

6.3 The Work of the Cross

As not only Americans, but many of us former Protestants, we have been (whether we know it or not) indoctrinated into the belief that the Cross was the purpose for the Incarnation. That if man had not sinned, the Word of God would not have had to become man – Christ would not have entered humanity. And that being the case, not only is the Cross the only reason (in the West) for Christ entering humanity, but the rescue of man through the Cross also becomes the central tenant of the work of Christ.

I should say that, it is not that the penal substitutionary atonement has no merit it does. This is the belief that Christ died on the cross as a substitute for sinners.

That God imputed the guilt of our sins to Christ, and he, in our place, bore the punishment that we deserve. This was a full payment for sins, which satisfied both the wrath and the righteousness of God, so that He could forgive sinners without compromising His own holy standard.¹

Again, it is not that this is wrong in and of itself. Certainly, there is an aspect of this in Scripture and the fathers.² It is not that this teaching has no merit. It is that it is a single part of the Incarnation the West has used, because of its obsession with law/justice, that has almost completely obscured the much more central truth of the Incarnation, which we will look at in depth, but let us first look at this view by seeing it from Anselm's view – who is primarily responsible for it and than looking at how it has manifested itself in the Western Church.

Anselm's satisfaction of divine justice: (from *Curs De Homo?*)³

Anselm suggested that *we owe God a debt of honor: "This is the debt which man and angel owe to God, and no one who pays this debt commits sin; but every one who does not pay it sins. This is justice, or uprightness of will, which makes a being just or upright in heart, that is, in will; and this is the sole and complete debt of honor which we owe to God, and which God requires of us."*

¹ Theopedia (theopedia.com) on the Atonement

² Isaiah 53:6 - "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Isaiah 53:12 - "yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors." 2 Corinthians 5:21 - "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Galatians 3:13 - "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us -- for it is written, *Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.*"

³ Latin for for "Why a God Man?"), usually translated **Why God Became a Man**, is a book written by him in the period of 1094–1098. In this work he proposes the satisfaction view of the atonement.

His teaching is summed up by James McClintok:

“The infinite guilt which man had contracted by the dishonor of his sin against the infinitely great God could be atoned for by no mere creature; only the God-man Christ Jesus could render to God the infinite satisfaction required. God only can satisfy Himself. The human nature of Christ enables Him to incur, the infinity of His divine nature to pay this debt. ... He surrendered His infinitely precious life to the honor of God, a recompense from God became His due, and His recompense consists in the forgiveness of the sins of His brethren.”

This is combined with the Reformers view addition of punishment:

as theologian J.I. Packer observes, the stark absence of the view of the Cross as satisfaction God’s wrath (punishment) in the early church fathers should not come as a surprise since it is a 16th century medieval interpretation:

*“...Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon and their reforming contemporaries were the pioneers in stating it ... What the Reformers did was to redefine satisfactio (satisfaction), the main mediaeval category for thought about the cross. Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo?, which largely determined the mediaeval development, saw Christ’s satisfactio for our sins as the offering of compensation or damages for dishonor done, **but the Reformers saw it as the undergoing of vicarious punishment (poena) to meet the claims on us of God’s holy law and wrath (i.e. his punitive justice).**”*

In the Cross of Christ we see one of the great divides between the Eastern Apostolic Church and the Roman Catholic and Protestant West. In the West the Cross is literally the basis for Christ becoming man. Everything else we know the Christ taught and that He did, within the entire scope of the Incarnation is secondary to the Cross. The kenosis (emptying Himself to enter humanity), His presentation at the Temple and Circumcision – submitting to, and fulfilling the Law of Moses – secondary to the Cross. His Baptism, the revelation of the Holy Trinity and purifying the waters and giving us the ministry of literally returning creation to its created purpose – not as important as the Cross. The beatitudes and parables, opening to us the kingdom of God, and His healing man of the effects of sin and the fallen world and destroying the power of the devil which had held man captive. And in so doing, giving us power over our ancient enemy. ...subordinate and less important than the Cross.

