

## INDIGENOUS CHURCH: A PAULINE RESPONSE

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the concept of the Indigenous Church through a Pauline lens, examining how the early Christian communities in Paul's letters exhibit characteristics of indigenous churches. By analysing Paul's ministry and writings, the study highlights key aspects of Pauline churches, such as the local assembly, the house church model, and the inclusivity of marginalised groups. Additionally, the paper argues that Paul's theology, particularly his teachings on the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, developed in response to the specific social contexts and challenges of early churches. The study concludes that contemporary indigenous churches should adapt their theology to their own cultural and social context, in a manner similar to Paul's contextual approach to church issues.

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## Introduction

From a brief, cursory reading on the internet about the topic, I came across a definition of an indigenous church as, “a community of believers birthed in a specific context who are Spirit-driven (Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered) to accomplish God’s purposes for and through that community. Like the various churches described in the New Testament, particularly in Acts, these local and national communities of faith are to be Spirit-governed, Spirit-supported, and Spirit-propagated.”<sup>1</sup> So I approach the topic with the following pre-understanding:

1. The Bible reveals that God has always dealt with people in terms of their cultural context.
2. The principles and values of the indigenous church emerge from a biblical theology of missions. Therefore, this article from a biblical perspective is needed.

Since most of the literature points to the early church, as narrated in Acts, as an indigenous church, I would like to study the Pauline literature and identify some characteristics of the Pauline churches, assuming that they are indigenous churches. Additionally, I aim to argue that Pauline theology developed according to the specific context, needs, issues, and problems of each church. To support this, I have attempted to study Paul’s Christology, especially his explanation of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## Pauline Letters

Why study the Pauline letters for indigenous churches? Paul acts as a mirror reflecting the idea of Jesus. Moreover, his letters, written before the gospels, were among the earliest faith documents of the early church. Through his actions and writings, Paul conveyed his gospel – that Gentile converts need not be circumcised as the Law of Moses required for Jewish people. Additionally, Christians did not have to meet in synagogues but could establish their own associations and use their own buildings. The range of Paul’s conflicts and

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<sup>1</sup> DeLonn Rance, *Defining Terms and Principles of Indigenous Church Philosophy: Toward a Renewed Surrender to a Spirit-Driven Missiology and Praxis*, paper presented at The Missions Leaders Forum of World Assemblies of God Fellowship Congress, Chennai, 6 February 2011, 10.

disagreements with the Jerusalem church and the pillar apostles was aimed at protecting the indigenous character of Gentile, Antiochian, Galatian, and other churches from ideas claimed to have come from the Jewish Jerusalem Church. The entire letter to the Galatians testifies to this. Thus, Paul can be regarded as the pioneer of the indigenous churches in biblical tradition times.<sup>2</sup>

## **I. The Characteristics of Pauline Churches as Indigenous Churches.**

### **The Social Setting of Paul's Ministry**

With Paul's ministry, there was a social shift in the early church from being a predominantly Palestinian and rural movement to becoming a Gentile and urban movement. Cities offered much greater potential for the Pauline mission than villages: "Cities were much more open. They possessed both power and potential for change. They would have within them more independently minded people who were open to the new message of the gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Paul's discussion on the church in his letters indirectly highlights certain characteristics of the early church as he envisioned it. These characteristics can serve as guidelines for developing our own local churches.

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<sup>2</sup> As we begin to study the Pauline literature, some caution is necessary. It must be kept in mind that Paul is not a systematic theologian in the modern sense of the term. He is primarily a preacher and a pastor, concerned with establishing and organizing churches. Thus, he discusses theology, doctrine, and even Christology as needed to address specific issues or conflicts within a particular church. Pastoral problems serve as the springboard from which he launches into theological discourse. Therefore, we cannot expect a well-defined and clearly articulated ecclesiology or Christology from Paul. (cf. Antony John Baptist, *Unsung Melodies from the Margins* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2014), 151.).

Secondly, Paul's social world and the church were small in nature, which were composed of individuals and households from diverse ethnic backgrounds, religious traditions, and social statuses. These were very small units within a social context shaped by powerful political and economic interests. Therefore, the issues cannot be reduced to a simple statement of principle with a straightforward application. Rather, they can serve as a source of inspiration, providing guidance and direction. At best, we can evolve our own principles and theories, drawing inspiration and intuition from Paul. Thus, I am in no way presenting Paul as an absolute or ideal model to be imitated. (James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 672-673.).

