

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
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AND WAS CRUCIFIED FOR US UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

Mortem Turpissima Crucis is a Latin expression that comes from the early church father Origen and his commentary on Matthew (27:22ff).¹ The phrase *mortem* (from which we get words like *mortuary*) *turpissima* (our word *turpitude* is derived from this), *crucis* (you can easily recognize this as the source for the English *crucify*) means “the utterly vile, disgusting, shameful death of the cross.” Martin Luther spoke often of the *Theologia Crucis* (the theology of the cross). Indeed, this was to Luther descriptive of his understanding of the nature of God’s revelation and, therefore, of theology as a whole. The great reformer argued that God has chosen to reveal Himself in the weakness and scandal of the cross. Human reason, on the other hand, finds this offensive and would rather go about proclaiming a *Theologia Gloriam* (theology of glory).²

In I Corinthians 1:18-25, the Apostle Paul writes that in the eyes of “those who are perishing” the gospel (“the message of the cross”) is “foolishness.” The message of a crucified Christ is a “stumbling-block” for the Jews and utter “folly”³ to the Greeks (1:23). We need to recognize that the early Church had to deal with their culture and society in preaching the gospel. Think about it. The One whom Christians claim as their God was put to death on a cross – a dead god? Isn’t that a blatant contradiction? And if that were not enough, he had been justly condemned as a criminal to suffer the worst form of death imaginable! The very heart of the Gospel, which Paul called “the word of the cross,” ran, as Hengel has noted, “counter not only to Roman political thinking, but to the whole ethos of religion in ancient times and in particular to the ideas of God held by educated people.”⁴ In other words, the church at the time had to resist the cultural conditioning of that society. The shameful death of Jesus on the cross could not be altered. The offensive “word of the cross” *had to be* proclaimed. The gospel cannot be detached from this and be interpreted independently. Separated from the particular death that Jesus suffered, the gospel becomes vague and incomprehensible. We must not make the cross of Christ void (1 Corinthians 1:17).

Leon Morris correctly noted, “Paul can sum up his message by saying *we preach Christ crucified* (1 Cor. 1:23). When he came to Corinth, he had reached a determination not only to preach, but also *not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified* (1 Cor. 2:2). Likewise among the Galatians *Jesus Christ was openly set forth* (or *placated*) *crucified* (Gal. 3:1). Each of these passages shows that the crucified Christ was primary in Paul’s preaching. In each case *crucified* is the perfect participle, which means that Paul preached not only that Christ was once crucified (which would be the aorist), but that He continues in His character as the crucified One. The crucifixion is a fact of permanent significance and not simply a historical curiosity. It is this firm conviction of the permanent efficacy of the crucifixion that leads Paul to say that he will glory only in the cross (Gal. 6:14).”⁵

- I. **PAUL’S RESOLVE (1 Corinthians 2:2).** “Any ministry,” declared Sinclair Ferguson, “that claims to stand in the apostolic succession, the exposition and application of the biblical teaching on the atonement demands a central place. Paul gives us the vision in summary statements: *I decided to*

know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2); *Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Gal. 6:14). As under-shepherd, the pastor must expound what the Chief Shepherd did in laying down his life for his sheep.”⁶ The Apostle is not saying that he was disinterested in everything else – he is, however, declaring that the scope and centrality of his message revolved around two things.

A. ***The Subject Matter Generally: Jesus Christ.*** Paul in his epistles takes up a large number of issues, but the *focus* around which everything else depended was JESUS CHRIST. Paul’s only design in going to Corinth was to preach Christ; and Christ not as a teacher, or as an example, or as a perfect man, or as a new starting point in the religious consciousness in mankind--but Jesus Christ the Redeemer, the Saviour of sinners. As Charles Hodge puts it, “Christ as a propitiation was the burden of Paul’s preaching.”⁷ W. G. T. Shedd, a contemporary of Hodge, picked up on this theme and wrote: “The sufferings of Christ the mediator were vicariously penal or atoning because the intention, both on the part of the Father and the Son, was that they should satisfy justice for the sin of man. They were not calamity for their object is known. The reason for calamitous suffering is secret. And they were not disciplinary, because Christ having no sin could not pass through a process of progressive sanctification. Scripture plainly teaches that our Lord’s sufferings were vicariously retributive; that is, they were endured for the purpose of satisfying justice in the place of the actual transgressor: *Christ has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust* (1 Pet. 3:18); *Christ was made a curse for us* (Gal. 3:13); *Immanuel was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities* (Isa. 53:5); *Jesus our Lord was delivered for our offenses* (Rom. 4:25); *he has made him to be sin [a sin offering] for us, who knew no sin* (2 Cor. 5:21); *he is the propitiation for our sins* (1 John 2:2); *behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world* (John 1:29); *he spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all* (Rom. 8:32). With this, compare 2 Pet. 2:4: *He spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell*. Penalty in the case of Christ was vicarious; in that of the fallen angels was personal.”⁸