But not so in the Apostolic Eastern Church. For us it is just the other way around: the Cross was necessary after the Fall, but the point of the Incarnation, of which the Cross was part,

was immortalized by St. Athanasius the Great, (298-27AD) that: "God became man that man may become god." As he also said,

- "Therefore He was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us"
- "for as the Lord, putting on the body, became man, so we men are deified by the Word as being taken to Him through His flesh"

And St. Clement of Alexandria: (150-215)

- "The Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God."
- "For if one knows himself, he will know God; and knowing God, he will be made like God"
- "And to be incorruptible is to participate in divinity..."

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395)

- "Since the God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, ... that by this communion with Deity mankind might at the same time be deified, for this end it is that, by dispensation of His grace, He disseminated Himself in every believer."
- "For just as He in Himself assimilated His own human nature to the power of the Godhead, being a part of the common nature, but not being subject to the inclination to sin which is in that nature (for it says: "He did no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth), so, also, will He lead each person to union with the Godhead if they do nothing unworthy of union with the Divine."

And lest we think this is an Eastern doctrine and not a foundation of the universal Apostolic Church. This is what St. Irenaeus of Lyon (130-200) taught:

- "The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."
- "'For we cast blame upon [God], because we have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods; although God has adopted this course out of His pure benevolence, that no one may impute to Him invidiousness or grudgingness he declares, "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are sons of the Most High."

Justin Martyr (100-160)

- "[Men] were made like God, free from suffering and death, provided that they kept His commandments, and were deemed deserving of the name of His sons, and yet they, becoming like Adam and Eve, work out death for themselves; let the interpretation of the Psalm be held just as you wish, yet thereby it is demonstrated that all men are deemed worthy of becoming "gods," and of having power to become sons of the Highest.'

Hyppolytus of Rome (c. 170-235)

- "And you shall be a companion of the Deity, and a co-heir with Christ, no longer enslaved by lusts or passions, and never again wasted by disease. For you have become God: for whatever sufferings you underwent while being a man, these He gave to you, because you were of mortal mould, but whatever it is consistent with God to impart, these God has promised to bestow upon you, because you have been deified, and begotten unto immortality."

And the very father of the Western Church (if not Western civilization) Augustine of Hippo: (c. 354-430)

- "'For He hath given them power to become the sons of God.' If we have been made sons of God, we have also been made gods.

This is all based on the belief held by all Church fathers everywhere that the deification of man was his created purpose. Even more than this, the deification of man was the very purpose of creation. And therefore the Cross, like all the work of the incarnation, was necessary for man to become like God.

The Cross is the greatest symbol, not of *our* rescue, not of *our* sin, but of the love of God. Turning again to Fr. Georges Florovsky:⁴

“Whatever may be our interpretation of the Agony in the Garden, one point is perfectly clear. Christ was not a passive victim, but the Conqueror, even in His uttermost humiliation. He knew that this humiliation was no mere endurance or obedience, but the very path of Glory and of the ultimate victory. Nor does the idea of Divine justice alone, reveal the ultimate

⁴ Theological Articles of Fr. Georges Florovsky 3: Incarnation and Redemption

meaning of the sacrifice of the Cross. The mystery of the Cross cannot be adequately presented in terms of the transaction, the requital, or the ransom.

If the value of the death of Christ was infinitely enhanced by His Divine Personality, the same also applies to the whole of His life. All His deeds have an infinite value and significance as the deeds of the Incarnate Word of God. And they cover indeed superabundantly both all misdeeds and sinful shortcomings of the fallen human race. Finally, there could hardly be any retributive justice in the Passion and death of the Lord, which might possibly have been in the death of even a righteous man. For this was not the suffering and death of a mere man, graciously supported by the Divine help because of his faithfulness and endurance.