<sup>3</sup> D.J. Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 884.

## 1. Church of God

Paul's usage of the term "the church of God" intends "to depict the little assemblies of Christian believers as equally manifestations of and in direct continuity with 'the assembly of Yahweh', 'the assembly of Israel'."<sup>4</sup> But at times Paul uses "the assemblies (plural) of God", while LXX uses it almost always singular. Dunn explains it, saying, "Paul evidently had no problem with conceiving 'the assembly of God' as manifested in many different places at the same time – the churches (of God) in Judea, in Galatia, in Asia, or in Macedonia. Each gathering of those baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus was 'the assembly of God' in that place. ... The point is that wherever believers met for fellowship and worship, they were in direct continuity with the assembly of Israel, they were the assembly of God."<sup>5</sup> As corollary Dunn states that "Paul's conception of the church is typically of the church in a particular place or region. He does not seem to have thought of 'the church' as something worldwide or universal – 'the Church'."<sup>6</sup> Therefore the words 'the church of God' in 1Cor 10:32 which reads as "Do not become an offence, whether to Jews or Greeks or to the Church of God." can be explained as referring to church in Corinth. Therefore, we can safely conclude that "Paul's primary thought was of the local assembly as 'the church of God' in the city where it met."<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The House Church

In the Pauline letters, the term *ekklesia* can also mean as referring to "a gathering that met in a particular home, a house-church."<sup>8</sup> P. T. O'Brien further explains it saying, "On occasion, a whole congregation in one city might be small enough to meet in the home of one of its

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<sup>4</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 537. Also cf. P. T. O'Brien, "Church," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 538.

<sup>5</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 540.

<sup>6</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 540. Today we have to take into consideration also the historical development that has taken place after Paul. In this connection it is interesting to note that Pope Francis often refers himself as 'bishop of Rome'.

<sup>7</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 541; also cf. 1Cor 1:1; 16:19; 14:23. But in the latter writings of Paul, say Col 1:18 and 24, the church was referred with universal reference. One more corollary of this way of thinking is that the words 'church' or 'assembly' for Paul do not mean church as assembly meeting 'in church' or 'in building' but "He thought rather of Christians coming together *to be church, as church*." (Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 542 emphasis added.)

<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, "Church," 125.

members."<sup>9</sup> The dictionary of Paul further explicates this saying, "Households were not the private residences of today but were most likely to be large houses which provided shops at the front and living accommodations at the rear. There would also have been room for workshops and living quarters for dependents and visitors. Such an arrangement would have ideally suited Paul's purpose by both enabling him to finance his mission through his work as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3; 20:34, 35; 1Thess 2:9) and by providing him with a ready-made platform from which preaching and teaching could be conducted daily among the many who would have been around the workshop."<sup>10</sup> Households, in the social realm, were consisting of principle families, slaves, friends, tenants, partners or clients in commercial or agricultural enterprise. The indigenous church grows by utilising locally available sources, thus becoming self-supporting.

### 3. The Body of Christ (cf. Rom 12; 1Cor 12; Eph 4)

This imagery of the body that Paul uses to explain the nature of the church reveals Paul's way of thinking. He does not speak uniformly or stereotypically of the 'body of Christ'. Besides the usual messages about the body of Christ communicate,<sup>11</sup> in 1 Cor 12, Paul draws our attention to what he calls 'weak members'. According to him they are indispensable (1Cor 12:22), to be clothed with greater honour (1Cor 12:23), treated with greater respect (1Cor 12:23). This is another distinctive feature of the indigenous church of Paul's time. Paul was also concerned about the weak believers (cf. 1Cor 8:9, 11) regarding food offered to idols. To prevent their falling, he prefers not to eat meat (cf. 1Cor 8:13). He also advocates for the 'latecomers' – the poor (cf. 1Cor 11:21-22) – when the wealthy humiliated them by eating alone without waiting for the other brothers to arrive. He urges Philemon to accept Onesimus, the run-away slave, with his whole heart (cf. Philm 12), not as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother (cf. Philm 16). The collection of money for the Jerusalem church is a tangible sign of his love for the weaker members of the church. Therefore, concern

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<sup>9</sup> O'Brien, "Church," 125. Cf Col 4:15; Philem 2; Acts 16:5, 15, 40; Rom 16:23; 1Cor 14:23; 16:19

<sup>10</sup> Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches", 884.

