²² Berkouwer, 199.

¹²³ Berkouwer shows the severity of death by saying: "the general observation [is] that the Old Testament describes death as an inevitable, all-powerful, and irreversible reality Above all, the finality of death comes to the fore: to die is to be cut off from the land of the living, without the possibility of return. In death the antithesis to life is clear" (*Return of Christ*, 172). He goes on to say that "those who have studied the Israelite expectation of the future generally recognize that for the Old Testament believer the prospects of a life after this life were in many respects concealed in a thick cloud" (*Return of Christ*, 175).

This is not to say, however, that the concept of bodily resurrection is entirely missing in the Old Testament. Berkouwer writes, “Although it cannot be denied that in the Israelite view of death a great deal of emphasis was placed on the meaning of this present life on earth, it does not follow that there was no real eschatological expectation.”¹²⁴ The three resurrections recorded in the narrative of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24, the widow at Zarephath’s son; 2 Kings 4:18-37, the Shunammite’s son; 2 Kings 13:20-21, the corpse thrown into Elisha’s grave) were all resurrections of whole persons, body and soul. Along with the bodily assumption of Elijah to heaven (2 Kings 2:11), reminiscent of God’s taking away of Enoch (Genesis 5:24), these events prepared God’s people for the concept of eschatological resurrection.

Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) is a dramatic description of bodily resurrection. Bones come together, tendons reattach, flesh appears, skin covers the flesh, and the breath of life is breathed in again. Hyper-preterists are quick to correctly point out that this vision is given to Ezekiel as a picture of God’s restoration of His people to the land of Israel, and that “resurrection imagery”¹²⁵ is here used metaphorically. But it must not be forgotten that “the standard use of any term is presupposed by the metaphorical use, and we would not understand the metaphor without it.”¹²⁶ For a metaphor to convey any meaning, there must be a concrete phenomenon behind it that supplies the standard of reference. Unless Ezekiel’s readers and hearers knew the meaning of a literal resurrection from the grave—and in chapter 37 they are given a vivid description to make that meaning crystal clear—they would have no idea of what God meant when He promised to grant them a “resurrection” to

¹²⁴ Berkouwer, 174.

¹²⁵ Noë, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 50.

¹²⁶ Peter Carnley, *The Structure of Resurrection Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 229.

their land. Berkouwer makes the point that “this prophecy does not deal with an abstract possibility, but with a divine act in restoring His people Israel. This proclamation of God’s merciful power of life does not relativize the power of death, but makes it subservient to and contrasts it with God’s power, as the light of resurrection shines into the utter and despairing darkness.”¹²⁷ And thus when, in the progress of redemption and revelation, God raised His own Son from the grave and promised His people a resurrection like His at His return, the meaning of that historical event and that future event were quite clear.

Other Old Testament texts indicate that the doctrine of a future resurrection was being progressively revealed, although never fully before Christ. Difficult questions have been raised about the proper text and translation of Job 19:25-27, but for good reason there is remarkable agreement among the leading contemporary English Bibles and commentaries. I quote here the New International Version, citing other versions in brackets at the key points in dispute:

I know that my Redeemer [Hebrew *go’el*; NASB margin, “Vindicator”]
lives,
and that in the end [NASB, ESV, “at the last”] he will stand upon
the earth.
And after my skin has been destroyed, yet
in [Job: NET,¹²⁸ “from;” NLT margin, ESV margin, “without”] my flesh
I will see God;
I myself [NLT, ESV, “for myself”] will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

Francis I. Andersen wisely comments that “two extremes should be avoided” here.¹²⁹ On the one hand, the central theme of the passage—“Job’s

¹²⁷ Berkouwer, 177.

¹²⁸ *Job: A New English Translation*, tr. and ed. A. J. Rosenberg (New York: Judaica Press, 1989).

certainty of ultimate vindication”—is so loud as to be unmistakable, and cannot be drowned out “by the static of textual difficulties.” On the other hand, the full, rich doctrine of the resurrection brought to light by the risen Christ “should not be read back into the passage.” We must not overlook, however, the “tremendous emphasis on ‘seeing God.’” Job repeats that point three times in verses 26-27, emphasizing the *personal* character of this seeing:¹³⁰ “I shall see God . . . I shall see *for myself*, and *my* eyes shall behold, *and not another*” (ESV). And, as Andersen says, “the references to *skin*, *flesh*, and *eyes* make it clear that Job expects to have this experience as a man, not just as a disembodied shade, or in his mind’s eye.” Interestingly, Andersen argues that the precursor of the hope that Job expresses in 19:25-27 is the longing he expressed earlier, in 14:13-17, that, should the day of his vindication not come before his death, God would “hide” him “in the grave” until the “time” “set” for His “renewal” and then “remember” him and “long for the creature [His] hands have made.” At that time, God “will call” and Job “will answer” Him. This oft-overlooked passage confirms that “the hope of the resurrection” eventually comes to lie “at the very heart of Job’s faith.”¹³¹ Berkouwer states:

Nothing of the radical gravity of death is discounted; at the same time the believer continually retains his faith in the God of life. The latter perspective presupposes the radicality and horizonlessness of what is possible from the human side. On the basis of his own existence man is unable to determine the meaning of death or to reduce its ultimate seriousness. But this seriousness of death remains subject to divine possibilities, which come into play at the point man encounters the irreversibility of death. At this moment, on the border between life and death, Yahweh’s power of life becomes operative in Israel’s religion. Sheol does not have the last word.

¹²⁹ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1976), 193.

¹³⁰ First with the first person form of the verb, then with the emphatic pronoun subject, then with the dative.

¹³¹ Andersen, *Job*, 194.

This power of life of Yahweh is related to resurrection, . . .¹³²

Intimations, not merely of immortality, but of *resurrection*, are found in the Psalms (16:9-11 [Acts 2:25-27; 13:35]; 17:15;¹³³ 49:15), Isaiah (25:7-8 [1 Cor. 15:54]; 26:19), and Hosea (13:14 [1 Cor. 15:55]), culminating in Daniel 12:1-3, where the reference is not merely to the oppression under Antiochus IV, but to “the time of the end” (Dan. 11:40), the eschatological end.¹³⁴ Murray Harris notes the “unambiguous references to unparalleled tribulation, resurrection, and final reward and judgment.”¹³⁵ Verse 2 reads, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” Berkouwer states:

What seems definitive for man in its inevitability is neither inevitable nor definitive with God. He provides a return from the land from which there was no return. Even if one is ill-disposed to “systematize” Israelite eschatology, he must acknowledge the impressive force of this message. The raising of the dead is only mentioned very incidentally and enigmatically in the Old Testament . . . , unlike the New Testament, where such signs are central. But in these incidental and fragmentary accounts, as in the translation of Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and the ascension of Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-12) there is an unambiguous testimony to the power of the *living* God.¹³⁶

On the basis of such teaching in the canonical Old Testament, as well as in many passages in the intertestamental apocalyptic Jewish literature, mainstream Jews at the time of Jesus believed in a bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of history. We could have assumed, even before reading the Gospels, that Jesus

¹³² Berkouwer, 176.

¹³³ See Franz Delitzsch’s judicious comments on this and similar preexilic passages in *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, tr. Francis Bolton (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

¹³⁴ For a discussion of interpretations that find exclusive reference to Antiochus Epiphanes, see Edward J. Young, *Daniel*, Geneva Commentary Series (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 250-53.

¹³⁵ Murray J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 61.

¹³⁶ Berkouwer, 179 (emphasis original).

and His followers shared that belief.¹³⁷ Martha reflects that standard Jewish hope: “I know [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (John 11:24). Berkouwer states, “As it is portrayed in the gospel, the Lord saw the disruption of life by sickness and death as a fearful destruction He did not respond to his friend’s death with pacifying words about the security of the soul; He responded with intense prayer and a call to faith in the glory of God: ‘Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God’ (vs. 40)?”¹³⁸ It should go without saying that the Jews anticipated a resurrection of the *body*. Murray Harris notes the consequence of that fact when he discusses the significance of Jesus’ empty tomb:

Moreover, in Jewish thought the idea of a Resurrection . . . after death necessarily involved (at least) the revival of the physical body, the emptying of the grave. No one could be said to be resurrected while his corpse lay in a tomb.¹³⁹

Up to the time of the destruction of the temple, “there was a small but highly placed and influential minority,” the Sadducees, who “clung to the primitive agnosticism” and denied the resurrection.¹⁴⁰ But Jesus clearly opposed their teaching and spoke to them about the “children of the resurrection,” “those who

¹³⁷ Joost Holleman, *Resurrection and Parousia* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 37, 92. But Max King’s hyper-preterist presupposition requires him to insist that the resurrection that Paul preached “was radically different from the traditional Jewish understanding of the resurrection” (*The Cross and the Parousia of Christ* [Warren, OH: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 987], 428).

¹³⁸ Berkouwer, 199.

¹³⁹ Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 39. Similarly, Stephen T. Davis observes that “apart from further elaboration, any first-century Jew would understand the term *resurrection* to mean bodily resurrection (which would imply the empty tomb)” (*Risen Indeed* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 180). And Raymond E. Brown writes, “The concept of resurrection from the grave . . . is certainly what resurrection meant to the Jews of Jesus’ time It is not really accurate to claim that the NT references to the *resurrection* of Jesus are ambiguous as to whether they mean bodily resurrection—there was no other kind of resurrection” (*The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* [New York: Paulist Press, 1973], 70).

¹⁴⁰ John T. Darragh, *The Resurrection of the Flesh* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1921), 23.

are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead" (Luke 20:27-40). Berkouwer states:

There are passages in the gospels that speak more explicitly of the resurrection. This comes to the fore in Christ's dispute with the Sadducees, when He points up the flaws in their opposition to the doctrine of the resurrection. Their attempt at *reductio ad absurdum* with an appeal to the Old Testament law of levirate marriage ran up against Christ's wisdom. "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God (Matt. 22:29). Christ reminds them of the words of the Lord, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (vs. 32; cf. Exod. 3:6). This had been spoken at a time when these patriarchs had already passed away. So the significance of what follows comes into focus: "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Though He might have cited a more explicit word about the resurrection from either Isaiah or Daniel, Christ sees the mystery of the resurrection wrapped up in these words of the *living* God, who, in His faithfulness and mercy, enters into communion with man and preserves him in that communion. Through this communion the resurrection becomes real. This contains no separate treatment of body and soul, but speaks of the whole man, on whom the living God bestows His mercy. In this joyful message, which touches the whole man, is the most profound argument against a spiritualistic misinterpretation of God's intent with respect to creation and fulfillment.

The difference between the Old and New Testaments is not that the one lacks and the other has an eschatology. Rather it is that only in the New Testament is the meaning of the reality of Yahweh's power of life fully revealed. The focus is no longer on what God *can do*, but on what He *has done*. All the earlier incidental and fragmented references to resurrection center in the fact of salvation through the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ, the first-born from the dead. In the proclamation of the gospel to the world, it is revealed that God's power of life is not just a "possibility," but an act of the living God, whose power extends beyond the limits of death and supersedes the reach of Sheol.¹⁴¹

Jesus spoke clearly of the resurrection and Luke also records how Paul later took his stand before the Sanhedrin on the side of the Pharisees against the Sadducees: "I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6). It is well to remember when we come to consider 1 Corinthians 15 that this is the apostle who wrote that letter.

¹⁴¹ Berkouwer, 180, 202.

By both His words and His deeds, our Lord Jesus Christ provided clear instruction about resurrection even before His own triumphant resurrection, that resurrection which provides not only the model and the guarantee, but also the basis of our resurrection. When Jesus spoke of the “temple” that He would “raise . . . again in three days,” the temple he spoke of, John tells us, “was His *body*” (John 2:19-21). As the One to whom the Father has given authority to judge “because He is the Son of Man,” Jesus announced: “Do not marvel at this, for an hour [Greek ὥρα] is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29 ESV). Here Jesus clearly echoes Daniel 12:2, but interestingly He refers not to “*multitudes* who sleep in the dust of the earth,” but to “*all* who are in their graves” (NIV). (Also interesting are the hermeneutical gymnastics in which hyper-preterists must engage in order to avoid the clear teaching of these verses regarding one coming resurrection for all, both righteous and unrighteous.)

John Noë seeks to redefine “resurrection” as “simply put, life from death.”¹⁴² But clearly that definition is too simple and not sufficiently specific. When Jesus granted life to the widow of Nain’s son, this “dead man” received a return to *bodily* life; he “sat up and began to talk” (Luke 7:15). Likewise, when Jesus commanded the dead daughter of Jairus to “get up,” “her spirit returned [to her body], and at once she stood up” and was given “something to eat” (Luke 8:54-55).

Lazarus’s resurrection (John 11:38-44) was clearly a *bodily* resurrection. Indeed we are beginning to see that the use of that adjective when referring to the raising of one who has suffered psycho-physical death is *redundant*. We have

¹⁴² Noë, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 47.

already noted that the term *resurrection* can be used figuratively in the Bible, but such secondary, figurative uses are based on the primary, literal meaning of *resurrection*, which refers to the actual raising of the psycho-physically dead back to life, despite the insistence of hyper-preterists that the phrases “bodily resurrection” or “resurrection of the body” do not appear in the Bible, as though that means that the *concept* does not appear in the Bible. Lazarus was raised after four days to the same life he had known before his death, and thus his resurrection was merely a *sign* of the resurrection of Jesus after three days to imperishable, immortal, heavenly glory. Andrew Lincoln’s insights at this point are worth quoting in full:

[Lazarus’s] temporary restoration to normal human life points beyond itself to the full resurrection and eschatological life that Jesus provides. Yet the sign also indicates that human bodily life is significant, because it points to the belief that eternal life will not finally involve an escape from the body but will entail physical resurrection. When Jesus, “with a loud voice,” cries out: “Lazarus, come out!” (v. 43), this is a narrative embodiment of his words in 5:28-29: “For an hour is coming when all who are in their tombs will hear his voice and will come out.” This sign anticipates the final resurrection. In so doing, however, it also anticipates the anticipation of that resurrection in Jesus’ resurrection. In both cases there is a tomb and a stone has to be removed. In both cases the grief and faith of women disciples are to the fore. And in both accounts the grave clothes—particularly the head cloth—are singled out for mention (cf. 11:44; 20:7). But here the difference is telling: Lazarus exits from the tomb still bound in these wrappings, whereas in Jesus’ resurrection they are left behind and rolled up, indicating Jesus’ own sovereignty over death And just as for the incarnate Logos divine life overcame death in a bodily resurrection, so for believers, too, eternal life will triumph over physical death through resurrection.¹⁴³

A final point by way of background, before turning to 1 Corinthians 15, can be made briefly: While belief in the eternal survival of the soul was fairly common in the Greco-Roman world into which the first Christians came

¹⁴³ Andrew T. Lincoln, “‘I Am the Resurrection and the Life’: The Resurrection Message of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 140-43.

preaching the gospel, belief in bodily resurrection was looked upon as utter foolishness and rejected out of hand. Peter Bolt summarizes his study of the term *resurrection* in the literature of this period succinctly and helpfully: “When ‘resurrection’ proper is mentioned in nonbiblical Greek literature, it is most commonly in a statement of its impossibility: the dead are not raised.”¹⁴⁴

C. F. Evans says, “Certainly Christians did not invent the idea of resurrection; the way it was thought about and the terminology for expressing this thought [were] already current.”¹⁴⁵ The two verbs used by Paul in his Corinthians discussion, and shown to be synonymous in this connection by their interchangeable use in verses 20 and 22, ἐγχεῖται and ἀναστασις, were already current in Greek literature, and that latter term in particular, ἀναστασις, literally “standing up,” or “standing again,” “meant always for these first-century men, Jews and Greeks alike, Josephus, Paul, and the Corinthians, *resurrection of the body*.”¹⁴⁶ Thus Tertullian, like many other early church fathers, argued that the very language of resurrection (ἀναστασις; Latin *resurrection*) can apply only to the body, since only that can “stand up” which has previously “fallen down,” and the soul does not fall down as the body does; indeed, “the soul does not even fall into sleep along with the body, nor does it with its companion even lie down in repose.”¹⁴⁷ Hyper-preterists Richard C. Leonard and Janice E. Leonard, in their book *The Promise of His Coming*, counter as follows:

The New Testament term for resurrection, *anastasis*, is not a theological word but is related to the verb *stēnai* Paul employs in the above passage [Eph. 6:11-13]. In ancient

¹⁴⁴ Peter G. Bolt, “Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Life in the Face of Death*, ed. Longenecker, 74. Cf. A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987), 181.

