

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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UNDERSTANDING THE LORD'S SUPPER (Part V)

Probation—the word has a decidedly uncomfortable ring to it. We use the word in reference to a person being tested to determine character or conduct. When someone is placed on probation, we recognize that a condition of continual good behavior is expected – or else! As a college professor, I have had to place students on academic probation because of poor grades – which, if not remedied, will result in their dismissal from school. We read of people involved in some criminal activity having their sentence suspended on the condition of promised good behavior and regular reporting to a probation officer. The covenant of works was probation. If Adam showed perfect obedience to God for a certain period, he was to have eternal life. However, if he disobeyed, he was to have death. He disobeyed, and when Adam fell, all mankind fell with him (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21, 22). The Bible refers to two Adams: the first Adam and the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). The last Adam (or second man, 1 Corinthians 15:47) is Jesus Christ. Let me propose a hypothetical question: Suppose that on the cross, Jesus merely paid the just penalty our sins deserve and that was *all* that He did for us – where would we then be? This is a legitimate question (and a very crucial one at that). If Christ had merely paid the penalty of sin for us and that was all that He did on our behalf, we would all be back in a situation like the first Adam. We would simply be under probation again, only we would be in a worse condition than Adam. He was created in righteousness and without sin – yet he fell. We would certainly fall. Do you see my point? If all that Jesus did for us was to merely remove from us the guilt of past sin and then leave us to our own efforts to offer a continual perfect obedience to God – where would we be? Hopeless is what we would be. What else must Christ do for us?

I. THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST'S DEATH

“Read your four Gospels,” wrote Lloyd-Jones, “and calculate, in terms of proportion, the amount of space given to our Lord's death. Though they are all very brief records, look how much space is given to the account of the death.”¹ The bread and the wine speak to us of Christ's death. The bread, Jesus tells His disciples, stands for His body *broken* and *given* for them in death. Likewise, the wine stands for His blood, not as it coursed through His veins, but as it is *poured out* for them in His death.² J. R. W. Scott has observed, “The Lord's Supper, which was instituted by Jesus, and which is the only regular commemorative act authorized by him, dramatizes neither his birth nor his life, neither his words nor his works, but only his death. Nothing could indicate more clearly the central significance that Jesus attached to his death. It was by his death that he wished above all else to be remembered. There is then, it is safe to say, no Christianity without the cross. If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus.”³

II. THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST'S DEATH

It is not uncommon to hear people say that the cross is at the center of Christianity and then proceed to explain it in terms that do not reflect the emphasis of Scripture. For instance, to say that Christ's death was primarily an *example*, or that it was designed simply to move us to repentance, misses entirely the Bible's perspective on the atonement.⁴ The words of Jesus specifically tell us that the cup referred to His blood and that this was shed for the forgiveness of sins and the establishment of the New Covenant (compare Exodus 24:8; Isaiah 42:6; 49:8; 52:12; Jeremiah 31:33-34; Zechariah 9:11; Hebrews 8:8-13; 9:18-20; 10:15-18). In order to ratify the New Covenant and secure the forgiveness of sins, Christ *must* die, and the death He dies is described in theological terms as being *penal*, *vicarious*, and *propitiatory*. As Bible-believing people, we should know the meaning of such terms as well as we know the names of our closest friends.

III. THE NEED FOR PERSONALLY APPROPRIATING CHRIST'S DEATH

Our Lord took bread, broke it, and explained its significance. He took the cup and likewise explained it. In both cases, He also gave the bread and wine to the disciples so that they might participate in His body and blood. Thus, the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine are, as it were, visible signs of our receiving the crucified Christ and being nourished by Him in faith (John 6:53-55; I Corinthians 10:16).

IV. RIGHTEOUSNESS MORE THAN GUILTLESSNESS

The Law of God contains a two-fold sanction. If the Law were *perfectly* kept, the reward will be eternal life; if it is broken in *any* respect, the penalty of death is the punishment. "Pardon alone would release from the punishment of its breach, but would not entitle to the reward of its performance. In other words, he who broke it and has suffered the penalty, therefore does not stand on the same platform with him who has kept it."⁵ Remission of sin *by itself* is not justification. The sinner stands in need, not only of pardon for guilt, but also a positive title to favour and life. "If the believer founds his expectation of an eternity of blessedness upon the amount of obedience which he has himself rendered to the law, and the degree of holiness which he has personally attained here upon earth, he is filled with doubt and fear respecting the final recompense. He knows that he has not, by his own work, earned and merited such an infinite reward as *glory, honor, and immortality*."⁶

A. The Illustration

In Zechariah 3:4, and 5, we have pictured for us Joshua, the high priest, being accused by Satan before the Lord. The text says, "Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes." The Hebrew word translated *filthy* is TSO'IM. This is the strongest expression in Hebrew for filth of the most vile and loathsome character.⁷ The Lord has Joshua's filthy clothes removed and says, "See, I have taken away your sin, *and* I will put rich garments on you." Justification is not only the stripping off of the filthy garment, but *also* the putting on of the clean turban and rich garments. Note how this dual aspect is stated elsewhere in Scripture. Acts 21:18 – Faith obtains forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among the saints. Romans 5:1, 2 – Justification faith brings us, not only peace with God, but access to a state of grace, joy, and glory. Galatians 4:5 – Christ's coming under the curse for us results in a redemption, which includes adoption (cf. also John 1:12, where believing is the immediate instrument of adoption).