This death was the suffering of the Incarnate Son of God Himself, the suffering of unstained human nature already deified by its assumption into the hypostasis of the Word. Nor is this to be explained by the idea of a substitutional satisfaction, the *satisfactio vicaria* of the scholastics. Not because substitution is not possible. Christ did indeed take upon Himself the sin of the world. But because God does not seek the sufferings of anyone, He grieves over them. How could the penal death of the Incarnate, most pure and undefiled, be the abolition of sin, if death itself is the wages of sin, and if death exists only in the sinful world? Does Justice really restrain Love and Mercy, and was the Crucifixion needed to disclose the pardoning love of God, otherwise precluded from manifesting itself by the restraint of vindicatory justice?

If there was any restraint at all, it was rather a restraint of love. And justice was accomplished, in that Salvation was wrought by condescension, by a "*kenosis*," and not by omnipotent might. Probably a recreation of fallen mankind by the mighty intervention of the Divine omnipotence would have seemed to us simpler and more merciful.

Strangely enough, the fullness of the Divine Love, which is intent to preserve our human freedom, appears to us rather as a severe request of transcendent justice, simply because it implies an appeal to the cooperation of the human will. Thus, Salvation becomes a task for man himself also, and can be consummated only in freedom, with the response of man.

The "image of God" is manifested in freedom. And freedom itself is all too often a burden for man. And in a certain sense it is indeed a superhuman gift and request, a supernatural path,

the path of "deification," *theosis*. Is not this very *theosis* a burden for a self-imprisoned, selfish, and self-sufficient being? And yet this burdensome gift of freedom is the ultimate mark of the Divine love and benevolence towards man. The Cross is not a symbol of Justice, but the symbol of Love Divine. St. Gregory of Nazianzus (in the 4th century) utters all these doubts with great emphasis in his remarkable Easter Sermon:

To whom, and why, is this blood poured out for us and shed, the great and most precious blood of God, the High Priest and Victim ... We were in the power of the Evil One, sold to sin, and had brought this harm on ourselves by sensuality ... If the price of ransom is given to none other than him in whose power we are held, then I ask, to whom and for what reason is such a price paid ... If it is to the Evil One, then how insulting is this! The thief receives the price of ransom; he not only receives it from God, but even receives God Himself. For his tyranny he receives so large a price that it was only right to have mercy upon us ... If to the Father, then first, in what way? Were we not in captivity under Him ... And secondly, for what reason? For what reason was the blood of the Only Begotten pleasing to the Father, Who did not accept even Isaac, when offered by his father, but exchanged the offering, giving instead of the reasonable victim a lamb?

By all these questions St. Gregory tries to make clear the inexplicability of the Cross in terms of vindicatory justice. And he concludes:

*"From this it is evident that the Father accepted [the sacrifice], not because He demanded or had need, but by economy and because man had to be sanctified by **the humanity of God.**"*

Redemption is not just the forgiveness of sins, it is not just man's reconciliation with God. Redemption is the abolition of sin altogether, the deliverance from sin and death. And Redemption was accomplished on the Cross, **"by the blood of His Cross."**

Col. 1:20; *...and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. cf. Acts 20:28* *Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*

Rom. 5:9 *Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.*

Eph. 1:7 *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.*

Col. 1:14 *in whom we have redemption ^[a]through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.*

Heb. 9:22 *And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.*

I John 1:7 *But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

Rev. 1:5-6, 5:9 *and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, ⁶and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

“By the blood of the Cross.” Not by the suffering of the Cross only, but precisely by the death on the Cross. And the ultimate victory is wrought, not by sufferings or endurance, but by death and resurrection.

We enter here into the ontological depth of human existence. The death of Our Lord was the victory over death and mortality, not just the forgiveness of sins, nor merely a justification of man, nor again a satisfaction of an abstract justice. And the very key to the Mystery can be given only by a coherent doctrine of human death.

As we sing in the Sunday Kontakion hymn:

‘The dominion of death can no longer hold men captive, for Christ descended, shattering and destroying its powers. Hell is bound, while the prophets rejoice and cry: the Savior has come to those in faith. Enter, all you faithful, into the Resurrection.’