<sup>11</sup> 1. No member of body should try to be another member (foot-hand, ear-eye). Each has its function and role in the body (12:15-20). Thus, feelings of envy and superiority are to be avoided. 2. All the members are important and needed for the function of the body. The suffering and the honour for one member of body is suffering or honour for the whole body (12:21-26).

for the poor and marginalised within the church is another hallmark of the Pauline indigenous church.

#### **4. The Indigenous Church as Charismatic Community (Rom 12:6-8; 1Cor 12:4-27; Eph 4:7-16)**

This idea is closely linked to the concept of the body of Christ. The early church, like today's church, was filled with charismatic gifts. This understanding of charismatic gifts is entirely new and is a unique contribution of Paul. The gifts and charisms are given graciously, making it a gracious act of God. As a result, individuals should contribute to the whole church. In this way, the entire body becomes 'charismatic' (cf. Rom 12:4-8). When discussing the gifts (cf. Rom 12:6-8; 1Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; Eph 4:11; also cf. 1Cor 12: 4-6), Paul states, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1Cor 12:7) and "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ," (Eph 4:12). Therefore, the early indigenous church was a lively community where everyone used the God-given gifts for the benefit of the saints and the growth of the church.

#### **5. The Ministry and Authority of Women**

The discussion on the characteristic features of the early church, the indigenous church, will not be complete without examining the ministry and authority of women in the early church. We are aware of the controversial texts,<sup>12</sup> in Pauline literature that requires a detailed study in its own right. Here, I only make some mention of the positive contribution of Paul's literature in this regard. Dunn is right when he says, "the fact of ministry (of women) is clear, but the issue of authority is more obscure."<sup>13</sup> As far as the Ministry of Women is concerned, they played a very prominent role. Rom 16 gives a list of women co-operators with Paul like Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3-5), Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7),<sup>14</sup> Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom 16:6, 12), who are known for hard work.

#### **Evaluation or Critic**

Now the question is, were all these characteristics present in all or most of the churches of Pauline times? Dunn rightly points out, "Paul

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. 1Cor 11:2-16; 14:33b-36; 1Tim 2:12-14.

<sup>13</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 586.

<sup>14</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 587, no. 114. Junia is a female name. She is acclaimed as prominent among the apostles. Dunn even thinks that "the question can hardly be ignored whether they were actually the apostles (founders) of at least some of the Roman churches.

was no mere dreamer of dreams or promoter of merely idealistic blueprints. He was well aware of how far the churches to which he was writing were falling short of his vision. He may well have realised that the theology expounded was strictly speaking unrealistic in the realities of the little house churches scattered round the Mediterranean."<sup>15</sup> If this was the case in Paul's time, when eschatological hopes were very high, how much more difficult is it to realise these ideals in our days of global churches facing complex problems? This should make us aware of the herculean task ahead and motivate us to work accordingly.

## **II. Pauline Interpretation of Christ Event according to the Social Setting of Indigenous Churches**

This second section of this article discusses the role of social factors in shaping the beliefs or faith of the early church. D. J. Tidball, examining the social context of mission churches, states, "The churches founded by Paul were not abstract theological entities formed in a social vacuum but real-life communities of men and women who inhabited specific social environments. The term social setting is a broad one, encompassing the social context of the churches; the social class of converts; the dynamics involved in the formation and growth of the Christian communities; social aspects of Paul's own ministry; and social factors in the development of early Christian doctrine, usually known as the sociology of knowledge."<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the mission churches of Paul took root and shaped within a particular social environment. Likewise, his theology and teaching were, as stated at the beginning, responses to the concrete situations or problems of those particular churches. D.J. Tidball is correct when he states, "Paul's theology is in fact a secondary reaction to 'primary, concrete phenomenon in the social world.'"<sup>17</sup>

I would like to demonstrate in the following section how the Pauline theology of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Lord developed within a specific context of the church. In doing so, I also aim to argue that Christian theology should emerge from the particular circumstances of the church, responding to its issues and challenges. Consequently, both the church and its theology will become genuinely indigenous.

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<sup>15</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 562.

<sup>16</sup> Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches", 883.

<sup>17</sup> Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches", 890.

## Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus in Pauline Literature

The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus were interpreted in the Pauline letters in various ways.<sup>18</sup> J. B. Green explains it, saying, "In fact, Paul seems capable of tailoring his representation of the significance of the death of Jesus to the needs of his audience in particular, contextualised circumstances."<sup>19</sup> The following section will explain how these events were explained to the churches as a response to the particular context or problem.