¹⁴⁵ C. F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 20.

¹⁴⁶ Clayton R. Bowen, *The Resurrection in the New Testament* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1911), 76.

¹⁴⁷ Tertullian, “On the Resurrection of the Flesh,” in ANF, 3:558.

Greek literature, *stēnai* is sometimes used in the sense of rising up in protest or rebellion. Resurrection or *anastasis* is literally “standing again” in defiance of enemy powers, and thus contains an element of vindication.¹⁴⁸

The Leonards, who seem to have no grasp of the fact that any word must be interpreted in its context, go on to make that supposed “element” the central meaning of both Christ’s resurrection and ours, thus emptying *resurrection* of any reference to the body. Jim West well asks, “What kind of credibility can a person have who would argue that the Greek word for resurrection is ‘not a theological word’?! The Leonards both dodge and discount the word *αναστασις* as it is used throughout the Bible.”¹⁴⁹

Equally incredible is the following statement by the preterist Daniel E. Harden:

As the book of Corinthians was written to a Greek church, and as much of our NT is targeted to a Greek audience, we must understand the common understanding of the Greek mind as well What is of note is that up to that time, not one Greek perception of “resurrection” had anything to do with the physical body. The “resurrection” was a term that was descriptive merely of what happens to a man when he dies and leaves his physical body behind. The common understanding, then, wasn’t that the physical body is brought back to life, but that the soul proceeds from out of the dead body.¹⁵⁰

But if that was the “common understanding of the Greek mind,” then why was Paul mocked by the Greek philosophers in Athens when he began to speak about the resurrection of the dead? The fact is that, aside from such minority views as those held by Hymenaeus and Philetus (whom Paul *opposes* in 2 Timothy 2:18) and the late second-century Christian Gnostic *Treatise on the Resurrection*, the Greek world understood *resurrection* to refer to the body.

¹⁴⁸ R. C. Leonard and J. E. Leonard, *The Promise of His Coming* (Chicago: Laudemont Press, 1996), 181.

¹⁴⁹ Jim West, “The Allurement of Hymenaen Preterism,” at www.chalcedon.edu.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel E. Harden, “A Response to Mathison: Audience Relevance!” at www.preterist.org.

Whether they were sophisticated intellectuals or simple artisans, Greeks had one feature in common: resurrection was totally foreign to their worldview To a Greek the term *resurrection* would signify “reanimation” when used of persons, so that the expression “the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 17:32) would mean “the resuscitation of corpses,” a patent absurdity to an Epicurean.¹⁵¹

The doctrine of the *resurrection*—first of Christ and then of His people at His return—was the Christian teaching most violently rejected by the pagan mind. It had to be repeatedly addressed as such by the earliest Christian apologists all the way down to Augustine three and a half centuries later.¹⁵² Berkouwer states, “Nowhere in the gospel of Christ is salvation portrayed as the soul’s liberation from the body.”¹⁵³ Nothing in the philosophy or theology of the Greeks or the Romans had prepared them to accept the strange new teaching that Paul presents in 1 Corinthians 15.

1 Corinthians 15

In this section, I would like to first present the essential elements of some representative hyper-preterist interpretations of this pivotal chapter, and then to consider particular errors of those interpretations as I work through Paul’s argument.

Max King’s “Collective Body” Interpretation

¹⁵¹ Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, 41-42.

¹⁵² H. Cornēlis, “The Resurrection of the Body and Primitive Conceptions of the Last Things,” in *The Resurrection of the Body*, by H. Cornēlis et. al., tr. M. Joselyn (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1964), 48.

¹⁵³ Berkouwer, 191.

The most influential hyper-preterist writer in the late 1980s and early 1990s was Max King, who devotes 285 pages of his massive book, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ*,¹⁵⁴ directly to the doctrine of the resurrection (more pages than to any other topic). King emphasizes that the (alleged) second coming of Christ in A.D. 70 marked both the end (1 Cor. 15:24) of the old covenant and the old aeon (which had been in the process of ending since the Cross) and the beginning of the new covenant and the age to come, this Christian age which is “the consummation of the new creation in Christ,” the “new heaven and earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13)” (31). Thus, for the church living after A.D. 70, all the eschatological promises of the New Testament have become her history, because Paul and the other New Testament writers “entertained no future expectations that extended beyond the time restriction of ‘that generation’” (33).

What then are we to make of the resurrection of believers, which Paul said would occur at Christ’s coming (1 Cor. 15:23)? Obviously, King writes, “the traditional view of resurrection from biological death is untenable” (381). Paul is speaking here of the establishment of the *church* as Christ’s resurrection body, “the completion of Christ’s death and resurrection” (385). It is the church collectively that is raised into the new “body” of Christ and “out of the Old Testament Jewish system.”¹⁵⁵ The “dead” referred to in 1 Corinthians 15:12ff, whose resurrection some at Corinth were denying, “in that context” must be the “faithful Jews of the Old Covenant” (390). Paul is assuring the Corinthians that

¹⁵⁴ Max R. King, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ: The Two Dimensions of One Age-Changing Eschaton* (Warren, OH: Parkman Road Church of Christ, 1987). Page references to this book will be given in the text.

¹⁵⁵ Stevens, *Stevens Response to Gentry*, 28. The notion that we should see Christ as raised in His church, His body, is remarkably similar to the teaching of John Knox, a liberal scholar of the last generation. See Robert B. Strimple, “Jesus and the Church: A Critical Study of the Christology of John Knox” in *WJT* 35 (1972): 36-64.

the saints who had died under the old covenant would not miss out on the defeat of “the powers of sin and death . . . in this new mode of existence in Christ” (417).

King begins the summary of his long section on “The Resurrection of the Dead” with this statement: “It is axiomatic that *context* determines *content*” (649, emphasis original)—and so it is. So what is the contextual basis for understanding “the dead” in 1 Corinthians 15:12 to be “the faithful Jews of the Old Covenant”? None is offered by King. He says that “the centrality of the Jew-Gentile relational problem in 1 Cor. 15 is impressively clear” (472), but is it? King goes on to refer to New Testament texts that indicate that the early church faced serious questions about the place of Israel in God’s plan of salvation (most importantly, Romans 9-11), but he cannot show that this is the question being addressed in 1 Corinthians 15. If we search for references to the Jews earlier in this letter, we find Paul saying in 9:20 that “to the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews,” and in 10:11 he speaks of Israel’s Exodus experiences as “examples . . . written down as warnings for us.” But is it credible that when Paul gets down to chapter 15 and begins speaking about “the resurrection of the dead,” he is introducing the question of whether the faithful Jews of the old covenant are to share in the new covenant blessings of Christ—even though he has never used the phrase “resurrection of the dead” anywhere else in this distinctive sense? Note that when the apostle speaks of the Jews in chapter 9, or of our forefathers who were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea in chapter 10—or when he speaks of the Israelites in Romans 9-11—he refers to them in clear, straightforward, unmistakable terms.

The fact is that the Corinthian context cries out for a simple, straightforward understanding of the reference to the “resurrection of the dead” in verse 12. We will examine the evidence for that later, when we consider the error that Paul is addressing in this chapter. But simply notice here that the

phrase in question in verse 12 is the *second* appearance of the Greek noun νεκρῶν (“dead”) in that sentence. The first reference is to *Christ’s* having been “raised from the dead.” King may refer us to Romans 9:5 and to the fact that Christ is descended from the Israelites according to the flesh—from which he infers that perhaps Christ’s having been raised “from the dead” is a reference to His solidarity with Israel (481)—but since we have already read here in 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ died (v. 3) and was buried (v. 4), when we then read in verse 12 that He “has been raised from the *dead*,” we hardly need to reach afar afield for an understanding of Paul’s statement.

This point is crucial and must not be missed: King’s failure adequately to consider the *context* along with the *immediate context* in which a passage of Scripture appears is one of his fundamental errors. The only “context” that he considers is his own concept of the overarching covenantal framework of the entire Bible. For King, that schematic controls everything, so that it is impossible for the biblical writer, by the Spirit’s inspiration, to write straightforwardly on any subject in words clear enough that King cannot twist them so as to make them fit in with his preconceived system. Perhaps there is no principle of biblical interpretation so easily abused as the familiar principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture (*sola scriptura*). Of course the need to do that is real and vitally important, because there is in the ultimate sense just one author of the entire Bible, the Holy Spirit. But if that method is employed without regard to the immediate context of each particular biblical statement, the result is to make the Scriptures a proverbial “nose of wax” that can be given any shape the interpreter desires.

*The “Immortal Spiritual Body at Death” Interpretation of Stevens, Noë,
Harden, and Others*

Note that these more recent hyper-preterist writers do not reject King’s interpretation entirely. John Noë writes, “Although the collective body view of resurrection may be hard to grasp, that’s no reason to reject it.” Noë hastens to add, however: “As valid as this collective body view may be, it’s only one perspective of the greater and multifaceted resurrected reality.”¹⁵⁶

Indeed, so “multifaceted” does the hyper-preterist doctrine of the “bodily” resurrection become, that the reader may soon feel hopelessly lost. What the apostle Paul presents as a once-for-all event at the second coming of Christ, actually becomes in hyper-preterist doctrine a “continuing process.”¹⁵⁷

Daniel Harden is one hyper-preterist who insists that “the resurrection was *a one-time event* in which the Old Testament saints were brought out of Hades and finally overcame Death to be with the Lord, thanks to Christ’s finished work of salvation.” Therefore, he will not use the term *resurrection* for anything that happens after Christ’s return in A.D. 70. Harden emphasizes that “we today aren’t ‘resurrected’; we don’t have to wait in Hades.” However, most of his hyper-preterist colleagues use the term *resurrection* regularly to refer to a series of events. Furthermore, Harden himself writes later in his book that of the “three basic views of the resurrection in the New Testament . . . only the last (which Harden calls “the *individual immortal-body-at-death* resurrection view”) truly addresses the Corinthian concerns for their dead brethren . . . [and]

¹⁵⁶ Noë, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 114-15.

¹⁵⁷ John L. Bray, *The Rapture of Christians* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry, 1998), 11. See also Leonard and Leonard, *The Promise of His Coming*, 171; Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 57. Randall E. Otto says that the hyper-preterist view is “that the resurrection indeed *began* with the Parousia in A.D. 70” (*Case Dismissed: Rebutting Common Charges Against Preterism* [Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 2000], 60 [emphasis added]).

maintains the idea or thought of what was commonly meant and understood by the word 'resurrection' in the first century."¹⁵⁸ First we are told that what happens to individual believers at death should *not* be called a "resurrection" because "the resurrection was a one-time event," and then twenty-four pages later we are told that only an individual "resurrection" at death satisfies the concerns of the passage and maintains the Greek idea of resurrection.

It seems that hyper-preterists maintain that, by His resurrection and ascension and second coming, Christ transported deceased old covenant saints from the shadowy realm of Hades into the heavenly presence of God (see, e.g., the first quotation from Harden above). Noë agrees with King that the "dead in Christ" or "those who have fallen asleep" is "a pre-parousia term (1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 51)" and "they were departed and saved Old Testament saints, and possibly 1st-century Christians who had or would die before the eschatological resurrection event [T]his group was, both spiritually and in some sense physically, separated from fellowship with God."¹⁵⁹ Here again, a *process* is involved. Harden writes:

The transition saints [who died after Christ's resurrection and] before AD 70 did not have immortality in the presence of God when they died physically They didn't go to Hades at physical death, but they did have to wait in the outer courts of the heavenly temple (Rev. 6, 7) or at the foot of Mt. Zion (Heb. 12) until Christ finished His High Priestly Yom Kippur duties in the Holy of Holies and "appeared a second time" outside to invite them into God's presence (where no one had been since Adam).¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Daniel E. Harden, *Overcoming Sproul's Resurrection Obstacles* (Bradford, PA: International Preterist Association, 1999), 34-35 (emphasis added), 58 (emphasis original). We addressed above Harden's mistaken statements about the Greek concept of resurrection.

¹⁵⁹ Noë, *Shattering the 'Left Behind' Delusion*, 53-54.

¹⁶⁰ Harden, *Overcoming Sproul's Resurrection Obstacles*, 95.

Notice in such an interpretation the kind of bizarre “literalism” (which, of course, is anything but literal in the contextual historico-grammatical sense¹⁶¹) that hyper-preterists combine with blatantly naturalistic rationalism. (Similarly, note below the hyper-preterist objections to any meaningful continuity between our present body and our resurrected body.) That combination is often characteristic of cultic thinking. Harden’s hermeneutic (i.e., interpretive method) is reminiscent of Ellen G. White’s Seventh-day Adventist “investigative judgment” interpretation of Daniel 8:14—although, of course, the particulars and the time frames proposed are quite different (for Harden, Christ’s high priestly work lasts forty years, from A.D. 30 to 70; for White, His work lasts 1,810 years, from A.D. 34 to 1844). A truly biblical hermeneutic, on the other hand, will see the writer to the Hebrews using tabernacle imagery to present the redemptive efficacy of Christ’s once-for-all atoning sacrifice.

As mentioned previously when introducing our survey of the Old Testament’s doctrine of the resurrection, very little is said in Scripture about the afterlife before Christ conquered death and “brought life and immortality to light” (2 Tim. 1:10). John Noë remarks, “Admittedly, this is a gray area and one about which the Bible says little”—but it is one of which Noë makes much. He even acknowledges that “the actual existence or nonexistence of Hades is still actively debated in religious circles,” but you would never know this by reading the extensive hyper-preterist expositions of this doctrine and its implications. Noë justifies the prominence given to this doctrine in hyper-preterism by stating that what is “important” is that “neither Jesus nor any New Testament writer

¹⁶¹ Few will agree with John Noë’s contention that hyper-preterism presents the Bible’s teaching “in its literal, face-value meaning” (*Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 4).

ever challenged or corrected this 1st-century belief in a two-compartment, hadean realm”¹⁶²—a singularly weak argument from silence.

Stevens, Noë, and others now differ from Max King in their contention that Paul is speaking in 1 Corinthians 15:35ff, not of what Christ accomplished definitely in A.D. 70, but rather of what now *results* from that victory for each individual Christian, i.e., that he or she receives immediately at death (for eternal life in heaven) a new body, immortal and spiritual.

