

# **Expound on the Significance of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus for the Christian Faith**

## **Introduction**

The death and resurrection of Jesus are fundamental to any consideration of the Christian faith. Morgan describes the Coming of the Lord Jesus as the 'consummation of history'<sup>1</sup> and some examination of the postulates fundamental to orthodox Christology allow us to consider the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ.

To those who belong to a Liberal, Modernistic or even Post-Modern tradition and would reject the orthodox postulates, the death and resurrection are still events that need to be dismissed as invalid or marginalised into the background from their prominent position. These points of view will also be considered.

## **Interpreting the Death and Resurrection**

Only by having some idea of who Jesus was and is can a reasonable interpretation be proposed. Vine,<sup>2</sup> interpreting the early theologian Nestorius whom founded some of the most radical and progressive Asian churches, assigns three postulates fundamental to orthodox Christology:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Humble God*, Morgan, D., p43, Canterbury Press, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *An Approach To Christology: An Interpretation and Development of some elements in the metaphysic and Christology of Nestorius as a way of approach to an orthodox Christ compatible with Modern Thought*, Vine, A., pp149-153, London Independent Press Ltd, 1948.

1. Jesus Christ was truly God;
2. Jesus Christ was truly a man;
3. Jesus Christ was one person.

Importantly, this union left the integrity of the Godhead and manhood unimpaired. He was not a fusion of nature and God but a man as patterned after the Creation of Adam. However, whereas with Adam God withdrew His immediate presence when He breathed the breath of Life into Him<sup>3</sup>, with Jesus He remained as the incarnation of the *λογος* of God.

A divine sacrifice alone would be illegal within the Earth given to Man. A human sacrifice alone could never be perfect, it would always be contaminated with sin<sup>4</sup>. There can be no redemptive or atoning work unless Jesus was truly both divine and human.

## **Modes of Interpretation**

Cave<sup>5</sup> describes three main approaches to interpreting the work of Christ:

1. The Classical, Dramatic, Eschatological or Patristic View

This views the death and resurrection as primarily a victory over the powers of evil and thus redeeming men from their tyranny. The term “Patristic” is used

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2,7

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 9:23. The implication here is that Adam’s original authority stretched all the way to the throne of God and his Fall defiled all but God Himself.

<sup>5</sup> *The Doctrine of the work of Christ*, Cave, S., p4ff, University of London Press Limited, 1950

as this was the predominant view amongst early Church Fathers and has particularly Jewish roots.

## 2. The Objective or “Latin” View

This view is associated first with the great theologian Anselm (c1100). Writing within the feudal context of the early Middle Ages, he viewed the Death and Resurrection as the satisfaction of the honour of God injured by Man’s sin. It was the expiation of God’s Judgement by Christ’s vicarious punishment.

Typically, a nobleman whose honour was offended, could demand far more than the original offence as retribution and restitution. However, as God already owned all, there was no way Man could pay the price of restitution to purge away our sin. The price could only be paid by God Himself in Christ.

Placher<sup>6</sup> quotes Anselm:

“..for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed  
for God saints from every tribe and language and people and  
nation.”

These ideas were developed by Catholic philosopher Aquinas and became central to the Catholic tradition. They are seen to focus on the suffering of death as central to the Christian faith and even as suffering something good in itself rather than just a means to an end. The suffering of Christ is seen as an example for us to follow. Some particularly extreme theologies of suffering

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<sup>6</sup> *Jesus the Savior (The Meaning of Jesus Christ for the Christian Faith)*, Placher, W.C., p136, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001

are still found within Catholic practice<sup>7</sup> but suffering even to death as part of Christian witness it is also accepted within the Protestant tradition<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. The Subjective or “Moral” View

This is essentially a philosophical view deriving from the Enlightenment work of Kant and Rieschl that viewed Jesus as a “pattern” or “prototype” for the citizen of the Kingdom of God. Pannenburg<sup>9</sup> also views the influential theologian Schleiermacher as the developer of this thought providing a framework for a particular liberal school of theology.