### 1. The Lord's Supper (1Cor 11:23-29) in the Context of Economic Divide

Paul recounts the event of the Lord's Supper, commonly known as the 'Last Supper', within the context of tension between wealthy (those with their own houses, cf. v. 22) and poor (those with nothing, v.22) Christians. According to 1 Corinthians, the poor were humiliated (v.22) when they attended the 'Lord's Supper'. The wealthy were preoccupied with 'their own supper' (v.21). Thus, "one goes hungry and another becomes drunk." (1cor 11:21).

To contrast this, he reminds them of what he received and what he handed over to them, which is the correct teaching on the institution of the Lord's Supper (cf. 1Cor 11:23-25). The Lord's Supper that he received contrasts with the way they were 'celebrating' it. The true understanding of the Lord's Supper includes the following: 1. Self-giving or sharing (1Cor 10:14-22) 2. Jesus dying for the weak (1Cor 11:26; 8:11) 3. Political and religious liberation (Ex 7-12) 4. The New Covenant, which unites God with people and people among themselves (1Cor 11:25; also cf. Ex 24:6-8).

The earliest record of the Eucharist thus emerges within the social context of the rich and the poor, aiming to teach the correct understanding of the Eucharist. Paul is not merely reiterating the tradition he received but adapts it effectively to the specific situation of his church. Therefore, Eucharistic theology is presented against the backdrop of the social issues faced by the indigenous church in

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<sup>18</sup> As expiation for sins past and present (Rom 3:25); as coming under the law (Gal 4:4); as sacrifice for sins (cf. Rom 3:25; 5:6, 8; 8:3; 14:9; 1Cor 5:7; 8:11; 15:3; 2Cor 5:14, 15, 21; Gal 2:21; 1 Thess 5:10; also cf. Lev 4; 16:11-19); as the death of the beloved son (Rom 5:10; 8:3, 32; Gal 2:20; 4:4-5 also cf. Mk 12:1-9 pars; Gen 22:1-19); as curse of the law (cf. Gal 3:13 also cf. Deut 21:23); as redemption, buying or buy from/ back: cf. Rom 3:24; 1Cor 6:18, 20; 7:21-23; Gal 3:13; 4:5); as giving up (cf. Rom 4:25; 8:32; Gal 1:4; 2:20).

<sup>19</sup> J. B. Green, "Death of Christ," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 204.



Corinth. Although his basis is rooted in the tradition handed down, he draws inspiring conclusions tailored to the particular challenges of his time and church.

## 2. The Death of Jesus as Reconciliation (2Cor 5: 18-20)

This idea of Jesus' death as reconciliation was introduced only in Pauline letters, especially in 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2. According to Paul, God reconciled people to Himself through Christ. He explains the role of Jesus' death in the following way: "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2Cor 5:19). He further states, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2Cor 5:21)."

According to Dunn, the main theological features of this passage are, "(a) ... the reconciliation is between God and the world. ... Christ is the medium of the reconciliation, not the one who is reconciled. (b) ... God was involved in the act of reconciliation - 'through Christ' (v.18), 'in Christ' (v. 19). ... The image is not of God as an angry opponent having to be cajoled or entreated, but of God, the injured partner, actively seeking reconciliation. (c) ... the image of forgiving or choosing to ignore active hostility. .... (d) the message of reconciliation focused on the cross (5:21), is the heart of the gospel."<sup>20</sup>

What is important here is the context in which the whole discussion on reconciliation takes place. It is the context of the rift between Paul and the Corinthians.<sup>21</sup> After the canonical 1Cor reached the Corinthians, Timothy would have visited Corinth. He might have reported to Paul the bad situation of the Corinthian church caused by the intruders. Then Paul would have made what is called the *painful visit* (cf. 2Cor 2:1). During this visit, someone would have offended him in public (2Cor 2:5-11; 7:12). After returning to Ephesus, he wrote a letter "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears (2Cor 2:3-4)." This is called '*The Letter of Anguish*' or 'the second lost letter'. In the meantime, Titus brought the news of the willingness of the Corinthians for reconciliation (2Cor 7:5-13, 15). As an immediate

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<sup>20</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 229. Col 1:20-22 discusses the reconciliation of individuals with God, and Eph 2:16 reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles; also cf. Rom 5:10.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. R. E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 541-544; Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, vol. 8 of *Sacra Pagina Series* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 5-6.

response, Paul wrote this letter from Macedonia to express his readiness for reconciliation.