Hyper-preterist writers confusingly move back and forth between their two resurrection “events”—the one in A.D. 70 (which is the focal point of hyper-preterist theology, not the resurrection of Christ forty years earlier) and the other at whatever moment a particular believer dies. And to add to the confusion, Stevens insists that “‘the general resurrection’ . . . occurs at the Parousia . . . an AD 70 event,” just as Noë says that Jesus, in speaking of a coming hour “when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:28-29 ESV), was referring to the “one-and-only end [that] came in 70 A.D.” Indeed, from Noë’s language one would certainly think that the resurrection was strictly a *past* event: “After 70 A.D. we *have* the fullness of salvation resurrection reality. No longer is it a future *hope*. It’s our *heritage*. 1 Cor. 15:51-52. What a change this was!”¹⁶³

One would expect that all hyper-preterists who favor the immortal-body-at-death view would surely interpret 1 Corinthians 15:53—“For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality”—in

¹⁶² Ibid., 43, 40.

¹⁶³ Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*, 6; Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 26-27, 44 (emphasis original).

terms of that view. But no; Daniel Harden, whom we have already cited in favor of the immortal-body-at-death view, writes on this verse:

Same concept—we *have* redemption today, we *have* immortality, despite the corrupt and mortal physical nature and body. We *have* the salvation and eternal life through Christ, which nullifies and overcomes the curse of this body. We *have* incorruption despite still being in a body that is corrupt.¹⁶⁴

Trying to critique the hyper-preterist doctrine of the resurrection is like trying to hit a moving target or trying to win at the old shell game. If you point out that the New Testament teaches that the eschatological resurrection will be a one-time event, you will be answered with reference to A.D. 70; if you point out that attempts to interpret passages like 1 Corinthians 15:35ff in terms of what happened in A.D. 70 are totally unconvincing, you will be answered (usually, but see Harden above) with the immortal-body-at-death interpretation. However, Max King himself lists three successive stages in the resurrection of the dead¹⁶⁵—and he did not even propose the fourth, immortal-body-at-death stage.

The Error of Some of the Corinthians

Displaying proper caution, John Calvin wrote, “I myself leave undecided the question of what the error of the Corinthians actually was.”¹⁶⁶ Berkouwer maintains:

In all probability the motive of those in Corinth was similar to that of Hymenaeus and Philetus. These Corinthians most likely did not intend a brute, rationalistic denial of the resurrection. It could well be that in this denial Paul was confronted of the logical

¹⁶⁴ Harden, “A Response to Mathison.”

¹⁶⁵ See King, *The Cross and the Parousia*, 410.

¹⁶⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, tr. John W Fraser (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 312.

conclusion of the “Gnostic” heresy of 2 Timothy 2:18. In that case, we might ask whether Paul was addressing himself to the background (the resurrection has already taken place) or to the specific results. Judging from the way he formulates his response, the latter is his intent, as well as to deal with the denial of the *future* resurrection. For Paul there were more far-reaching consequences than these doubters themselves imagined when they said, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32; cf. Isa. 22:13). There is a sort of nihilism, which Paul counters with a warning: “Come to your right mind, and sin no more” (1 Cor. 15:34). It is probable that Paul is not here giving their philosophy of life, but his opinion of what the inevitable consequences of the denial of the future resurrection are.¹⁶⁷

Even with Berkouwer’s input, we must still acknowledge that we cannot reconstruct with certainty the precise theology of those at Corinth whom Paul addresses in verse 12 (“some of you”). That must not cause us, however, to miss the obvious forest for the scholars’ speculations regarding the possible trees. What is clear from verse 12 is that some of the Corinthians denied that there would be a future resurrection to which Christians could look forward. It seems highly improbable, from verse 11 and from Paul’s line of argument from verse 12 on, that they were denying the resurrection of Christ¹⁶⁸ Thus, I find Dahl’s suggestion helpful, that “the trouble with them is not apostasy but muddled thinking.”¹⁶⁹

A survey of the most frequently made suggestions regarding the error that prompts Paul’s argument in chapter 15 follows:

1. Some (e.g., Karl Barth) have suggested that these deniers of the resurrection of the dead did not believe in any life after death at all, or at least

¹⁶⁷ Berkouwer, 185 (emphasis original).

¹⁶⁸ Martinus C. de Boer, however, has argued that although the apostle in v. 11 says that they “had ‘believed’ the gospel, cited in vv. 3-5 . . . Paul would hardly have cited this gospel with such solemnity and in such emphatic detail had the Corinthians still believed that gospel *in the same way Paul did*.” De Boer suggests that “in accordance with their Gnostic anthropological presuppositions,” they taught that Christ’s death “signified, as theirs would, the moment of pneumatic liberation from the ‘natural’ bodily world, and . . . his bodiless exaltation to the heavenly world of glory (cf. 2:8)” (*The Defeat of Death: Apocalyptic Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5*, JSNTSup 22 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988], 103-4 [emphasis his]).

¹⁶⁹ Murdoch E. Dahl, *The Resurrection of the Body* (London: SCM, 1962), 76.

that Paul thought they didn't (Bultmann). Isn't that indicated by verses 19 and 32 in particular? "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (v. 19). "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (v. 32) and that's that. Judging from Paul's argument in this chapter, it seems that, whatever the particulars of their denial of the resurrection may have been, a large element of Greek rationalistic skepticism was at work. As we shall see, this is also true of hyper-preterism's objections to the resurrection of the body.

2. Others (e.g., Schweitzer, Conzelmann) have suggested that some of the Corinthians believed that only those still alive at the Parousia would participate in the eternal life of the new age that Christ would usher in then. This might seem similar to the error that existed among the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4:13ff), except that the worry of the Thessalonians was due to ignorance, and therefore could be removed simply by Paul's giving them further instruction, whereas the Corinthian deniers knew of his resurrection teaching and had rejected it. Thus, Paul had to bring arguments against the Corinthians to convince them of the error and perversity of their rejection.¹⁷⁰

According to these two views, these Corinthians denied that there is any life after death at all. It seems that most commentators find it difficult to believe that that was the Corinthians' error, pointing especially to verse 29. If they believed that death simply ended everything, why were they practicing vicarious baptism for the dead? But, of course, that may have been precisely the question that Paul was asking them.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 15.

¹⁷¹ Regarding v. 29, I agree with Dahl: "The vast number of theories . . . propounded in connexion with the enigma of 'vicarious baptism' . . . illustrate the impossibility of ever solving the problem satisfactorily. I prefer to take the passage at its face value as the surviving evidence of the practice in the primitive Church" (*The Resurrection of the Body*, 79). Taking this passing reference

The next three views are the ones most frequently suggested. It should be emphasized that they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is quite possible that any two or all three notions were at work in these Corinthian deniers of the resurrection.

3. Many commentators remind us of the popularity among the Greeks of a doctrine of the immortality of the soul, which denied the possibility, or even desirability, of a resurrection of the body. Dahl sees the difficulties that these Corinthians were having with the doctrine of the resurrection as being “such as one would expect to find in a Greek or Hellenistic community conditioned to believe that all matter . . . is either evil or illusory, and who would tend to think of salvation in terms of the immortality of the soul.”¹⁷² Cullmann reminds us that “in Athens there was no laughter until Paul spoke of the resurrection (Acts 17:32).” He suggests that “indeed for the Greeks who believed in the immortality of the soul it may have been harder to accept the Christian preaching of the resurrection than it was for others.”¹⁷³

It might be thought that an obvious objection to this third suggestion is the fact (noted above) that Paul seems to argue that the Corinthians’ denial was really a denial of *any* future life, whether for soul or for body. But perhaps this is simply Paul’s way of combating their “muddled thinking” (Dahl), by making it clear that, for the Christian, the pagan doctrine of immortality for the soul, but not for the body, is tantamount to no hope at all—and is certainly *not* the sure hope grounded in the resurrection of Christ.

at “face value,” there is no indication that the apostle endorses it. He is merely presenting the *ad hominem* argument that the denial of the resurrection of the dead and the practice of vicarious baptism are inconsistent and contradictory.

¹⁷² Ibid., 12. John Murray writes: “Any disparaging conception of the body springs from pagan and anti-biblical sources and has no affinity with biblical thought” (“The Last Things,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976-82], 2:401).

¹⁷³ Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 59.

4. There is clear evidence, not only in chapter 15, but elsewhere in both Corinthian letters, of what might be called an “overrealized” and “hyperspiritualized” eschatology: the notion that with the resurrection and exaltation of Christ and the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, the powers of the new age have *fully* arrived. The church is now enjoying all the blessings of the consummation. (Notice how the special importance of 1 Corinthians 15 as a refutation of the contemporary hyper-preterist error is becoming increasingly clear.) Paul’s irony in 1 Corinthians 4:8 seems clearly to be directed against such a false outlook: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!” Hyper-preterists would say that these Corinthians were simply a few years premature in their thinking that the consummation had fully arrived. Soon it would arrive, in A.D. 70. How different, however, is Paul’s answer to them in 1 Corinthians 15. Their eschatological error was not simply a matter of being a few years off with regard to the *timing*. Andrew Lincoln writes:

[Paul] meets the Corinthians’ preoccupation with an “over-realized” heavenly existence and their disparagement of the body by showing that Christ’s resurrection from the dead into the heavenly dimension means not only that heavenly life has been opened for the Corinthians now, but also that in the future their *bodies* will play an essential role in this heavenly order of existence.¹⁷⁴

5. This suggestion is closely related to the previous one, but not every proponent of that one accepts this further elaboration. This suggestion, which goes back at least to Thomas Aquinas, is that the doctrine of this group at Corinth was essentially the same as the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus

¹⁷⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge: University Press, 1981), 54 (emphasis added).

(condemned by Paul in 2 Tim. 2:17-18), i.e., that “the resurrection has already taken place.” Various possible sources for this false doctrine have been proposed: Hellenist philosophy, Gnosticism, the mystery religions, and even the teaching of the apostles themselves! Certainly there are many passages in the writings of both Paul and John teaching that believers are already risen with Christ and possess eternal life. There would seem to be no need to choose which one of them was the source of the Hymenaeian (and possibly Corinthian) doctrine. Clearly the Gnostic and pagan teachings may have influenced a one-sided reading of the apostles.

Murray Harris says that we should not dismiss the possibility that the Corinthian “anti-resurrectionists” did not consider themselves to be completely repudiating the resurrection, but rather to be purging “the offensive element—the association of resurrection with embodiment,” thus maintaining “a façade of orthodoxy.” Thus, “these precursors of Gnosticism” were simply denying two aspects of resurrection: “its futurity and its somatic character.”¹⁷⁵

Note again that these last three understandings of the Corinthians’ error are not mutually exclusive. I myself am most impressed with the evidence for view 4, but “overrealized eschatology” may very well have been influenced by the virtually universal Hellenistic “contempt for and depreciation of the body”¹⁷⁶ (view 3), and may have been expressed by proclaiming that “the resurrection has already taken place” (view 5).

Hyper-preterism is often charged with being a new form of the old heresy of Gnosticism. Noë notes that many “feel that if resurrection is presented as a disconnect from our old earthly bodies, then that position has stepped over into

¹⁷⁵ Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 116. Cf. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 78.

¹⁷⁶ Darragh, *The Resurrection of the Flesh*, 55.

heterodoxy, like the Gnostic position of separating the physical from the spiritual.”¹⁷⁷ Noë answers with Stevens that “full preterism” is not Gnostic because it does not affirm a “bodiless resurrection” into mere “disembodied soul consciousness.”¹⁷⁸ But that answer does not address the fact that the hyper-preterist doctrine of the resurrection presents just as complete “a disconnect from our old earthly bodies” as Gnosticism did. Calling a brand new, nonphysical entity created (not *resurrected*) for the saint at death a “body” seems to give that word a new definition (Webster: “1. The whole physical structure and substance of a man, animal, or plant”) and in no way absolves hyper-preterism from the charge of Gnosticism. Later, I will address what Paul meant by the “spiritual body” and consider its continuity with the body we now possess.

Hyper-preterists profess to be completely unruffled by the charge that their teaching falls under Paul’s condemnation of Hymenaeus and Philetus. Indeed, they seek to turn this problem text into a proof text for their position. Harden asks in regard to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 as well as 2 Timothy 2:17-18:

How could this errant belief of an already-come Parousia and resurrection have arisen within the church if the apostolic teaching of the resurrection were a *physical* one? . . . If the apostle taught such a resurrection, how could anybody possibly have come up with the notion that it had already happened?¹⁷⁹

And the reply could be: “In the same way that the hyper-preterists have come up with that ‘errant belief,’ despite the apostle’s having taught such a resurrection and the church having confessed her faith in such a resurrection for two thousand years!” Similarly, Noë, whom we have seen to be fond of arguments from silence, sarcastically argues:

¹⁷⁷ Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 71.

¹⁷⁸ Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*, 40.

¹⁷⁹ Harden, *Overcoming Sproul’s Resurrection Obstacles*, 65.

Interestingly, though, when the Apostle Paul was confronted by claims that the resurrection had already taken place (2 Tim. 2:17-18), he did not use this “bones-are-still-in-the-graves” objection as a defense. If this physical concept is the correct nature for this event, he could have easily taken a trip to the local graveyard and presented plenty of physical evidence to prove them wrong. But he didn’t. Sometimes what’s not said is as important as what is said.¹⁸⁰

And the reply could be: “But notice that Paul does not attempt *any* ‘defense’ against their error here. If he *had* responded in the way Noë suggests, Hymenaeus would surely have answered Paul in precisely the same way Noë answers his critics—that is, by claiming that the bones being still in the grave is irrelevant to an unseen, ‘spiritual’ resurrection in heaven.”

Randall Otto acknowledges that the common hyper-preterist response to 2 Timothy 2:7-18, which simply notes that Hymenaeus and Philetus were speaking of something as past that was still future at the time 2 Timothy was written, but which has *now* been past since A.D. 70¹⁸¹ — “true as this is” —

Hymenaeus and Philetus were part of the Christian community who had embraced proto-Gnostic tendencies and were therefore removed from the community for fear that they would wrongly influence the church It should already be clear that there is no convergence between preterism and this Gnosticism.

But then Otto immediately and amazingly agrees with Stevens (saying “this is well brought out by Ed Stevens”) that “Paul doesn’t challenge [Hymenaeus’s and Philetus’s] concept of the nature of the resurrection, but rather their timing of it.”¹⁸² Otto does not seem to realize that if Paul did not challenge their Gnostic concept of the resurrection because he agreed with it, then Paul himself was

¹⁸⁰ Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 70-71..

¹⁸¹ Stevens, *Stevens Response to Gentry*, 57; Kenneth J. Davies, “A Response to the False Witness of Keith Mathison,” at www.preterist.org.

¹⁸² Randall E. Otto, *Case Dismissed*, 49, 51-52.

Gnostic. And if the hyper-preterists agree with that Gnostic view, then they too, like Hymenaeus and Philetus, should be “removed from the community” for fear that they will “wrongly influence the church.”

How Death Is Swallowed Up in Victory

“Since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man” (1 Cor. 15:21). With these words, the apostle introduces one of the major themes of this passage. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of the *resurrection* of which Paul speaks, we must understand the nature of that *death* that is to be “swallowed up in victory” (v. 54).