V. THE SATISFACTION OF GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

“Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them (Galatians 3:10). This is one aspect of the law and its curse, but there is also another aspect – that of perfect performance. If life is to be received, the law must be kept *perfectly*. “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). Christ fulfilled both aspects in His work of obedience. “It must be clear to anyone who reads Scripture that we may designate the work of Christ as obedience. In fact, the word *obedience* is actually used. In the noteworthy passage where Paul speaks of Christ’s emptying and humbling Himself, we read that He *became obedient unto death, even death on a cross* (Philippians 2:8); and concerning His suffering, we read that *though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered* (Hebrews 5:8). He was *born under the law* (Galatians 4:4) and his entire life was a continuously obedient living under the law.”⁸ John Murray says “that no category could more significantly express the execution of his vicarious work than obedience. The language of prophecy is again confirmatory: *I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart* (Psalm 40:8; cf. Hebrews 19:5-10).”⁹ Theologians speak of two parts of the saving work of Christ, One is commonly referred to as His *passive* obedience, and the other is called His *active* obedience.

A. The Passive Obedience of Christ

Passive is not to be confused with passivity. Christ was *active* in His passive obedience (John 10:17, 18). His passive (or suffering) obedience is not to be restricted to what He experienced in the garden and on the cross. Everything in His human and earthly career that was distressing belongs to His passive obedience. Machen put it best when he wrote: “By His passive obedience – that is, by suffering in our stead – He paid the penalty for us.”¹⁰ By bearing the punishment due our sin OBEDIENTIA PASSIVA, Christ has disarmed the law of its curse (Galatians 3:13).

B. The Active Obedience of Christ

Christ’s active obedience is, simply stated, His perfect performance of the requirements of the moral law. The Lord Jesus fully obeyed the law in His heart and in His conduct without a single slip or failure. Machen wrote, “By His active obedience, that is, by doing what the law of God required—He has merited for us the reward.”¹¹

CONCLUSION: Oscar Cullmann perceptively observed that nothing shows more clearly the contrast between Christianity and the ancient world than the death of Socrates and that of Jesus (a contrast which was often cited, though for other purposes, by early opponents of Christianity). The biblical view of death from the first is focused in salvation-history and so departs completely from the Greek conception. Plato shows us how Socrates goes to his death in complete peace and composure. The death of Socrates is a beautiful death. Nothing is seen here of death’s terror. Socrates cannot fear death, since indeed it sets us free from the body. Whoever fears death proves that he loves the world of the body, that he is thoroughly entangled in the world of sense. Death is the soul’s great friend. So he teaches; and so, in wonderful harmony with his teaching, he dies – this man who embodied the Greek world in its noblest form. And now let us hear how Jesus dies. In Gethsemane He knows that death stands before Him, just as Socrates expected death on his last day. The Synoptic Evangelists furnish us, by and large, with a unanimous report. Jesus begins, ‘to tremble and be distressed,’ writes Mark (14:33). ‘My soul is troubled, even to death,’ He says to His disciples. ‘I am so sad that I prefer to die’ in this situation where Jesus *knows* that He is going to die [the scene is the Last Supper!] is completely unsatisfactory; moreover, Weiss’s interpretation: ‘My affliction is so great that I am sinking under the weight of it’ is