B. ***The Subject Matter Particularly: Christ Crucified.*** This “word of the cross” Paul readily acknowledges was the one doctrine he magnified. Notice how he deliberately accents this message in spite of the fact that it was highly offensive to the very people he was trying to evangelize. To the offense which the Jews took at the word of the cross (it was a weak doctrine), Paul declares that “Christ crucified *is* the power of God” and to the offense which the Greeks took (it was a foolish doctrine) he declares, “Christ crucified *is* the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24).

II. ***PAUL’S PREACHING (1 Corinthians 2:3-5).*** We have in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 a clear example of a statement of purpose. Paul explains that his preaching was intentionally not patterned after the popular orators of the day. He did not seek to win followers with eloquence. And he most certainly did not seek to make his message “culturally relevant” by adapting it to the popular tastes of the times! The reason (which is also the effect of his action) is given in verse 5: “so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.”

CONCLUSION: Douglas Kelly, one of my former professors rightly stresses that, “we must remind ourselves of why a holy and loving God must punish sin. Almighty God is under no constraints from any power outside himself, for his own character provides the security of the very structure of the universe which he created. Part of his strength is that he cannot deny himself. Paul writes: ‘If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself’ (II Tim. 2:13). For God to go against his own character, to deny himself, would mean the total destruction of the universe, and we would not be here to discuss it! Sin constitutes a contradiction against God’s own character, and – to speak imaginatively – if he did not deal with it, it would seek to eat him off his throne, and thereby bring all else into utter destruction (of course, infinitely impossible!). It is God’s righteous strength that he should punish sin, not an injustice nor a weakness.

“In the apposite words of T. F. Torrance: ‘If God did not oppose sin, there would be no really objective and ultimate difference between sin and righteousness. Thus the divine opposition to sin is a factor in the qualification of humanity as sinful before God, and especially as guilty before him... Yet that [i.e. holding back his full opposition to sin] was in the very mercy of God, as the cross showed, for the cross reveals that God withheld his final resistance to sin until in Christ, he was ready to do the deed which would also save us from his wrath. That is to say, God’s holy consistency with himself requires that he should at all times (and throughout an endless eternity) act in accordance with his pure character. His holiness requires the punishment of sin, but at the same time his heart is full of the most tender love for sinners. To bring them back into his immediate favor action must be taken in accordance with who God always is. He cannot deny himself in saving sinners, for that would be the end of all. Indeed, Christ thought so highly of the Father’s honor, that he gave up everything for the Father to be honored in the salvation of the Church. His people are called, and through the Holy Spirit enabled, to share in his attitude of devout submission to the thrice holy God.

“The sacred transaction among Father, Son and Spirit in Gethsemane and Calvary, once grasped by the believer, in no sense presents a God who is harsh, nor is it the merely external imposition of standards outside of who God most essentially is, or in any sense alien to the sacred image in which we were made to live and function. On the contrary, Jesus’ attitude to the Father in Gethsemane and on Calvary demonstrates the ineffable beauty that reigns within the Trinitarian relations. Jesus’ self-offering to the Father as our great High Priest displays the absolute relational beauty of the infinite tenderness of the love of God.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ As cited by Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Fortress, 1977), p. 1.

² This was Luther’s term for the theology of the medieval scholastics. God was discussed in terms of His glorious attributes rather than in terms of Christ’s cross. God was chiefly discussed philosophically. Luther is actually drawing a sharp contrast between these two types of theology. “That person,” Luther declared, “does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as if it were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.” As cited by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress, 1966), p. 23.

³ *Mōria* is the source for our English word “moron.” It means that someone lacks knowledge and discernment and is in fact, not capable of learning. The word was used in reference to people who were mentally deranged. Cf. *The New Dictionary of New Testament Theology* III, ed. C. Brown (Zondervan, 1978), p. 1023ff.

⁴ Hengel, op. cit., p. 5.

⁵ L. Morris, *The Cross In The New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 218.

⁶ S. B. Ferguson, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine?” *Definite Atonement and The Cure of Souls in From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Perspective*, eds. D. Gibson & J. Gibson (Crossway, 2013), p. 608.

⁷ C. Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 30.

⁸ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* Third Edition, ed. A. W. Gomes (P&R, 2003), p. 716.

⁹ D. F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor Books, 2014), p. 364.