Throughout his massive book, Max King minimizes the significance of what we often refer to as physical death, but which is more accurately referred to as psycho-physical death (since it affects the whole person, and is the separation of the soul and body). Immediately on the frontispiece we are told that “the focus of this particular volume is on the *cross-determined* resurrection from the state of *sin-death*.”¹⁸³ And as we get into the volume, we begin to understand that “sin-death” is King’s code word for something very similar, it would seem, to what Reformed theology has referred to as “spiritual” or “moral” death (Eph. 2:1-5; Col. 2:13). Whether King’s term also includes what Reformed theologians have referred to as “judicial” death—the fact that, because of his sin, man is separated from God’s favor, fellowship, and blessing and is under God’s judicial condemnation (Rom. 5:16, 18) and, apart from Christ, will remain in that state forever (Rev. 20:13)—is less clear. But what becomes very clear is that in King’s theology “sin-death” and man’s psycho-physical death bear no significant

¹⁸³ Max King, *The Cross and the Parousia*, vi (emphasis original).

relationship to each another. On page 467, King says that “biological death” is not “the primary meaning of *death*” in a verse like 1 Corinthians 15:12. Two pages later, however, he states flatly that the death Paul is talking about in this chapter “refers not to the phenomenon of biological death, but to *sin-death*.” Thus, psycho-physical death is not only not the “primary” meaning of death in 1 Corinthians 15, but not the meaning of death in this chapter at all. On page 615, King says not only that “nowhere does Paul teach a recovery of physical immortality as the effect of Christ’s redemptive work,” but also that the theological reason for this is that psycho-physical death is simply not involved in “the wages of sin” (Rom. 6:23): “There is nothing in the Genesis account of Adam’s fall to indicate a loss of *physical immortality* through his sin.”

Stevens also insists that man was originally created mortal, as all creatures were, and would have died whether or not he had sinned. Thus, neither death nor salvation has any relationship to man’s body:

This is the very point where much misunderstanding of the nature of the resurrection body surfaces [P]hysical death is merely the natural consequence of being human and made from dust. And the ultimate resurrection was to reverse whatever “death” God placed on mankind in the beginning. If that original death was spiritual, then the resurrection which reverses it must also be spiritual. We believe spiritual death (the real curse) can be reversed without all the physical consequences being eliminated Physical death seems to be a planned, “natural” consequence of being human and living on earth.¹⁸⁴

And Noë agrees:

Physical death of the old physical body remains the natural consequence of being created human. This was true for Adam and Eve. It’s been true ever since. Even in Christ, we don’t regain or reverse that which was never lost. Hence, the elimination of physical death was never the focus of Jesus’ redemptive work.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Stevens, *Stevens Response to Gentry*, 56-58.

¹⁸⁵ Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 71-72.

For exegetical support, these writers appeal to the fact that Adam and Eve did not die biologically “in the day that” they sinned, thus proving that biological death was not included in their punishment (Gen. 2:17). Geerhardus Vos makes the interesting suggestion here that the phrase “in the day that you eat of it” is simply a Hebrew idiom meaning “as surely as you eat of it.” He asks us to compare 1 Kings 2:37, where King Solomon says to Shimei, “The day you leave and cross the Kidron Valley, you can be sure you will die;” but it was not until Shimei had gone across the Kidron and then returned to Jerusalem and the report had reached the king that Shimei was executed (vv. 38-46).¹⁸⁶ But whether what Vos says about the meaning of the Hebrew idiom applies to Genesis 2:17 or not, surely we can say that at the very *moment* of man’s sin, the seeds of psycho-physical death were sown in his body and began to go to work.¹⁸⁷

The statement in Genesis 3:19—“for dust you are and to dust you will return”—is also misinterpreted by hyper-preterists, who insist that it points to an inherent necessity for man to die and return to dust simply because he was created from dust. That, of course, is a misunderstanding of the force of this statement. Those words appear as part of the curse upon Adam because of his sin. The reason for this death is his sin. The reason death takes this form is that man is dust. Death is directed against man’s person, and therefore it must take

¹⁸⁶ The whole section is worth reading in Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 47-51.

¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, after just mocking that “traditional interpretation,” Noë adopts an interpretation that brings him right back to that understanding of the phrase. He says that “some people, your author included, feel Adam and Eve were created mortal By continually eating from the tree of life, their mortality was suppressed and they could physically live forever. But when they were cast out of the garden, they lost access to this tree and its life-perpetuating nourishment. Consequently as an indirect result of their expulsion, their mortality was unleashed on that very day, not begun” (*Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 23 [emphasis his]). But what is the temporal difference between “unleashed” and “begun?”

account of the composition of his person. If we were not dust, he could not return to dust. But the reason for return to dust is not that he is dust, but that he has sinned (Gen. 2:17; 3:17).¹⁸⁸

The mere fact that man has a body does not mean that he has to die. Death for man is not the debt of nature; it is the wages of sin. That declaration is made in Romans 6:23,¹⁸⁹ where Paul is reflecting on the death that was the consequence of the sin that “entered the world through one man” (Rom. 5:12), and that death clearly involved psycho-physical death (see especially 5:10 and 14). Of course this is considered a ridiculous idea by modern man, with his evolutionary presuppositions—and the hyper-preterist is always anxious to present reasonable doctrine to modern skeptics—but the biblical teaching would seem to be clear.

Now this does not mean that Adam would not have known any kind of change had he successfully passed his covenantal probation in Paradise, that he would not have received some additional endowment to equip him for immortal existence. For his life in Eden, man was dependent, as man always is, upon the life-giving word and Spirit of God. His probation would result in a decisive word, either of justification and life or of condemnation and death. We know what the outcome was. But had Adam obeyed and the outcome been the opposite, may there not have been, with the utterance of God’s word of life, an endowment suiting Adam for his immortal existence? That may well be one of those secret, unrevealed truths that “belong to the LORD our God” (Deut. 29:29). But what God reveals to us and what we must affirm is that Adam was not

¹⁸⁸ John Murray, “The Nature of Man,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:15.

¹⁸⁹ Leon Morris comments on Rom. 6:23, “Man dies, not simply as a body, but in the totality of his being, as a unity with physical and spiritual aspects. Death here includes, but is more than, the terminus of biological existence Or perhaps we should say that the two aspects, spiritual and physical, are not sharply distinguished” (*The Wages of Sin* [London: Tyndale, 1955], 10).

created with the seeds of death “naturally” at work in his body. He was not created as a *Sein-zum-Tod*, a “being-towards-death,” as the German existentialist Martin Heidegger describes man.

The hyper-preterist interpretation of Genesis 2:17 and 3:19 has to strike the biblical scholar as most surprising, because Christian theologians have found that it is easy to show that the death spoken of in the Genesis curse involves *psycho-physical* death, but that extended effort is required to show that it also includes *judicial* death and *moral-spiritual* death. That the curse includes psycho-spiritual death lies on the face of the biblical text. Indeed, that seems to be the only aspect of death spoken of in the Genesis account. Christian interpreters, however, have argued, correctly, that this is simply in keeping with the nature of the Genesis narrative as a whole, which focuses on the phenomenal reality (e.g., the serpent), rather than the unseen spiritual realities that lie behind the phenomenal (e.g., Satan). It is only on the basis of the total revelation of Scripture that we learn that the death with which Adam was threatened if he disobeyed was threefold: psycho-physical, judicial, and moral-spiritual.

The point that must be emphasized and understood clearly is that we can never appreciate the full measure of God’s redemptive grace in Christ unless we appreciate the full scope of sin’s dreadful consequences for our whole person. John Murray comments that the psycho-physical death spoken of in Genesis 3:19

is not a mere incident. It consists in the disintegration of man’s person, and demonstrates as such the gravity and total abnormality of sin and of its consequence. The body returns to dust and sees corruption, and the spirit, though it continues to be active, is no longer existent or active in its normal and natural relationship. Death is not merely a physical event; it is separation of body and spirit; and disembodied existence for man is punitive and expresses condemnation.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ John Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:57.

And therefore, as Dahl observes: “Since sin, death, and corruption form a dynamic totality together, the only salvation worth the name is a real deliverance from all three.”¹⁹¹ Max King is certainly correct when he says that orthodox Christian theology has taught “that the wholeness or completeness of man after this life hinges upon resurrection from physical death.”¹⁹² In commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:21, Tertullian speaks for all the early church fathers:

If we have life in Christ as we have death in Adam, since in Adam we find the death of the body, it is necessary that in Christ we have the life of the body. Otherwise there would be no comparison, if the life in Christ did not attain to the same substance which found death in Adam.¹⁹³

Oscar Cullmann’s lecture, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* is justly famous. Though I could not endorse every detail of it, the overall impact of that lecture is certainly biblical and moving. Cullmann begins by contrasting the Greek view of death and the biblical view by contrasting the attitudes of Socrates and Jesus in the face of impending death. Socrates (in Plato’s *Phaedo*) “in complete peace and composure” welcomed death as ultimate release of the soul “from the prison of the body and back to its eternal home,” while Jesus was “deeply distressed and troubled” (Mark 14:33), “his sweat . . . like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44), praying, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me (Matt. 26:39). Certainly Jesus’ death was unique as the death of the covenant head of His people, bearing the penalty for their sin. But the point Cullmann drives home is that “the belief in the resurrection

¹⁹¹ Dahl, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 75-76. Norman L. Geisler comments: “Reincarnation of whatever variety is not a Christian teaching . . . [A] resurrection that fails to restore the same material body that died is a failure” (The Battle for the Resurrection [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989], 163-64).

¹⁹² King, *The Cross and the Parousia*, 665.

¹⁹³ Tertullian, “Against Marcion, in ANF, 3:447.

presupposes the Jewish connexion between death and *sin*. Death is not something natural [I]t is rather something unnatural, abnormal, opposed to God.” That is why Paul calls it Christ’s “last enemy” (1 Cor. 25:26). As Cullmann puts it so eloquently:

Only he who apprehends with the first Christians the horror of death, who takes death seriously as death [that is, as “the wages of sin”], can comprehend the Easter exultation of the primitive Christian community and understand that the whole thinking of the New Testament is governed by belief in the Resurrection Whoever has not grasped the horror of death cannot join Paul in the hymn of victory: “Death is swallowed up—in victory! O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Cor. 15:54f.)¹⁹⁴

And that is a victory to be fully won at Christ’s second coming, which marks the end (1 Cor. 15:23-24). As Berkouwer and G. E. Ladd remind us:

The “already” element is present in [Paul’s] eschatology, but he never applies this “already” to the resurrection of the dead. For that “already” is an illusion that completely misses the reality of true salvation and underestimates the gravity of death Then [at the Parousia]—and only then—the promise “death is swallowed up in victory” will become actuality. Paul concludes here with the blessing from the Isaiah Apocalypse. This promise has not yet become reality, but that will happen. Old Testament prophecy already spoke of the swallowing up of death, but now that Paul has seen the foundation upon which this reality will be built, the full and profound meaning of this prophecy can be properly understood.¹⁹⁵

1 Cor. 15:24-26. Here is the goal of redemption: the divine order reestablished in the whole of God’s creation, when all evil powers—sin, Satan, and death—will be abolished. God’s plan is to reunite all things in Christ, both in the visible and the invisible world (Eph. 1:10) Everywhere in the Bible, the ultimate destiny of man is a redeemed, transfigured earth, dwelling in redeemed, transfigured bodies As long as sin, evil, corruption, decay, violence, and death remain in the world, God’s redemptive work remains ever incomplete.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* 20, 28, 26-27.

¹⁹⁵ Berkouwer, 186.

¹⁹⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 113, 116, 120. Cf. Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* 37: “The transformation of the body does not take place until the End, when the whole creation will be made new by the Holy Spirit, when there will be no more death and no corruption The Christian hope relates not only to individual fate, but to the entire creation.” David E. Holwerda notes that “in his letter

Cosmic Redemption

It is God's "very good" creation (Gen. 1:31), now groaning in sin and bondage to decay, that will be redeemed (Rom. 8:18-23; 2 Peter 3). But according to hyper-preterist theology, ongoing sin and death on this earth will never end or be overcome. True to his hermeneutical premise, Noë insists that Revelation 21:5—"I am making everything new!"—was fulfilled in A.D. 70: "It's a done deal There is not an interim plan that will be superseded by something better in the future!"¹⁹⁷ Noë comments:

Most Christians have been led to believe that someday, yet-future, all death and evil will be finally destroyed and gone forever. This, supposedly, will be part of God's ultimate triumph. But does this futuristic utopian belief line up with the Bible? . . . Far better we adjust our understanding of the nature of Jesus' victory over death and what this means for us today, rather than adjusting the time factor to a yet-future occurrence.¹⁹⁸

Gary North, appropriately and helpfully, likens hyper-preterism at this point to the ancient pagan philosophy of Manicheanism, which taught the eternality of the struggle between good and evil and was vigorously opposed by Christianity. North notes that hyper-preterist eschatology is really an *anti*-eschatology, because it insists that no truly "last things" lie ahead. What is now will forever be, with Christians living on this God-created, but sin-cursed earth, suffering, dying, going to heaven, and a new generation of believers living,

to Cardinal Sadolet, Calvin explicitly rejects the view which reduces the Christian life to the quest of the soul seeking its salvation in heaven. (*Tracts and Treatises*, 33-34) . . . Calvin does not allow his anthropology to cancel a genuine appreciation for the escatological dynamic of human history and of the renewal of creation" ("Eschatology and History: A Look at Calvin's Eschatological Vision," in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David E. Holwerda [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976], 116).

¹⁹⁷ John Noë, *Beyond the End Times* (Bradford, PA: Preterist Resources, 1999), 256.

¹⁹⁸ Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 20.

suffering, dying, going to heaven. Thus, “this view grants to Satan what the creeds and confessions deny: influence in history forever.”¹⁹⁹

Hyper-preterism’s response to North’s charge is fascinating: In sum, it is that Manicheanism was not actually guilty of this heresy, *but* hyper-preterism is:

Let’s set the record straight right now: . . . Manicheans did not teach, as North leads his readers to believe, the doctrine of a never-ending non-victory of good over evil. Manicheanism had an *End* . . . It was taught that when the gathering of the Particles was finally realized, the material cosmos would be destroyed in an inferno that would continue for 1,486 years. After the universe eventually burned itself out, the separation of Light from Darkness would be complete. Then the Darkness would be closed off forever, and eternal peace would reign in light . . . North is right that [hyper]preterists believe that sin and suffering on Earth will exist forever . . . [Hyper]preterists see no prophecy in the Bible that says that believers on Earth will one day be absolutely and literally and in every sense free from all sin and suffering. [Hyper]preterists in fact see verses that teach that the existence of sin will continue forever.²⁰⁰

Hyper-preterists evidently believe that this is an answer that will satisfy serious biblical exegesis. The biblical connection between the resurrection hope and the hope for a new creation is expressed well by Berkouwer:

The discussion of the resurrection from the dead leads us directly to a consideration of the “new earth.” The link between these two aspects of the eschatological promise is the fact that the *resurrection carnis* talks about a future for the *body*. This body is not an abstract, spiritual existence having nothing to do with the earth, but something that has a place and a manifold function *in the earth*.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Gary North, “Full Preterism’: Manichean or Perfectionist-Pelagian?” at www.preteristarchive.com.

²⁰⁰ David A. Green, “Gary North: Postmillennial or Neo-Manichaen?” at www.preteristarchive.com. (emphasis original). Green does not use the term *hyper-preterist* as a self-designation, of course. But since North calls himself a preterist, I have inserted the prefix in Green’s text for clarity. Walt Hibbard repeats Green’s argument in “A Courteous Response to Dr. Gary North’s Vitriolic Essay,” 3.