So, after explaining the theology of reconciliation, Paul further states, "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal thorough us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (5:20). This appeal, in the context of the rift with the Corinthian community, would also mean "Be reconciled to/with me."<sup>22</sup> So the indigenous context of seeking for reconciliation between Paul and Corinthians brought out the Christological explanation of the death of Jesus Christ as an act of reconciliation.<sup>23</sup>

### **3. Resurrection of Jesus as Guarantee of our Resurrection (1Cor 15)<sup>24</sup>**

Paul devotes one full chapter to speak of resurrection. There are two things involved here: the resurrection of Jesus and that of the believers. Unlike the above two instances, here the teaching on the resurrection of Jesus is used as a guarantee for the resurrection of the dead.<sup>25</sup> Some Corinthian Christians would have claimed that there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). Paul is trying to correct such an opinion.<sup>26</sup>

Jan Lambrecht further explains the situation prevalent in Corinth and the need to discuss the theme of the resurrection of the dead.

The Christian community of Corinth was not that large, may be between 200 and 300 members. It was composed of a majority of simple people (cf. 1Cor 1:26; not many were wise and powerful or of noble birth). They were surrounded by a society which to a certain extent and perhaps more often in the upper classes can be characterized as materialist, if not immoral. Belief in a future bodily resurrection goes counter to what everybody in town daily sees and experiences: death, burial, definitive separation from friends, disappearance of loved ones. Belief in a resurrection of the body is not seldom ridiculed by referring to the decomposition of the corpses.

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<sup>22</sup> The words of Paul in 2Cor 6:11-13 and 7:2-3 make a better sense in this background. Cf. Green, "Death of Christ", 204.

<sup>23</sup> For Paul's discussion of death of Jesus as reconciliation also cf. 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Rom 5:10-11; Col 1:20; Eph 2: 14-16 – here the Law appears as a barrier separating Jew and Gentile; there the death of Christ abolishes this 'dividing wall'.

<sup>24</sup> Also cf. 1Cor 6:14.

<sup>25</sup> Jan Lambrecht, *Collected Studies: On Pauline Literature and on The Book of Revelation*, Analecta Biblica series 147 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001), 72.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lambrecht, *Collected Studies*, chapter 8, and 9. Therefore we should not expect any philosophical discussion as to whether and how such a thing is possible (Cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 239). Rather try to understand how the resurrection of Jesus explains or proves the resurrection of the believer.

Several data in 1Cor 15 appear to confirm that a radical denial of the bodily resurrection by some Christians is in view.<sup>27</sup>

In such a background, "He (Paul) simply asserts the resurrection as a fact (presumably believed by them) and seeks to draw out its implications for their life and faith."<sup>28</sup> In this passage (1Cor 15) Paul shows the indissoluble link between the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection of Jesus which has already happened (cf. 1Cor 15:13, 16). So here the theology comes in handy to answer an active problem of the church.

## Conclusion

This article aims to explain Indigenous churches from a Pauline perspective. After some initial remarks on definitions and Pauline literature, I have identified key characteristics of Pauline churches, which are indigenous. First, by 'assembly of God', Paul refers to any local gathering that meets for fellowship and worship. Second, these churches during Paul's time grew within households, utilising the structures available to them. Third, in the image of the body of Christ, Paul's concern for weak members or weak believers is highlighted. These churches were charismatic communities that provided proper space for women to exercise their ministry.

The second section of this article aims to demonstrate the role social setting played in the development of theology or dogmas. This is shown by explaining how the theology of the Last Supper, the death, and the resurrection of Our Lord took shape within a specific context and in response to the concrete problems faced by the churches. The theology of the Last Supper is examined in the context of economic division in the Corinthian church; the death of Jesus is explained as reconciliation amidst the rift between the Corinthian church and Paul himself; and finally, the teaching on the resurrection of Jesus is presented as a guarantee of the resurrection of the dead.

Therefore, finally, we can say that for churches to remain true to their Biblical roots, they should develop their theologies, beliefs, and doctrines from their own cultural context.

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<sup>27</sup> Lambrecht, *Collected Studies*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> L. J. Kreitzer, "Resurrection," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 806. Also cf. Hieronymus Cruz, *Christological Motives and Motivated Actions in Pauline Paraenesis*, European University Studies Series, no. 23 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 98-99.