supported by Mark 15:34. Also Luke 12:50, 'How distressed I am until the baptism [death] takes place,' allows of no other explanation). Jesus is so thoroughly human that He shares the natural fear of death. Some have attempted in vain to avoid this conclusion, which is supported by the strong Greek expressions for 'tremble and shrink,' by giving explanations which do not fit the situation, in which Jesus already knows that He must suffer for the sins of His people [Last Supper]. In Luke 12:50 it is completely impossible to explain away the 'distress' in the face of death, and also in view of the fact that Jesus is abandoned by God on the Cross [Mark 15:34], it is not possible to explain the Gethsemane scene except through this distress at the prospect of being abandoned by God, and abandonment which will be the work of Death, (God's great enemy). Jesus is afraid, though not as a coward would be of the men who will kill Him, still less of the pain and grief which precede death. He is afraid in the face of death itself. Death for Him is not something divine; it is something dreadful. Jesus does not want to be alone in this moment. He knows, of course, that the Father stands by to help Him. He looks to Him in this decisive moment as He has done throughout his life. He turns to Him with all His human fear of this great enemy, death. He is afraid of death. It is useless to try to explain away Jesus' fear as reported by the Evangelists. The opponents of Christianity who already in the first centuries made the contrast between the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus saw more clearly here than the exponents of Christianity. He was really afraid. Here is nothing of the composure of Socrates, who met death peacefully as a friend. To be sure, Jesus already knows the task which has been given Him: to suffer death; and He has already spoken the words: 'I have a baptism with which I must be baptized, and *how distressed (or afraid) I am* until it is accomplished" (Luke 19:50). Now, when God's enemy stands before Him, He cries to God, whose omnipotence He knows: "All things are possible with thee; let this cup pass from me" (Mark 14:36). And when He concludes, "Yet not as I will, but as thou wilt," this does not mean that at the last He, like Socrates, regards death as the friend, the liberator. No, He means only this: If this greatest of all terrors, death, must befall Me according to Thy will, then I submit to this horror. Jesus knows that in itself, because death is the enemy of God, to die means to be utterly forsaken.¹²

Death, the Scriptures tell us, is the result of sin and for death to be defeated sin must first be dealt with.

The effects of Christ's obedience unto death is an aspect of His work as Redeemer and is made a present reality in the Lord's Supper. In actuality, the emphasis is on what God does, not on what we do! Christ's active obedience and His passive obedience are *not* two divisions of His work on our behalf. The two are inextricably intertwined. Neither was performed apart from the other. Together they make up the complete salvation, which was accomplished for us by the Lord Jesus. Can you say with the Apostle Paul, "He loved me and gave Himself for me; He took my place; He bore my curse; He bought me with His own precious blood; He is my righteousness?"

ENDNOTES

¹ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, The Cross (Crossway, 1986), p. 23.

² In discussing the language of Scripture regarding the nature of the bread and the wine, Stephen Charnock wrote, "Christ is called the Passover; was the paschal lamb, therefore, substantially the body of Christ? Were those lambs that were slain in Egypt, or at any other time in the celebration of this ordinance, transubstantiated into Christ? Yet Christ is as absolutely here called the Passover, and in other places the lamb, as the bread in the sacrament is called his body, or the wine his blood. Christ is said to be the rock, of which the Israelites drank, I Co. x. 4. Was the rock or the water that flowed from it, transubstantiated into Christ? But in Scripture the name proper to the thing represented, is given to that which represents it. The lamb is called the Passover, because it is a memorial of the angel's passing over the Israelites' families, and not only called so at the first institution, but above fifteen hundred years after that miraculous mercy. So the bread and wine are called the body and blood of Christ, because they are memorials and signs of his body and blood. If the church of the Jews spake figuratively in the case of the Passover, what difficulty is it, that Christ should call the

memorials of his body and blood by the name of the things they signified? Christ Crucified (rpt. James Family, 1979), p. 61.

³ J. R. W. Stott, The Cross of Christ (IVP, 1986), p. 68.

⁴ “Some,” R. L. Dabney remarked, “say that the object of Jesus’ innocent sufferings and death was designed to add moral weight to this example as our pattern, especially in practicing the virtues of truth, moral courage, patience, and fortitude under calamity. Still another set hold that the object was to soften and melt our hearts by sympathy with his sufferings; and yet another, that God’s object in the sacrifice of Christ was to make a dramatic display of his opposition to sin, even while pardoning the sinner, and so to prevent men’s presuming too much upon his kindness. When we are taught that these are ends designed and secured through Christ’s death, we respond, yes, they are secondary ends; but in order that they may be such, they must be grounded in the great truth that he suffered legally and righteously for the guilt of sin imputed to him.” Christ Our Penal Substitute (rpt. Sprinkle, 1978), p. 65.

⁵ R. L. Dabney, Lectures in Systematic Theology (rpt. Zondervan, 1972), p. 624.

⁶ W. G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology II (rpt. Zondervan, 1971), p. 151.

⁷ Cf. D. Baron, The Visions and Prophecies of Zechariah (rpt. Kregel, 1972), p. 90.

⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 314.

⁹ Collected Writings of John Murray II (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 151.

¹⁰ J. G. Machen, God Transcendent and Other Sermons (rpt. Eerdmans, 1949), p. 174.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Oscar Cullmann, D.Th., D.D., was Professor of the Theological Faculty of the University of Basel and of the Sorbonne in Paris. I have adopted this from the section “Immortality of The Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?” in [*Theologische Zeitschrift*, N. 2, pp. 126ff]. See also *Verbum Caro* [1956], pp. 58ff.) of which a summary has appeared in various French periodicals.