## **The Liberal<sup>10</sup> View of the Death and Resurrection**

Much Liberal theology derives from the understanding of the Kingdom concept outlined in the Subjective view. For the Enlightenment, the Kingdom concept is viewed purely in rational terms and so assigns no more to the work of Christ beyond providing the ultimate model of how to live morally on Earth and within eternity. Jesus is not seen as the “object of faith” but, at best, as

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<sup>7</sup> Pilgrims to Rome walking on their knees through churches until they bleed and the annual nailing to the cross at Easter of the pious practised in the Phillipines.

<sup>8</sup> For example, *Foxe’s Martyrs*.

<sup>9</sup> *Jesus (God and Man)*, Pannenburg, W., pp44-45, SCM Press Ltd, Cambridge, 1968.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Liberal’ can be a misleading term as in strict theological terms it simply refers to the rationalistic methods of finding knowledge about God through our reason in opposition to revelation as the source of knowledge about God. Theologian Karl Barth could never be considered ‘liberal’ in doctrine but used the Liberal methods of reasoned discussion.

an example to follow.<sup>11</sup> For liberal social activist movements within the Church, the suffering of the Cross presents particular problems. Placher<sup>12</sup> quotes feminist theologians accusing God of being pleased when a beaten wife returns to receive another beating or of being a child abuser satisfied by His Son on the Cross.

The Resurrection is not viewed as a literal historical event. Jesus, if resurrected at all, is resurrected abstractly in the preaching of the Word or is viewed as resurrected because He is present in the lives of His disciples<sup>13</sup>. This reflects a particular rationalistic, almost Humean, approach to the miraculous that deems because such an event is empirically improbable it probably did not happen and was misreported by the writers.

Thus, the Death and Resurrection have no fundamental importance and indeed are considered doctrinally unimportant or important only as providing an example of self-sacrifice or “goodness”. It is thus appropriate to turn to the orthodox traditions that have developed doctrines with a very different approach to interpreting the death and resurrection.

## **The Death and Resurrection in the Writings of Paul**

Although occupying the focus of the gospels, the interpretation of the death and resurrection within the synoptic gospels is minimal and is normally done

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<sup>11</sup> Cave, *op cit*, p7.

<sup>12</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, p112

<sup>13</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, p166

by the writer referring back to a Messianic prophecy<sup>14</sup>. Jesus, at the Last Supper, is seen as interpreting His death in the context of a new covenant of forgiveness, healing and the Coming of the Kingdom of God. This emphasises the Jewishness of the context and indeed of Jesus' own awareness of His status as the Jewish Messiah. This is not the 'Kingdom' of the rationalist view but of the Messianic Jewish view. The title adopted within the gospels as "Son of Man" is seen as Jesus identifying himself with the prophecy of Daniel within the Hebrew scriptures<sup>15</sup>.

It is with the writings of the Apostle Paul that the most thorough understanding of the death and resurrection can be developed. Cave<sup>16</sup> describes that 'Paul extended the understanding of the meaning of the death and resurrection in distinctly non-Jewish terms' and this interpretation was later endorsed by Peter as scriptural<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, Paul himself would call this revelation "his gospel"<sup>18</sup>.

Paul describes that the believers through the death and resurrection have been given the 'word of reconciliation' and uses the very unusual political term

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Mk 10,45 where Isaiah 53 is interpreted.

<sup>15</sup> Cave, *op cit.*, p27

<sup>16</sup> Cave, *op cit.*, p34

<sup>17</sup> 2 Peter 3:16

<sup>18</sup> Galatians 1,11-12

of 'ambassador' to describe believers in the world. Munroe<sup>19</sup> interprets this in the following terms:

“An ambassador is one sent from their government. We are diplomats of His Kingdom in this world, to represent the authority, rights and powers of that government...The mission of the Church on Earth is essentially a governmental one...to restore heaven's dominion to the earth realm... 'on earth as it is in heaven'”

The saints of the Old Testament could only have the Holy Spirit “come upon” them to perform specific tasks because ‘none of them were fit vessels for His abiding presence’<sup>20</sup>. The Pentecostal birth of the Church and Peter’s interpretation of it in the light of the prophet Joel show that the death and resurrection made it possible for the Holy Spirit to remain within us and administer the Kingdom on Earth<sup>21</sup>. Placher<sup>22</sup> describing the redemptive work of the Resurrection also sees Jesus in this kingdom context:

“Christ has ascended and is seated at the right hand of the Father. So we see Christ as the monarch, king, kingdom – He is the administrator of the Kingdom through His Spirit.”

