

Therapeutic Substitutionary Atonement (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures... (1 Cor. 15:3-4)

No statement is more central to the Christian faith than St. Paul's rehearsal of the Apostolic Tradition – for his words “delivered...received...” are specifically the words that describe the handing over of *Tradition*. His words represent what is already the *received* teaching of the faith – the Apostolic deposit. The Christian faith is not just that Christ died and was raised from the dead, but that He “died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” The death of Christ is somehow “for our sins.” This is the very heart of the Gospel – the most primitive preaching of the Church.



But it is at this most primitive point that essential questions must be asked: how is it that Christ's death is “for our sins?” How is it that His death and resurrection is

“according to the Scriptures?” For though Christ clearly taught the disciples that He would be crucified and would rise on the third day, this was not understood by them. It was not understood because it was not a part of the received Jewish expectation of the Messiah. That Christ died for our sins and according to the Scriptures is an article of the faith that was made known *only after the resurrection* : it is not a derived Tradition, but a teaching of the risen Lord Himself.

This is a place where disagreement has begun to manifest itself in recent years. For some, Christ’s death on the Cross represents the payment for a debt owed to God, the debt of Adam’s sin. In another account, Christ’s death on the Cross is a blood sacrifice to appease the wrath of God, incurred through Adam’s sin. For still others, Christ’s death is the destruction of Hades and death itself, the healing of the corruption of sin. There are yet other views, but the disagreement has largely been between advocates of one version or another of these accounts.

The first two accounts generally fall into a category of “forensic” models. In these, there is a debt or a divine consequence (wrath) that must be paid or turned aside. In various ways it is noted that only a perfect Man could pay the debt (or appease the wrath). Since all men sin, only God could meet the requirements. Thus God became man, so that God, as man, could accomplish what man alone could not.

In the second model, sin and death are more or less synonymous. Rather than being forensic (legal) in character, they are *ontological* (a matter of being and existence). Sin is the disease of corruption, the movement from true existence toward non-being. The destructive chaos that it leaves in its wake is more like “symptoms” than legal problems. God in His mercy becomes man, and as the God/Man enters the depths of death and Hades, the depths of ontological corruption and destroys them. In His resurrection (which is a *necessary* aspect of this model – unlike the others), our ontological corruption is destroyed or rather “put to death” and we receive new life – the eternal life of the resurrection (which is a quality and not merely longevity). In this model, there is a participation and communion. Christ *becomes* sin, that we might *become* righteous. He dies that we might live. He takes on our death, that we might take on His life.

In both models, there is a reality of *substitution* – Christ assumes the place of man. But the nature of that substitution, and therefore the nature of salvation itself, is quite different. In the forensic models, Christ accepts the punishment that was incurred by man: Christ is punished *instead* of man. It is certainly a demonstration of the love of God, though the debt owed or the wrath appeased belong to God as well. Christ’s acceptance of man’s due consequences instead of man, goes to the very heart of the forensic model – at least to the heart of what makes it most

distinctive from the ontological accounts.

Christ's substitution in the forensic models removes man from redeeming action. Man is not punished but forgiven. The wrath of God is appeased and man is not condemned to hell. Christ accepts these things on man's behalf. Justification is extrinsic – it happens outside of man and apart from man. By faith, man acknowledges Christ's gift on his behalf and accepts the gift of forgiveness that could not have been his in any other way.

The substitution in the second (ontological) model is different in character. Christ steps *into* the life and situation of man (the human race), but does not remove man from the equation. The Cross is not foreign to man – it is the fullness of the consequence of human sin. The substitution of Christ in the ontological models is not a *replacement*, but a *union*. Christ unites Himself with man (the Incarnation) and in so doing takes upon Himself, and into Himself the fullness of our humanity (excepting sin – which is foreign to our nature). Importantly, however, just as Christ takes upon Himself our humanity, so He also unites Himself to us, we take on His divinity. As God and man Christ enters death, Hades, the full consequence of our separation from God. As God and as man, Christ destroys death and unites man victoriously to His resurrection. He is the true mediator, having restored us to the union with God for which we were created.

It would be possible to argue that this second model is not a true substitution. I agree, if the term, *substitution*, is meant as “replacement.” But the problems within the notion of substitution are found in the idea of Christ as “replacement.” Christ as replacement creates a “theology of absence.” If Christ simply “takes our place,” then salvation is merely forensic (legal) and something which happens outside of us. If God simply *declares* us to be “just,” “forgiven,” or “made whole,” then the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection become something of an abstraction. Their “necessity,” would only exist within God Himself, who might otherwise have “declared” us to be righteous without all the bother. Indeed, there can be no necessity within God, whether it is predicated of His justice, or anything else. God is free and has no necessity.

However, there is a necessity which exists within us. We are indeed broken, unrighteous, sinful, in need of healing and subject to death and corruption. If our healing required only a word, then why not speak the word long before?

The necessity within salvation lies within us. Christ's Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection are acts of freedom. It is with complete freedom and cooperation that He is Incarnate of the Virgin. His death is a “voluntary” death: “No one takes my

life from me....” (John 10:18). Nor does our salvation violate our freedom. We must freely accept the gift of God given to us in Christ. The synergy of salvation is God’s respect for the freedom which allows us to exist as persons. It is this same freedom that lies at the heart of the mystery of the “fullness of time.” Christ entered history at the critical moment of man’s freedom.

Christ’s “substitution” is not a replacement. Christ does not “replace” our humanity, but “assumes” it. In Christ, every man is on the Cross. The Second Adam “recapitulates” the First Adam and the whole of humanity. There is in the Cross (and whole economy of salvation) an *exchange*, a *coinherence*, *aperichoresis* (περιχώρησις). The term “perichoresis” was used by St. Gregory the Theologian to describe the relationship between the Divine and Human natures in Christ. It is this same relationship (or one that can be similarly described) that is manifest in our salvation. Christ dies on the Cross. We die on the Cross.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

St. Paul is not describing an “ethical” or “moral” transaction, but a mystical and true exchange in which the life of Christ and our lives *coinhere*. His life, death and resurrection become our life, death and resurrection.

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God (Romans 6:3-10).

A substitution which represents our absence on the Cross does violence to passages such as this. We would need to go back and edit St. Paul, inserting the words “would be as if” repeatedly into the text:

Do you not know that our Baptism makes it such that it would be as if we had been

crucified with Christ? etc.

Such violence disrupts the realism of our salvation and turns the Christian life into a moral abstraction. The sacraments become empty mental exercises.

There are additional weaknesses within the forensic models, but I leave them for now. The Lenten journey is not an annual community remembrance of a legal event. Rather it is the mystical embrace of the true life which coinheres in every believer. Baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, we journey to the common ground of our Golgotha. There we suffer and die with Christ, having shared in His fast and preparation. Dying with Him, we rejoice in His/our victory over death and Hades and join in the festal shout as death is trampled down by what is now our common death.

This is the great mystery of our faith. Those who eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Crucified and Risen Christ, abide in Him as He abides in them and become partakers (those who have a true share) in all that is His. This is the great exchange, that God became what we are that we might become what He is.

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...

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