²⁰¹ Berkouwer, 211 (emphasis original). Note that Berkouwer is an amillennialist. In *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), Craig A. Blaising, a premillennialist, argues that amillennialism has been controlled by a “spiritual-vision” model of the eternal state, rather than by the “new creation” hope of the Bible (see, e.g., 143-44). In his response to Robert B. Strimple’s chapter on amillennialism in that the same book, Blaising even goes so far as to suggest regarding Strimple’s amillennial view: “Such an interpretation

Paul emphasizes this cosmic redemption at the end of the age in Romans 8:17-23, where he says that at “the redemption of our bodies” (v. 23)²⁰² “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (v. 21). Regarding 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, Harris comments: “Here the relation between the resurrection of man and the restoration of the universe is not so pronounced but it is none the less apparent.”²⁰³

Peter presents a picture of what will happen when our Lord returns that is in entire harmony with Paul’s teaching in Romans 8. Both apostles depict a *renewal* of the cosmos, rather than its *destruction*.²⁰⁴ Paul speaks of the creation’s “pains of childbirth” (Rom. 8:22); they are birth pains, not death pains. Otherwise Paul could not say that the creation was subjected to frustration “in hope” (v. 20). Think of the parallel that Peter draws between the future fiery judgment and the past judgment of the Flood. He says that “the world of that

should cause us concern, for it moves dangerously in the direction of denying the bodily resurrection altogether” (153). However, Strimple’s rebuttal of Blaising’s argument in the book (257-63) adequately puts that charge to rest concerning the amillennial view.

²⁰² Here Harden appeals to the Greek text: “Amazing how so much can be cleared up by looking at the original! The phrase is *apolutrōsin tou sōmatos* which is actually more accurately rendered ‘redemption from the body!’” “This is what Paul was waiting for so eagerly, and what Christ brought in 70 AD” (“A Response to Mathison”). Anyone more familiar with Greek than Harden knows that the prefix *απο* at the beginning of the Greek word for “redemption” relates to what “our body” (genitive case here) is to be redeemed from—it does *not* say that we are to be redeemed from our body. What we are to be redeemed from is left unspecified in this verse, but it is clear from the context and from all the New Testament that we—specifically here “our body”—will be redeemed from sin and death and all of their consequences. Noë comments on Romans 8:23: “Like Paul . . . I’m looking forward to getting my new resurrection body immediately after I die” (*Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 133). But is that to what Paul is referring in this context (see vv. 17-23)?

²⁰³ Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 166.

²⁰⁴ Hyper-preterism is explicit in its rejection of the doctrine of a future cosmic renewal: “The Scriptures do not teach that our material world will experience a cataclysmic upheaval at the end of time/history” (Walt Hibbard, “A Courteous Response to Dr. Gary North’s Vitriolic Essay,” 2).

time was . . . destroyed” (2 Peter 3:6), but it was certainly not annihilated. Similarly, Paul calls the Christian a “new man” (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10 KJV) and a “new creation” (Gal. 6:15). The new person is the old person made new. The new heavens and new earth will be the present cosmos transformed, just as man’s resurrected body will be the present body transformed (for those still living at the Parousia) or resurrected.²⁰⁵

Peter has strong language in 2 Peter 3: “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (v. 10). “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (vv. 12-13). But hyper-preterists insist that Peter’s language in 2 Peter 3 is entirely figurative. Making the same mistake in his “word-study” method of exegesis that Max King makes (i.e., failing to let the immediate context determine how particular words are being used), Noë notes that the Greek word commonly translated “elements” in 2 Peter 3 (“heavenly bodies,” ESV) “is *never* used to refer to the material creation in any other New Testament occurrence or context,” and thus concludes that it does not have that meaning here. Noë says:

The “elements” Peter is speaking of are the “elementary principles” . . . of Judaism, that Old Covenant “world” or system which would soon be destroyed in the coming of “the day of the Lord” in A.D. 70 The melting and dissolving of Peter’s “elements” was a totally covenantal transformation, not a cosmic conflagration.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ For a fuller treatment of Romans 8 and 2 Peter 3, and many other key eschatological passages, see Robert B. Strimple’s presentation on “Amillennialism,” plus his responses to “Postmillennialism” and “Premillennialism” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Bock.

²⁰⁶ Noë, *Beyond the End Times*, 245.

The fact is that the meaning of στοιχεια (“elements”) in Paul’s letters (Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20) “is much disputed.”²⁰⁷ It may well be true that 2 Peter 3 is the only place in the New Testament where the meaning “the basic elements from which everything in the natural world is made, and of which it is composed” is found. But instances of that usage in extrabiblical literature can certainly be found,²⁰⁸ and it is the only natural meaning in the context. We are immediately inclined toward a realistic interpretation by the opening reference in this passage to the Flood. The description of that watery judgment on “the world of that time” (v. 6) in Genesis is not a literary figure for a covenantal transition, but rather a literal historical narrative. Why should we think that the fiery judgment reserved for “the present heavens and earth” will be any less literal than the Flood that corresponds to it?²⁰⁹ Peter warns his readers against using our human perspective on the passage of time to charge God with being “slow in keeping his promise” of the Parousia. That day of the Lord “will come” —make no mistake about that—but remember this: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (vv.8-10). Such a reminder would hardly have been made if the Parousia was coming in just a few years. Finally, throughout this passage, Peter directs our minds to the created cosmos. As Gentry observes,

The reference to the unraveling and conflagration of the heavens and the earth is expressly tied to the material creation Peter expressly refers to the material creation order: “from the beginning of creation” (3:4; cf. Gen. 1:1) He seems clearly to be defining the “heavens and earth” to which he is referring. He is not contemplating the destruction of the old Jewish order, but the material heavens and the earth.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ BAG, 776.

²⁰⁸ See *ibid.* and other sources for references.

²⁰⁹ See M. A. Genevois, “The Faith and Christian Thought,” in *The Resurrection of the Body*, by H. Cornélis et. al., 272.

²¹⁰ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr, *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 304.

The Resurrection of Christ

Berkouwer states, “Throughout its history, the Christian church has always held to the unity of the two Testaments and the continuity of God’s dealing with man. Thus it is no devaluation of the Old Testament to say that the expectation of the resurrection is squarely founded on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”²¹¹ The resurrection of Christ, of which Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, is clearly a *bodily* resurrection. Indeed, as noted earlier, to use that adjective in such a context seems quite redundant. Raymond E. Brown comments that “the concept of resurrection from the grave . . . is certainly what resurrection meant to the Jews of Jesus’ time It is not really accurate to claim that the NT references to the *resurrection* of Jesus are ambiguous as to whether they mean bodily resurrection—there was no other kind of resurrection.”²¹² Paul speaks of a resurrection that followed on the third day after *burial* (v. 4), and it is only the body that is buried.

R. C. Sproul reminds us that the gospel records reveal that the tomb was *empty*, thus laying “great stress on the continuity of the body that was placed in the tomb with the body that was raised. It was not *a* body. It was the *same* body.”²¹³ Murray Harris (from whom hyper-preterists claimed to have learned to think in terms of a “spiritual” resurrection) agrees: “The empty tomb . . . is the presupposition of belief in Jesus’ resurrection, a guarantee of the continuity between the earthly Jesus and the risen Lord and a protection against a

²¹¹ Berkouwer, 181-82.

²¹² Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 70. William Milligan comments: “If Jesus only lived in the spirit after death, it would be an abuse of language to call such an entirely new life a resurrection” (*The Resurrection of Our Lord* [New York: Macmillan, 1917], 9).

²¹³ R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 163.

spiritualized view of resurrection.”²¹⁴ The gospels of Luke and of John in particular lay special emphasis on the *physical* character of Christ’s risen body. How could words be clearer than our Lord’s challenge to the “frightened” disciples who thought “they saw a ghost” standing among them?

Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have. (Luke 24:38-39)

And when “they still did not believe it,” He asked for food and “ate it in their presence” (vv. 41-43). Compare John 20:17, 27 and Acts 1:4 and 10:41, where Peter speaks of “us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” *The Westminster Confession of Faith* simply echoes this biblical emphasis on the *continuity* between Christ’s premortem and postresurrection body when it affirms that “on the third day He arose from the dead, with *the same body in which He suffered*, with which also He ascended into heaven . . . and shall return, to judge men and angels, at the end of the world” (8:4).²¹⁵

Above I alluded to the claim of hyper-preterists that they are simply agreeing with Murray Harris’s concept of resurrection.²¹⁶ Professor Harris is an evangelical believer and is not to be charged with the errors of hyper-preterism. Unfortunately, however, he has made statements that have confused rather than

²¹⁴ Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 43.

²¹⁵ *The Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechisms* (Glasgow: The Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1970), 48-49 (emphasis added). The proof text cited for the phrase I have italicized is John 20:25, which speaks of the nail prints in the hands of the risen Jesus. It would seem that those scars were marks, not of disfigurement, but rather of the highest honor, as eternal reminders to His people of the atoning suffering and death of the Lamb of God.

²¹⁶ E.g., Randall E. Otto: “With Harris we affirm the basically immaterial and invisible nature of Christ’s glorified resurrection body” (*Coming in the Clouds: An Evangelical Case for the Invisibility of Christ at His Second Coming* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994], 248). Cf. Stevens, *Stevens Response to Gentry*, 52, 110, id., *Questions About the Afterlife*, 41; Harden, *Overcoming Sproul’s Resurrection Obstacles*, 40; Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 69; id., *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 140.

clarified the issues. I quoted above Harris's clear affirmation of the continuity between the body of Jesus laid in the tomb and the body that arose and left the tomb, and he points to the passage in Luke 24 (see above) where Jesus "allay(s) their fears that he was some ghostly apparition." And yet what stands out in his discussion is his insistence that "after his resurrection *his essential state was one of invisibility and therefore immateriality.*" He speaks of "this change into a spiritual mode of being" and appeals to Paul's reference to a "spiritual body," even though at other points Harris indicates that he is well aware of the fact that Paul's use of the Greek term πνευματικόν in 1 Corinthians 15:44 is *not* a reference to that which is invisible, immaterial, or nonbodily.²¹⁷

Like many others in recent years, Harris reminds us that Jesus' actual resurrection "was not witnessed" by anyone. Why does Harris remind us of that fact? What is the point he is making? Most of the others who have called attention to this fact (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann and Max King) have raised the point in the interests of their skepticism. And the response to be made to them is that *God* was present in that tomb, the God who has told His people by His Holy Spirit in His Word what happened there: that Jesus arose and left the tomb.

Harris concludes that when we examine the Gospels and Acts "we discover two distinct sets of information, one stressing the material nature of his [resurrection] body, the other suggesting its nonmaterial character." The first set of texts indicate that

he was recognized by his followers . . . because of such individual features as his tone of voice, his bodily movements, and the marks of crucifixion. When he appeared, Jesus stood on *terra firma*, was not suspended in the air; his body was solid, not ephemeral, and tangible, not immaterial.

²¹⁷ Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 53 (emphasis original), 56-57.

And yet because of the other set of texts—which indicate that the risen Jesus came and stood among them “though the doors were locked” (John 20:19, 26), that “God . . . *caused* him to be seen” (Acts 10:41), and then that He suddenly “disappeared from their sight” (Luke 24:31)—Harris concludes that “in his resurrected state Jesus possessed a ‘spiritual body’ which could be expressed in an immaterial or a material mode.”²¹⁸

However, the features of Jesus’ resurrection appearances that Harris appeals to here are not unique to Jesus’ life after His resurrection. Before His death, Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6:49), was transfigured before the disciples’ eyes (Luke 9:28-36), and “walked right through” the Nazareth mob that sought to throw Him over the cliff (Luke 4:30). Indeed, such experiences are not even unique to Jesus. The report of the officers after the escape of the apostles was: “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside” (Acts 5:23). Or think of how “when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again” (Acts 8:39). Such phenomena are not indicators of immateriality,²¹⁹ but of supernatural power. As Grudem wisely cautions us: “The [explanation] possibilities are too complex and our knowledge is too limited for us to consider that these texts require that Jesus became nonphysical.” As a matter of fact,

if the “customary form” of his resurrection body was nonphysical [as Harris claims], then in these repeated physical appearances Jesus would be guilty of misleading the disciples (and all subsequent readers of the New Testament) into thinking that his resurrection

²¹⁸ Harris, *From Grave to Glory*, 139-42.

²¹⁹ Stephen T. Davis adds: “Nor do the unusual properties of the risen Jesus in some of the appearance accounts (e.g., the ability to appear or disappear, luminosity) entail incorporeality. Only a physical object can be located somewhere, can travel from point A to point B, or can glow luminously” (*Risen Indeed* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 58).

body remained physical when it did not He did not say, “. . . flesh and bones, as you see that I temporarily have!”²²⁰

So irrefutable is the evidence that Jesus’ premortem body was raised, that even hyper-preterists realize that they cannot simply deny that. Instead, they try to explain why *our* resurrection will *not* be a resurrection of our premortem body—even though our Savior’s was—and our present body will remain in the grave forever.

In his lengthy book, *The Cross and the Parousia of Christ*, King nowhere reflects on what he terms the “biological and historical aspects” of Christ’s death. On page 444 he says that those aspects of Christ’s death and resurrection “were important, to be sure, but the resurrection problem at Corinth was rooted in the *theological* meaning of the cross which transcended the outward, historical dimensions of that event.” But nowhere in the book does King spell out the importance of the physical aspect of Jesus’ resurrection, and it was not until the Covenant Eschatology Symposium in Orlando in 1993 that it became evident that King is willing to see some evidential value in Jesus’ physical resurrection. At that conference, however, he hastened on to emphasize that the physical aspect of Jesus’ resurrection was “an exception,” and that “this is not involved in the *meaning*, the theological significance, of Jesus’ resurrection,” which is spiritual only. By making the physical aspect of Jesus’ resurrection “of no theological importance,” King tears the resurrection of the *crucified* and *buried* Jesus out of the gospel that Paul preached (1 Cor. 15:1-5), leaving us with “a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6-7). The physical resurrection of Christ was not some “brute fact” of history that merely pointed sinners to the “true” (purely spiritual) resurrection. Rather, it is authoritatively interpreted for

²²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 611-13.

us, by the God who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11), as the resurrection that was “for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Therefore, the issues are no less than the very gospel being at stake in the debate with hyper-preterism.²²¹

More recent hyper-preterists offer a fuller “theological” reason why Jesus’ body could be resurrected from the grave, but “our physical bodies cannot be raised.”²²² God could make use of Jesus’ earthly body and give it a heavenly, nonphysical form “because it wasn’t tainted by sin. Our sinfulness negates that luxury. Our bodies are subject to decay.”²²³ Christ’s body was not tainted by sin, because He was incarnated in a body that was like Adam’s *before* the Fall. His body was fit to be raised, whereas our sinful body is not.

In response, we could point out that the New Testament nowhere offers this explanation of the difference between Christ’s resurrection and ours, but of course the apostles did not need to offer an explanation of the difference because they did not teach that there was such a difference. Furthermore, this hyper-preterist explanation denies the full reality of Christ’s incarnation “in the likeness of sinful man.” Hyper-preterism is guilty of Christological error at this point. It is in reality a form of docetic heresy.²²⁴

²²¹ See John Murray’s discussion of Rom. 4:25 where “the resurrection is viewed as that which lays the basis for our justification,” in *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 154-55.

²²² Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*, 19. Cf. 28-30, 42. Cf. Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 32, 69, 73.

²²³ Harden, *Overcoming Sproul’s Resurrection Obstacles*, 30-31. Note that Harden later says that “the body of the believer . . . is doomed to return to the dust from where it came, because of the curse of sin” (38), apparently forgetting the hyper-preterist denial that psycho-physical death is the result of God’s punishment of man’s sin.

²²⁴ The effect of Steven’s christology would be to deny Jesus’ genetic connection with Mary as well as with the Jewish race. This is profoundly unscriptural. The contention that at the Incarnation the Logos received an unfallen body runs counter to the *Westminster Confession’s* statement that Jesus was “conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance” (VIII:II) (emphasis added).

Adolf Schlatter, in his *Commentary on Romans*, suggests that the Greek word *homoīōma* (“likeness”) in Romans 8:3 “is meant concretely; it says of Christ’s body that it was made just like ours. Docetic ideas should not be intruded.”²²⁵ Note that Paul does not say that Christ was sent in the *nature* of sinful man, because He was absolutely sinless (Heb. 4:15; John 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22). Yet Paul does say, with the boldness of the Spirit’s inspiration, that Christ came not only in the flesh, not only like men, but like men who are sinners. And thus He bore in His very likeness, in His human body, the marks of sin and its ravages. He did not come in the likeness of Adam before the Fall. Unlike Adam before the Fall, He knew pain, hardship, suffering, tears, and death. In Romans 8:3, we are given a special insight into the depth of our Lord’s humiliation. In Philippians 3:21, Paul calls our present bodies “our lowly bodies.” He goes on to say that Christ will “transform” these bodies to be “like his glorious body.” But Christ at His first coming came not in that glorious body of His exaltation, but in the likeness of sinful man.

In this discussion of Christ’s resurrection thus far, we have emphasized the *continuity* between the body that was laid in the tomb and the body that was raised, because this is what is minimized by hyper-preterists—indeed denied, as far as any “theological importance” is concerned. But of course the New Testament also lays great stress on the wonderful *discontinuity* between Christ’s body before His resurrection and His body after it. Christ’s resurrection was indeed the *firstfruits* of eschatological resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20), because He was the first to be raised, never to die again. And His resurrection body was that “glorious body” of which Paul speaks in Philippians 3:21—imperishable, glorious, powerful, heavenly (1 Cor. 15:42-47). John Murray writes:

²²⁵ Quoted by J. Schneider, “*homoīōma*,” in *TDNT*, 5:195, n. 40. For examples of such a concrete use of *homoīōma* with reference to the body, see Phil. 2:7 and Rev. 9:7.

Christ by his resurrection has established the realm of the resurrection, a realm pneumatically conditioned and constituted [v. 44, “a spiritual body”] The body that was raised from the tomb on the third day was the same body as was laid in the tomb. But it was endowed with new qualities. So it is with the resurrection of believers. There is unity and continuity. The usage of Scripture with respect to both Christ and believers is noteworthy in this respect. It was not a body that was laid in the tomb of Jesus: it was *he* as respects his body. *He* was buried, *he* lay in a tomb, and *he* rose from the dead. So it is with believers The difficulty of forming a concrete idea of the resurrection body is no valid objection to the reality.²²⁶

The Resurrection of Believers

In 1 Corinthians 15:12, Paul begins to address the “muddled thinking” of the Corinthians (see above). They were apparently accepting the resurrection of Christ from the dead (bodily, as we have seen), but rejecting such a resurrection for Christians—precisely the error of hyper-preterism. However, as Berkouwer puts it, “The resurrection of believers is the outcome and an indication of the power of Christ’s resurrection. The link between the two is most clearly expressed in the phrase ‘the first-born from the dead.’ The ‘priority’ that Christ has implies a sequel.”²²⁷

Throughout his letters, the apostle uses a variety of images to portray this fundamental truth of salvation: the redeeming experience of our Savior, our covenant Head, is the pattern and firm guarantee of what lies ahead for us. He died, was buried, and was raised from the dead—and His people will follow the same pattern—“but each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (1 Cor. 15:23). Since His “children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death” (Heb. 2:14). In His earthly ministry, He had

²²⁶ Murray, “The Last Things,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:411-12.

²²⁷ Berkouwer, 182.

a “lowly body” like ours, but when He returns from heaven He “will transform our lowly bodies so that they would be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). Note that Christ will transform our *bodies*; He will not leave them in the grave, as hyper-preterism teaches.²²⁸ The God “who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (Rom. 8:11; cf. 1 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 4:14). Note again that the Spirit does not here say simply that “God will also give life to *you*,” but specifically “will also” (the Greek καὶ here implies “just as He did for Christ”) “give life to your mortal *bodies*.” Later in Romans 8, Paul says that “we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (v. 17). Christ “is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead;” and as the “firstborn,” He will “have supremacy” over the others who will be raised from the dead (Col. 1:18).

The vivid image Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15:23, that of Christ as “the firstfruits” (ἀρχή) of the resurrection harvest (an image familiar from the Old Testament) indicates that Christ’s resurrection is not simply the *guarantee* that the resurrection of His people will follow. His resurrection is the *beginning* of that resurrection!

All people share in the death of Adam because through Adam death came into the world. Similarly, all Christians share in the resurrection of Jesus because through Jesus resurrection came into the world (vv. 21-22). Christians will participate in the resurrection of their representative, the *aparchē*, Jesus.²²⁹

²²⁸ Lincoln notes regarding the verb that Paul uses in Phil. 3:21: “*metaschēmatizō* involves not a creation of something entirely new but the transformation of something already there, in this case ‘our body of humiliation’” (*Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 103).

²²⁹ Holleman, *Resurrection and Parousia*, 51.

“Firstfruits” expresses the notion of organic connection and unity, the inseparability of the initial quantity from the whole . . . Paul views the two resurrections not so much as two events but as two episodes of the same event.²³⁰

Messiah is the first-fruits; i.e., what has happened to him is precisely what is to happen to all believers, only it has happened to him *first*. That is the only point of difference; in his case the resurrection came in three days after death, for others it is a matter of . . . years. But the resurrection in each case is exactly the same thing . . . The New Testament never argues from a general resurrection to the Resurrection of Christ. The argument is the other way about, the faith that Christ had risen being made the starting-point of the faith that His saints will rise with Him to newness of life.²³¹

Fundamental to Paul’s entire argument is the fact that the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of Christians are “completely parallel events.”²³² “For Paul, what will happen to Christians is what has happened to Christ and the resurrected bodies of believers will be like that of Christ.”²³³ Berkouwer points out:

For Paul, one cannot believe in the resurrection of Christ and still doubt the resurrection of the dead. The preaching of the risen Lord closes the discussion on the possibility of resurrection from the dead. It erases any doubt about it. The connection is, in fact, so close that “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised” (vs. 13). To deny the resurrection of the dead does not just do away with the eschatological

²³⁰ Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*, 34-35.

²³¹ Bowen, *The Resurrection in the New Testament*, 71, 165. Strangely, hyper-preterists typically speak not of Christ as the firstfruits, but of the Old Testament saints whom He was taking from Hades to heaven as “the ‘firstfruits’ group of many holy ones who previously had been raised and appeared around Jerusalem after Jesus’ resurrection” (Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 41). In a typically false use of an Old Testament type, Noë comments on Matt. 27:51-53 and says that “only the firstfruits of harvested grain . . . were physically brought into the Temple’s Holy Place and visibly waved in the air as wave offering. The rest of the harvest never received this special treatment” (*Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 74).

²³² Wolfhart Pannenberg, quoted by Ronald J. Sider, “The Pauline Concept of the Resurrection Body in 1 Corinthians XV. 35-54,” *NTS* 21 (1975): 428.

²³³ Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 34. On page 125 of *Raised Immortal*, Harris writes: “Paul’s abbreviated answer to his own question, ‘With what kind of body do they come?’ (1 Cor. 15:35b) would have been, ‘With a body like Christ’s!’” On page 147, he comments: “Paul believed that the resurrection body of Christ was the paradigm for that of believers (Phil. 3:21).” And yet earlier in that book (44), surprisingly and disappointingly, Harris insists that “methodologically it is hardly appropriate to claim that the physical remains of believers will be raised and transformed simply because this was the experience of Christ.”

perspective, but with the *foundation* upon which the community was built as well. Consequently, what Paul had proclaimed is robbed of its content; it becomes vain (vs. 14). Paul and the other apostles turn out to be false witnesses, misrepresenting God, because they had preached the resurrection of Christ, “whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised” (vs. 15). Moreover, those who have already died are caught up in a “crisis”—a wholly imaginary one!—“those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (vs. 18).²³⁴

Readers of hyper-preterist literature should be forewarned that they will encounter semantic sleight of hand on this vitally important point. Stevens tells his readers that he wants to put “heavy emphasis” on the fact that “*it is a bodily resurrection* for both Christ and all His saints.” But he has already made it clear that for Christ it was His “selfsame body” that was “resuscitated,” whereas in our case “our physical bodies cannot be raised.”²³⁵ In like manner, Noë says that “Christ’s resurrection guarantees that our resurrection body will be like his . . . an imperishable, immortal, glorious, heavenly body.” But, says Noë, ours will not be a resurrected body at all. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:37-38, he insists that “the thought of a physically resurrected old body is not to be found here or anywhere in Scripture.” Thus, he must acknowledge that “there is major discontinuity between our spiritual bodies and Christ’s resurrected body.”²³⁶ King often stresses that the resurrection of believers is a “bodily” one, but the reader must always keep in mind that when King uses that term, he is referring to “a non-physical somatic change.”²³⁷

To use the terms *body* and *bodily* as the hyper-preterists do is to obfuscate rather than to communicate. Berkouwer puts the issue forward in the form of questions:

²³⁴ Berkouwer, 183.

²³⁵ Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*, 32 (emphasis original), 19.

²³⁶ Noë, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 129, 132, 128, 139.

²³⁷ King, *The Cross and the Parousia*, 532.

But what are we to make of the particular expression in 1 Corinthians 15:44—“a *spiritual body*?” Are we to deduce from this that Paul was not, after all, primarily concerned with an actual corporeality, but with something “spiritual?” Does this not inevitably lead to a dualism between body and soul? Can speaking of a “spiritual body” accomplish anything but throwing us into confusion? If the resurrection is a matter of a spiritual body, how much meaning is there to confessing a “resurrection of the body?”²³⁸

A “nonphysical σῶμα” is the same contradiction in terms as is a “nonphysical body.” Stephen T. Davis says that the standard definition of our English word *body* is “a physical object,” that is, “an entity that has spatio-temporal location and is capable of being empirically measured, tested, or observed in some sense.”²³⁹ So also Robert H. Gundry, in a most important study examining the use of the Greek word σῶμα, not only in the New Testament and the Septuagint literature, concludes that while σῶμα (like our word *body*) can be used in both the literal and figurative senses, its uniform primary reference is to the physical body—the material, corporeal aspect of our person.²⁴⁰

Paul uses the word σῶμα forty-six times in 1 Corinthians, more than in any other New Testament book. In 10:17 and 12:13, it refers metaphorically to the church as the body of Christ. In 10:16; 11:24, 27, 29, the word refers to the body of the incarnate Christ given for us and represented by the bread of the Lord’s Supper.²⁴¹ In the other forty occasions on which σῶμα appears in this letter, it refers quite simply and literally to a body, whether to the heavenly and earthly bodies that God has created (15:40), or to the body that will grow from the seed that is planted (15:37-38), or to the human body (15:35, 44). In 15:35, Paul asks, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of *body* will they come?”

²³⁸ Berkouwer, 191.

²³⁹ Davis, *Risen Indeed*, 94.

²⁴⁰ Robert H. Gundry, “Sōma” in *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

²⁴¹ This is not simply another metaphorical use of the word (*contra* Scott Brodeur, *The Holy Spirit’s Agency in the Resurrection of the Dead* [Rome: Editrice Pontifica Universita Gregoriana, 1996], 94), because this reference is, sacramentally, to the literal body of the crucified Christ.

In 15:44, Paul contrasts the “natural body” (σῶμα ψυχικόν) that is buried with the “spiritual body” (σῶμα πνευματικόν) that is raised. Note that in this last verse both the “natural” and the “spiritual” are *bodies*. There is no contextual reason in any of these forty references to seek some meaning beyond the simple, literal meaning.

Robert Gundry wisely notes that “Paul uses *sōma* precisely because the physicality of the resurrection is central to his soteriology.” He continues:

Paul’s zeal to defend the future resurrection of the *sōma* is no longer [better: “not merely”] attributable to an anthropological concern, viz., that “if man were no longer *sōma*. . . he would no longer be man” [Bultmann]. It rather derives from a soteriological concern: denial of a future resurrection of the physical body will work backward to the conclusion that Christ was not raised physically. That in turn, argues Paul, will take away the mainspring from life in the divine economy of salvation: “if there is no resurrection from the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain . . .” (1 Cor. 15:12-28).²⁴²

And, of course, it is not simply Paul’s use of the word σῶμα that establishes the fact that our resurrection body will be our present body raised and transformed for the life to come. Paul’s entire argument emphasizes the *continuity* between our present body and our resurrection body. In his answer to the questions he asks in verse 35, there is also joyous emphasis on *discontinuity*, on the transcendent glory of the resurrection body, surpassing all our fondest hopes. But throughout Paul’s argument it is the mortal Christian as he or she exists now—in his or her weakness, perishability, and dishonor—who will undergo this transformation. This perishable, mortal body (whether dead or still living when Christ comes) must “put on” the imperishable and immortality (vv. 52-53 ESV). Paul does not speak of the exchange of one body for another. The mortal body is raised to *become* immortal. Paul says that the relationship is like

²⁴² Gundry, “*Sōma*” in *Biblical Theology*, 168-69.

that between a seed and the plant that grows from it (vv. 37-39). Notice how the subject remains the same in verses 42-44; whether Paul is describing the mortal body or the immortal body, it is the same body:

What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. (ESV)

Paul underlines this corporeal continuity in verses 53-54 by adding the demonstrative pronoun *του/το* (“this”). Unfortunately, this word is entirely omitted from both verses in the NIV and from verse 54 in the ESV. For clarity, I put the word in italics here, quoting the NASB:

For *this* perishable must put on the imperishable, and *this* mortal must put on immortality. But when *this* perishable will have put on the imperishable, and *this* mortal will have put on immortality . . .

It is with good biblical support that *The Westminster Confession of Faith* says:

At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, *with the self-same bodies, and none other* (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever (32.2 [emphasis added]).

Raymond E. Brown responds well to the modern suggestion that the continuity, the identity, will be *personal*, but not corporeal—a proposal made even by such evangelicals as George E. Ladd and Murray Harris:²⁴³

If we would do justice to Paul, the concept of bodily resurrection should not be interpreted so vaguely that it loses all corporeal implications . . . for Paul there is more than a continuity of personal existence—in the resurrection there is a continuity of the corporeal aspect of personal existence. And so the modern suggestion that in

²⁴³ Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus*, 129; Harris, *Raised Immortal*, 126.

resurrection the body may corrupt and the person still goes on, while it may involve a continuity of the “I,” would not convey Paul’s idea of the corporeality of the “I.”²⁴⁴

We have said that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead was utter foolishness to the unbelieving first-century Greek minds; and, of course, in this twenty-first century it is considered no less ridiculous by unbelievers—and, sad to say, by the hyper-preterists. The question Paul asked of King Agrippa and his court is the very question that must be put to the hyper-preterists today: “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8).

The Christian reading a hyper-preterist for the first time may be startled to read the same objections to bodily resurrection that unbelievers have been scornfully presenting for two thousand years. At the heart of the hyper-preterist attacks on the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is naturalistic, “the-universe-is-a-closed-system” skepticism. E.g., Otto says:

The problems . . . are, of course, significant. The most obvious is the perennial concern raised as to how human material which has long since biodegraded into the dust and become part of the grass which is eaten by the cows which has been consumed by subsequent generations of human beings can be recollected.²⁴⁵

At what stage of maturity (child? young adult?) will the person be resurrected? What about the case of a believer eaten by a cannibal who is later converted—which man gets those eaten body parts as part of his resurrected body? Haven’t we learned from science about the so-called “indifference of the atom” (as well as all that makes up the atom)? When the body dies and cell life disintegrates, what basis remains for identifying any particular atoms with any particular body? Hyper-preterists devote many pages to stating such objections, sometimes in great detail.

²⁴⁴ Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, 87.

²⁴⁵ Otto, *Case Dismissed*, 15.

Many decades ago, Justin McCann noted that “all the difficulties may be reduced to one, namely . . . a man can claim no material substance as his own.” And McCann reminded us that “it is a difficulty which is almost as old as the doctrine.” All the standard objections can be found addressed by Tertullian, by Augustine, by Thomas Aquinas, by virtually every Christian theologian writing on the subject. What was their answer? McCann writes: “In its ultimate form it was simply this: that difficulties which seem to us with our limited knowledge and limited intelligence almost insuperable will be no difficulties to the omniscience and omnipotence of God.” And then he adds: “There is really nothing more to be said.”²⁴⁶ Now, obviously, in one sense much more could be said, but in the final analysis this is the last word to be said: “Jesus replied, ‘What is impossible with men is possible with God’” (Luke 18:27).

Hyper-preterists like to claim they are “pure Bereans” (see Acts 17:11), that is, those who are ready to believe whatever the Scriptures teach. But are they really Bereans when they insist that (with Otto), although “there is little disputing the fact that most of the early church fathers held to the resurrection of the very flesh in which one died,” those fathers were able to believe that only

by making demands of faith which cannot be rationally explained or defended Contrariwise, Christian theology has always insisted on the reasonableness of the faith, on the importance and indeed necessity of rationally defensible demonstrations of what is to be believed Moreover, inasmuch as there are two books of revelation, one in creation and the other in Scripture, which must be coherently explained, any procedure which neglects consensual scientific understanding in dogmatic insistence upon a particular view of the resurrection body, for instance, hardly merits serious attention, let alone a claim to authority.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Justin McCann, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 76, 81. Stephen Davis, writing sixty-five years later, says: “The point that the Fathers were making is that whatever difficulties resurrection presents can be overcome by an omnipotent being. I believe that point still stands and is not rendered improbable or implausible by evolution” (*Risen Indeed*, 102).

²⁴⁷ Otto, *Case Dismissed*, 52-53.

Only a view of the resurrection body that can claim a “consensus” in the scientific community (whether believing or unbelieving) “merits serious attention.” What that view would be, I cannot imagine. Think of what Otto’s criterion would mean, not simply for eschatology, but for every fundamental doctrine of our faith—the Trinity, the Creation, the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement—because every Christian doctrine takes a *supernatural* point of reference, namely, God. We can’t make the mistake of thinking that Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 was trying to present to the unbelieving Greeks a rational “demonstration” (in Otto’s words, “an experimental or logical proof”). Paul was writing to believers (v. 11) who had in their “muddled thinking” called into question, as Berkouwer puts it, “the *imaginability* and *thinkability* of the resurrection.”

Obviously, Paul did not intend to *prove* the resurrection of the body by this line of thought and make it acceptable to human understanding through “natural theology” or “natural cosmology.” He is careful to guard against his readers’ forming conclusions based solely on human reasoning The analogies . . . function only within the framework of what is believed and known in Jesus Christ.²⁴⁸

“Each in His Own Turn” and Other Phrases in Verses 23-55

I want to now look briefly at the hyper-preterist interpretation of some specific phrases in 1 Corinthians 15:23-55. When Paul in verse 23 says that the resurrection is for “each in his own turn,” he uses the Greek word *ταγματι*, which can be used as a technical term for a body of troops, but which can also be used “without any special military application” to refer to any class or group, or

²⁴⁸ Berkouwer, 188, 190 (emphasis original).

simply to refer to an “order, turn, arrangement.”²⁴⁹ And we are not left as to speculate as to what “order” the apostle is referring to here, because he immediately tells us. The order is that Christ was raised first, as “the firstfruits,” and “then *at his coming* those who belong to Christ” will be raised (v. 23, ESV).²⁵⁰ Incredibly, Noë argues that there are not only these two resurrection days (when Christ arose and when those who belong to Him will rise at His coming), but innumerable resurrection days being referred to in this verse:

First in this sequence was Jesus’ resurrection as the “first of the firstfruits.” Second was the company of many Old Testament saints who joined with Him as part of that initial portion of “firstfruits.” Third was the rest of the dead, raised forty years later at His *parousia* coming on “the last day,” . . . But after the “last day” in 70 A.D. it’s “each” or “every man in his own turn/order.”²⁵¹

From then on, it’s repeated over and over again in the lives of individual believers who are born, saved, die, and experience resurrection at different times. Again, it’s “each in his or her own turn/order.”²⁵²

Thus Noë turns this verse into a proof text for the immortal-body-at-death doctrine. But he is guilty here not only of reading much into the text that is not there, but also of making it say something different from what it clearly does say. E.g., Paul clearly speaks of Christ as “the firstfruits,” not as “the first of the firstfruits” (leaving room for *others* to also be the firstfruits). And Paul doesn’t say that the resurrection of “those who belong to Christ” will occur at various times *after* Christ’s coming (παρουσία). The Greek preposition *εν* cannot be translated “after,” as Noë translates it. It must be translated “at” (thus, “at His

²⁴⁹ BAG, 810.

²⁵⁰ C. E. Hill observes, “If there are two and no more *tagmata* this can hardly be surprising, as the concept of first fruits certainly entails no anticipation of a succession of multiple full harvests to follow” (“Paul’s Understanding of Christ’s Kingdom in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28,” *NovT* 30 [1988]: 308).

²⁵¹ Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 49.

²⁵² Noë, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 100. Cf. Bray, *The Rapture of Christians*, 18.

coming” [NASB, ESV]) or “when” (thus, “when He comes” [NIV]). Noë understands Christ’s coming to have occurred in A.D. 70, but he knows that the resurrection of “those who belong to Christ”—even in the sense in which he understands that resurrection—did not take place then.

“The glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” is *still* “the blessed *hope*” of the church, for which we still “wait” (Titus 2:13). The resurrection of believers will take place at Christ’s coming, and not at the time of their individual death. Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, where, just as in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, Paul also speaks of the “change” (glorification) awaiting those who will be alive at Christ’s return:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

This passage causes hyper-preterists great difficulty. Harden acknowledges that “the rapture is not a settled issue, even among full preterists. Preterists like King take it symbolically. Some in the ‘immortal body at death’ camp take it literally.” Among the latter were J. Stuart Russell and Milton Perry, who taught that there actually was a limited physical rapture of saints “in conjunction with the parousia at A.D. 70.” But Harden admits that as for there being any historical record of such an extraordinary event, “the silence is deafening.” Harden himself wants to interpret this passage in terms of his immortal-body-at-death doctrine, and so says:

The process of being “snatched” or “caught away from” death and Hades and being “gathered in” straight to heaven began in A.D. 70 We are all snatched away when we

die As post-A.D. 70 believers, we won't be resurrected out of Hades, only caught away on our way to Hades, snatched to be with Christ.²⁵³

Noē, however, offers a different interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4, one that reads like a parody of hyper-preterist “exegesis.” He claims that the “primary meaning” of the Greek word for “air” (αερα) that Paul uses in verse 17 “is the internal breathing air (inside us) and air within our immediate proximity (as exhaled)—i.e. within approximately ten feet above the earth’s surface—not the atmosphere air In short, one’s feet don’t have to leave the ground to get ‘caught up’ in this air (*aer*) with the Lord.” Thus, according to Noē, Paul is referring in this verse to “individuals alive at that time and since being transformed by a spiritual experience,” knowing what Jesus meant about the kingdom of God being “‘within you and among you’ (Lk. 17:21),” “unconsciously abiding in His presence and doing the things that please Him without ever having to think about doing them or forcing ourselves.”²⁵⁴

Surely such a bizarre interpretation needs no detailed refutation. Noē has evidently overlooked the fact that Paul called Satan “the ruler of the kingdom of the air [αερος]” in Ephesians 2:2. Did the apostle think that Satan was active only “within approximately ten feet above the earth’s surface?” And when we read that John in his vision saw “the sun and sky . . . darkened by the smoke from the Abyss” (Rev. 9:2), the Greek word translated “sky” is αηρ. Again, Noē would avoid such egregious errors if he would simply read words in their context.

I have noted how similar to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. Hyper-preterists insist, however, that when Paul writes

²⁵³ Harden, *Overcoming Sproul’s Resurrection Obstacles*, 76-78, 81. Cf. Bray, *The Rapture of Christians*.

²⁵⁴ Noē, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 13, 15, 54-55.

that “*we* will not all sleep, but *we* will all be changed,” he is teaching definitively that *some* of those to whom he is writing will be alive at the Parousia, a clear pointer to the fact that that coming took place in the first century. The hyper-preterist cannot claim that “*we*” includes Paul, because Paul suffered martyrdom at Rome prior to A.D. 70.²⁵⁵ But, as Sproul observes, if “*we*” simply implies that some of those who receive the apostle’s teaching would be alive at the Second Coming, “then it is likewise possible that the ‘*we* who are alive’ can be even more inclusive and refers to any reader of the Corinthian text in the future.”²⁵⁶ All we have to keep in mind when reading such alleged “imminency” statements in the New Testament is that none of the apostles knew *when* their Lord would return (Matt. 24:36); so how else would we expect them to write about that great day? I have found the words *good*, *better*, *best* form a helpful outline in understanding Paul’s eschatological hope. In his letter, Paul expresses a *good*: to live now “in the body” (Phil. 1:24-26), serving Christ and rejoicing in him; a *better* (Phil. 1:23): “to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8), awaiting the resurrection; and a *best*: to be one of those still alive at the Parousia, who will be “clothed” (2 Cor. 5:2, 4) “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52) with that heavenly, immortal body as one “puts on one garment over another garment,” without ever dying.²⁵⁷

The apostle says that this wondrous transformation will take place “at the last trumpet” (1 Cor. 15:52; cf. 1 Thess. 4:16). Harden says that “the message of the last trumpet” was to sound “the death knell of Old Testament Judaism,” and Noë says that “simply put,” the trumpet’s message was “for Christians to ‘reign

²⁵⁵ For the date of Paul’s death, see e.g., Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (3rd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 664-65.

²⁵⁶ Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, 162.

²⁵⁷ Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 189. See the excellent treatments of 2 Cor. 5:1-10 by Vos, 144-45, 185-98; Gundry, “*Sōma*” in *Biblical Theology*, 149-54; Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 160-83.

on earth.” But surely the Greek term εσχατος (“last”) must here be given its full eschatological force (compare Paul’s reference to death as “the last enemy” in v. 26). This final, eschatological trumpet sounds the passing away of the present order of reality—“the end” (το τέλος) announced in verse 24—and the arrival of “a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13).²⁵⁸

Paul’s Seed Metaphor

There are two further elements in Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15:35-50 that we must consider because the hyper-preterists’ distortion of their meaning is foundational to their immortal-spiritual-body-at-death interpretation.

As noted above, Paul is not attempting to offer rational proof of the resurrection in these verses. In turning these believers’ minds to the familiar experience of planting “a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else” (v. 37), he simply wants them to see (in Berkouwer’s helpful phrase) “the *imaginability* and *thinkability* of the resurrection,” so that they will not form “conclusions based solely on human reasoning”²⁵⁹ Berkouwer states:

Paul turns to nature for an example. The mysterious process of sowing and reaping is not an automatic process that does not arouse any amazement. What is sown is not the body-to-be, but the kernel of it, which does not grow by its own strength but is given a body by God, an individual body for each seed. All the emphasis on this passage falls on the act of God, which certainly does not follow as a matter of course from the human act of sowing as such. There is a *miracle* in the seed’s transition from kernel to body.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Cf. R. R. Collins, *First Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1999), 580; Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 141. Herman Ridderbos writes: “Here the thought of the conclusion of the economy of redemption carried out by Christ is at the fore” (*Paul*, tr. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 560. Joost Holleman writes: “The phrase ‘the end’ (*to telos*) refers here to the absolute end of human history, the very last day on which the old aeon will be finished completely and the new aeon will start” (*Resurrection and Parousia*, 58).

²⁵⁹ Berkouwer, 188 (emphasis original).

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

Paul's argument is picturesque, not scientific. Ladd notes that the illustration of sowing and growing is "a rather imperfect metaphor," since the seed only "seems" to die, and in actual fact "the bare kernel planted in the ground carries within itself the power of germination," whereas the resurrection will be a purely supernatural accomplishment.²⁶¹ But if it were a "perfect" metaphor (in the sense that Ladd is using that adjective), it would not be a metaphor at all, but rather a literal analogue.

Compare Paul's literal analogy between "the first man Adam" and "the second man from heaven," who is also "the last Adam" (vv. 45-49), which is not merely a figurative metaphor (basis Paul's two literal, historical, representative heads—Adam, the head of the entire race descended biologically from him, and Christ, the head of that new people united to Him by faith. This analogy therefore offers a much "tighter" comparison, the points of which, with regard to the resurrection, are drawn out by the apostle here in 1 Corinthians 15, and, with regard to justification, in Romans 5:12-19.

Paul was not so ignorant of the facts of botany that he thought that the seed actually died. He knew, as Jesus had said, that the seed itself "sprouts and grows" (Mark 4:27); and thus no true resurrection takes place in the case of the seed.²⁶² But, as Ladd reminds us, we simply cannot find "in the realm of nature adequate analogies for supernatural truth."²⁶³ Berkouwer expounds:

Obviously, Paul did not intend to *prove* the resurrection of the body by this line of thought and make it acceptable to human understanding through "natural theology" or "natural cosmology." He is careful to guard against his readers' forming conclusions

²⁶¹ Ladd, *I Believe*, 113.

²⁶² "Of course this is not resurrection, and Paul doesn't claim that it is" (G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* [London: Oliphants, 1964], 43).

²⁶³ Ladd, *I Believe*, 114.

based solely on human reasoning. For that reason, in his analogy of the seed he points out the miraculous power of God, which gives the body to the kernel. From the seed itself nothing can be expected unless one keeps his eyes open to the miracles of God. So it goes with the sowing of this earthly body. The reference to nature (for the analogy from creation also presupposes faith in the living God) is intended to break down all pretentious rationalistic questions. He intends to expose this seemingly real and meaningful problem for what it is

Paul does not want to make the leap from a phenomenon in nature to the resurrection of the dead, but in this polemical situation and on the basis of his unshakable certainty, he rejects all pride with reference to the mystery of God's future act.²⁶⁴

The point of Paul's illustration, however, has been clear to believers for two thousand years. The figure is well-chosen to emphasize both the *continuity* between what is sown and what later appears, and the wondrous *discontinuity*. Who could imagine, looking merely at a seed, what a future plant growing from it would look like? But who could deny that that seed is transformed into a plant? Likewise, it is that perishable, dishonorable, weak, natural body that is sown that will be raised an imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual body (vv. 42-44).

Hyper-preterists attempt to press the details of a seed growing into a plant in ways that Paul obviously does not—and we must always be careful to limit our understanding of a biblical metaphor to the purpose for which the biblical writer introduces it. (E.g., the Shulamite is not described as “a rose” in Song of Songs 2:1 to emphasize her prickly personality.) Stevens insists that Paul's point is that “the outer shell” of the seed corresponds to our body, and it “is not preserved or resuscitated.” “It dies and stays dead.” What corresponds to the “inner germ” of the seed is the “inner man,” the spirit. And at death the spirit receives a new, “spiritual” body (I will consider that adjective below) for its new heavenly life, a body “not just new in kind, but numerically as well,” which

²⁶⁴ Berkouwer, 188-89 (emphasis original).

simply means that it has no connection with the premortem body.²⁶⁵ Harden agrees, arguing that “the seed analogy” therefore “challenges the Reformed thought of psychosomatic unity, which says that man is not complete without his physical body.”²⁶⁶ Noē says that what “we modern-day Christians need” is a “loosening” of “our emotional attachment to the body sown”—as though early Christians did not have such an attachment.²⁶⁷ He explains:

The shell or outer coat remains in the ground and decomposes Hence, when we die, we leave that old body behind, forever Thus, the continuity is the spiritual, not the physical.²⁶⁸

Both Stevens and Noē must acknowledge, as we have seen, that this means that there is “a major discontinuity between our spiritual bodies and Christ’s resurrected body,”²⁶⁹ since His buried body was resurrected and transformed into His spiritual body. But, of course, they can “explain” why that was possible for Jesus’ body, but is not possible for ours (see above).

Seeking to press the literalness of the seed metaphor, J. E. Gautier insists that since a seed is alive and not dead, the “sowing” referred to in verses 42-43 is our birth into this world, and “our period of dormancy is our lifetime [Paul’s] argument implies that to be *sown* is to be born, not to be buried.”²⁷⁰ Noē agrees that while “many” who read these verses “think that the natural body is sown when it enters the ground at the time of physical death, the problem with

²⁶⁵ Stevens, *Stevens Response to Gentry*, 57; Stevens, *Questions About the Afterlife*, 37-38.

²⁶⁶ Harden, *Overcoming Sproul’s Resurrection Obstacles*, 99.

²⁶⁷ Noē, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 148.

²⁶⁸ Noē, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 68-69.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69. Cf. Stevens, *Stevens Response to Gentry*, 58.

²⁷⁰ J. E. Gautier Jr., “That Ye May Keep Your Own Tradition,” at www.ourworld-top.cs.com/preteristabcs (emphasis original). Surprisingly, Murray Harris also says that vv. 42b-43 refer to “the ‘sowing’ of life on earth,” although he then adds: “which terminates in death and burial” (“Resurrection and Immortality in the Pauline Corpus,” in *Life in the Face of Death*, ed. Longenecker, 153).

that is that a dead body no longer has any life in it [A] farmer does not sow a seed that is dead inside.” Contrary to Gautier, however, Noë argues that the “sowing” refers not to natural birth, but to spiritual rebirth: “Obviously, this sowing is a spiritual process. It has its beginnings when a person is born again and spiritually dies, not when a believer physically dies.”

It seems that such an absurd interpretation—who can miss the fact that, in the context of this chapter (i.e., the reference in verse 3 to the death, *burial*, and resurrection of Christ), Paul is referring in verses 36-38 and 42-43 to the burial and resurrection of the believers body?—results from pressing Paul’s seed metaphor in a falsely *literal* fashion. However, their interpretation is not really literal at all. A seed has no “immaterial inner spirit” that possesses “the ingredients for some or all of the future . . . spiritual body,” so that “the continuity is the spiritual, not the physical.”²⁷¹ The continuity between seed and plant is, as a matter of fact, physical. John T. Darragh, writing in 1921, already anticipated and answered the hyper-preterist interpretation of Paul’s metaphor:

The whole point of the illustration is missed when the reader overlooks the fact that it is the body of a dead person that is compared to a seed That body has been sown a natural body, but it is to be raised a spiritual body All this is lost if we make the hidden life-force of the seed correspond to the soul. For the soul is not sown in or with the body [T]he Apostle is speaking not of living persons but of the resurrection of the dead and of the bodies into which [the soul] is to return. It is this connection that he illustrates by the parable of the seed. The seed and the body are both sown, as it were. Both are dull, inert, devoid of signs of life. From both spring something far surpassing themselves in form, in living grace and beauty It is no less important to notice the limits of the illustration than it is to observe what the two things are between which the comparison lies. S. Paul confines himself to the contrast between the seed and the plant which springs from it, as showing the striking difference between the natural body and that spiritual body which it becomes at the resurrection.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Noë, *Shattering the ‘Left Behind’ Delusion*, 136, 135, 139.

²⁷² Darragh, *The Resurrection of the Flesh*, 40-41.

When reading Paul's seed metaphor, we must remember another crucial point that was emphasized earlier. Throughout this chapter, Paul is speaking not of individual "resurrections" that occur at the death of each individual believer down through history, but rather of a general resurrection of all those belonging to Christ that occurs at His coming (v. 23).

"A Spiritual Body" versus "Flesh and Blood"

In verse 44, the apostle writes: "It is sown a natural (ψυχικόν) body, it is raised a spiritual (πνευματικόν) body." To our modern minds it may seem that Paul is here drawing a contrast between what is material and what is immaterial, and that immediately raises the question of whether "a spiritual body" is not an oxymoron.

But to class it as an oxymoron completely misunderstands the apostle's use of the terms ψυχικός and πνευματικός. Paul refers to that which is πνευματικός ("spiritual") fifteen times in 1 Corinthians. A study of those texts reveals that the adjective does not refer to that which is immaterial generally or to the human spirit specifically. Rather, it refers to that which is given by the Holy Spirit or to the person who possesses the Holy Spirit. The Israelites ate "spiritual food" and drank "spiritual drink" from a "spiritual rock" (10:3-4), but that doesn't mean they couldn't sink their teeth into that food or strike that rock. It means that these provisions were supernaturally given by the Holy Spirit. The "spiritual gifts" discussed in chapter 12 are clearly gifts of the Holy Spirit. And when Paul draws a contrast between that which is ψυχικός and that which is πνευματικός, it is a contrast between that which is of this fallen, unregenerate world and that which is of the Holy Spirit. The ψυχικός man in 2:14, who "does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God," is "the man without the

Spirit” (see the NIV), as contrasted with πνευματικός man (v. 15), who has the Holy Spirit. Compare James’s contrast between ψυχική wisdom and the wisdom that comes “from heaven” (James 3:15, 17). And note especially how Jude explains his reference to those who are ψυχικοί in verse 19, by adding that they “do not have the Spirit.”

By the same token, the ψυχικός body spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15:44 is our present, natural body—fallen, weak, and sinful (Rom. 6:6), the likeness of the earthly Adam (1 Cor. 15:45-49), whereas the “spiritual” body is that body raised, transformed, empowered, and perfectly filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit for the life of the age to come, in the likeness of the risen, heavenly Adam (Christ). Berkouwer makes our point:

Paul’s expression [“a spiritual body” in 1 Corinthians 15:44] has nothing to do with spiritualism. In speaking about what God would send in the future through the miracle of His grace, Paul adds that the body to be raised would be a spiritual body. For him, this falls in line with the distinction between the first and second Adams. The spiritual body is contrasted to the physical, but Paul’s use of “spiritual” and “physical” conveys a specific meaning

This spiritual body of the future is a matter of the gift and power of the resurrection of Christ. It involves a perspective concerning reality that is wholly dominated by the Spirit—the *Pneuma* The “spiritual body” does not have to do with what we sometimes call “spiritualizing.” “Spiritualizing” always presupposes a dualism, which in turn carries with it a devaluation of the body, which is nowhere to be found in Paul’s teachings. He speaks of the body as “controlled by the *pneuma*.” The Spirit is already at work within man’s body, but only in the resurrection will it completely rule man’s life. This is not a gradual process of evolution, but an entirely novel divine act in which the Spirit will be manifested. It is the transition from mortality to immortality, from perishability to imperishability. The transition does not disqualify the body, but it does indicate a break. This break is not between the lostness of the body and the soul’s liberation from it, for the Spirit of God already lives within man’s concrete earthly existence. At present however, there remains perishability (*phthorá*), weakness (*astheneía*), dishonor (*atimía*), and humiliation (vv. 42f., 50; cf. Phil. 3:21). Then there will be imperishability as the body is raised through the power of Christ. The spiritual body stands in the full light of the destruction of death.²⁷³

²⁷³ Berkouwer, 191-92 (emphasis original).

Hyper-preterists sometimes indicate that they understand this. E.g., Noë writes: “The terminology ‘spiritual body’ does not define its substance. Nor does it necessarily mean this body is composed purely of spirit, as opposed to physical matter.”²⁷⁴ But throughout their writings they go on continually referring to “the spiritual body” as though Paul’s phrase did refer to a “nonphysical body” (whatever that might mean).²⁷⁵

Hyper-preterists likewise understand Paul’s declaration in verse 50 that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” as another apostolic denial of a physical resurrection.²⁷⁶ But again, this is an obvious distortion of Paul’s statement, since he immediately goes on to explain his statement: “nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” The phrase “flesh and blood” is a Semitic idiom (regularly translated by the Septuagint σαρξ και αιμα) denoting earthly man as he is presently constituted, in his sinfulness and resulting weakness, decay, and ultimate death. Thus, this phrase, like Paul’s preceding references to the ψυχικος body, point to the fact that the Christian as he or she is *now* is not suited for the eternal kingdom of God. The new heaven and new earth will be “the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). Although we are already *justified* in Christ (Rom. 8:1), we must still be *glorified* in Christ (Rom. 8:17, NASB, ESV). As Paul emphasizes throughout these verses, the believer, whether dead or still living when Christ comes again, must be *transformed* (v. 52), clothed with an

²⁷⁴ Noë, *Your Resurrection Body and Life*, 64.

²⁷⁵ Note that the Greek term ψυχικος is the adjectival form of ψυχη, the noun often translated in English as “soul.” But the hyper-preterist does not suggest that Paul, in speaking of the “soulish body,” is teaching that our present body is somehow immaterial.

²⁷⁶ E.g., see Harden, *Overcoming Sproul’s Resurrection Obstacles*, 29.

imperishable, immortal, spiritual body for the eschatological life of the consummation.²⁷⁷ Berkouwer states:

The close connection of this resurrection with the resurrection of Christ is a pervasive Pauline theme, and there is no indication that the early church ever lost this perspective The church was not interested in categories of substance or isolated metaphysical miracles, but in the reality of the miraculous power of God towards this our flesh, this weak, perishable, and mortal body; in short, towards the whole man in his earthly existence. Therefore, regardless of how much the eschaton was seen in relation to the indwelling of the Spirit, it was not yet realized, but remained the object of the expectation: God's act through the power of Christ.²⁷⁸

Berkouwer summarizes as follows:

Every attempt to explain the great change of 1 Corinthians 15:51 and to concretize the continuity on the basis of anthropological distinctions should be rejected. At the same time, every effort to detract from the reality of the miracle that comes—through Christ's power—over the whole man should be resisted. There is no room for a dualistic and spiritualistic interpretation that would exclude the body from the eschatological fulfillment.

Obviously, no one is able to describe fully the great change of which Paul wrote. But this does not take anything away from the emphasis Paul placed on the reality of this eschatological event. This transition concerns the transition from perishability to imperishability, from mortality to immortality. If we try to investigate further the *mode* of this transformation, we learn nothing more than that it will take place in a moment (*en atómō*), in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet (vs. 52).

Although the final transition is God's definitive miracle, it can never be conceived as an isolated cosmic problem or a question about substance. It frees the believer from death and frees him for a new life in the service of God, already beginning in this life.²⁷⁹

In this final thought, Berkouwer shows the hope that is given in the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body in the *eschaton*. The effects of hope are not

²⁷⁷ Anthony C. Thiselton notes that Paul's verb in v. 50, "to inherit," is "often used of coming into possession of eschatological existence, with all that this implies" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 1291 [emphasis original]).

²⁷⁸ Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 194.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 194-95, 198 (emphasis original).

felt only in the future hope, but such hope gives us power for living today. In a world where hearts are broken, lives are shattered, and tragedy visits us all, the hope of an ultimate “better tomorrow” pulls us forward in such a way that we live this life in a sure and certain hope.

Conclusion

Berkouwer’s *The Providence of God* holds to the Reformed doctrine of the providence of God within the background and circumstances of our hesitations and pessimism. I believe that this volume adheres to the Reformed conservative philosophy of providence. As a result, it contributes a practical restatement of these great truths in a modern context, especially those of 9/11.

I have considered Berkouwer’s doctrine of providence in the light of our present world with special regard to the terrorist attacks on America. I believe that this doctrine of providence does, in fact, give meaning to a life that can often be replete with hardship. In examining Berkouwer’s doctrine of providence in regard to the knowledge of providence, sustenance and government, mystery and miracles, and theodicy, it is my opinion that we *can* find meaning in this life *to the extent* that we find our answers in a rational faith in the revelation of God which results in glory and praise.

In regard to hyper-preterism, Berkouwer offers a way of hope in his doctrine of resurrection that summarizes the way we should approach this issue:

If one does not isolate in a futuristic way the eschaton from the salvation that is already given as the first fruits of the Spirit, who lives in the body as His temple (1 Cor. 6:19), a proper regard will follow for the points of contact evident in the biblical witness, where an immediate connection is made between the resurrection from the dead and the destiny of the body; the body for the Lord and the Lord for the body (1 Cor. 6:13f.).

How then can the eschatological expectation be fulfilled without a struggle? The church is called to this struggle and thus also to “take hold of eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:12) and to “strive to enter by the narrow door (Luke 13:24).²⁸⁰

A prime hyper-preterist goal is to be accepted by Christians as offering an orthodox Christian theology that offers a distinctive eschatological option.²⁸¹ Evangelicals have for years debated among themselves such viewpoints as amillennialism, premillennialism, and postmillennialism. Why not set another chair at the evangelical table now and extend a warm welcome to the hyper-preterists as fellow members of Christ’s church?

I have labored to show that a careful reading of the New Testament teaching regarding the nature of the resurrection reveals that the doctrine so central and essential to hyper-preterism—i.e., that the resurrection of believers is a past event, either entirely so (King) or at least decisively so, with individual “resurrections” occurring as each believer dies—is clearly unbiblical. But other fundamental Christian doctrines are also at stake. In order to maintain their heretical doctrine of the resurrection, hyper-preterists have devised heretical doctrines of creation, man, sin and its consequences, the Person and redemptive work of Christ, and the nature of salvation. Much more than eschatology narrowly defined is at stake in this debate. And all of these doctrinal deviations seem, at the end of the day, to rob us of the “blessed hope” that we have in Christ.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 204, 210.

²⁸¹ Indeed, they wish to be seen as Reformed. Walt Hibbard insists that he and his hyper-preterist colleagues “have not compromised their Calvinism in the least” (“A Courteous Response to Dr. Gary North’s Vitriolic Essay,” 4).

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