Thus, the supreme purpose of the death and resurrection is to free men from a legal form of religion and to restore the relationship of perfect fellowship and

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<sup>19</sup> *Rediscovering the Kingdom (Ancient Hope for our 21<sup>st</sup> Century world)*, Munroe, M., pp126-128, Destiny Image/Diplomat Press, Shippenburg, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Munroe, *op. cit.*, p129

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 11,11-12

<sup>22</sup> Plancher, *op. cit.*, pp188-198

harmony between Man and God. It is possible to know God as he really is.

Cave<sup>23</sup> describes the same thought:

“From the tyranny of death, Christians are now free...not only did His death destroy him that had the power of death and free men from the fear of death...[but it] equipped him to be a ‘merciful and faithful’ High priest...[ourselves with] freedom from guilt and dead religious works.”

Placher<sup>24</sup> when analysing the Pauline gospel of the death and resurrection identifies the following concepts: solidarity, priest and sacrifice, reconciliation and resurrection. These amplify some of the concepts mentioned previously and are described below.

### ***Solidarity***

A key concept here is that the death on a cross is not seen from the perspective of an angry Father demanding justice but that the Son, Himself God and in perfect union with the Father, was prepared to endure the worst expression of the sin of humanity and so demonstrate the love that God has for Man.

It was an expression of the desire of God to save Man. He was prepared to use all the resources of the Godhead to do so as a Man, Jesus. As He endured the worst of humanity, ‘there is nothing that can carry us outside of Christ.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cave, *op. cit.*, pp53-54

<sup>24</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, pp113-198

<sup>25</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, p113

## ***Priest and Sacrifice***

The image here is one of the High Priest of the order of Melchizedek (the eternal priesthood) presenting His own blood at the heavenly altar to pay the price for the sin of all Mankind. He is not just an Aaronic priest for Israel but for every tribe and tongue:

“Christ to perform this office had to come forward with a sacrifice...by the sacrifice of His death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins.”<sup>26</sup>

## ***Reconciliation***

Another term for reconciliation is atonement. Man was estranged from God, not God from Man. God took the initiative and made a way where Man could be reconciled back to Him. The death was not an:

‘act of vengeance for Christ volunteered to pay the price...the cross is not a model for passively accepting one’s suffering but for acting boldly to make the world a better place’<sup>27</sup>.

## ***Redemption***

The contextual meaning to the early Jewish believers would simply be “to buy back” property that had been pawned. However, people could be redeemed by a near relative if through their own fault and actions they were sold into slavery:

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<sup>26</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, p132

<sup>27</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, pp138-141, 51

“[redemption] was rescuing you not only from your new owner but also from the consequences of your own wrongdoing”<sup>28</sup>

Thus, our redemption was not a passive act but an active one delivering a slave that could in no way buy their own freedom. Paul describes in Galatians<sup>29</sup> the removal of the ‘Curse of the Law’ by the redeeming action of the death. The curse of the Law was the entire weight of the judgement of God for the sins and transgressions of Man.

Martin Luther echoes the classical understanding of redemption in that the death ‘actively vanquishes sin’ and ‘redeems Man from the power of Satan’. The idea is of a military victory of a conquering Roman General being received back home with the vanquished in his triumph procession<sup>30</sup>:

## ***Resurrection***

The Resurrection as a concrete historical event is the key concept within orthodox Christianity. Paul wrote that ‘of all Men we are most pitiful’<sup>31</sup> if there was no Resurrection. Placher<sup>32</sup> writes:

“If [His death] was the end of the story...all that Good News would collapse...he...made [unique] claims...he spoke for God with unique authority...[he claimed] people’s relation with God depended on their response to him...if His story

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<sup>28</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, p142-149

<sup>29</sup> Galatians 3:13

<sup>30</sup> This is the metaphor used by Paul in Colossians 2.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Cor 15:19

<sup>32</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, p159-198

really ended on the Cross, then it is hard to explain why we should follow Him.”

Thus, to the believer in the power of sin, its ultimate expression in the ‘power of death’, must be defeated by a bodily resurrection and not some abstract or spiritual resurrection after Greek or Roman philosophy:

“[To exist] in any way that has any value after death, one’s body will need to be resurrected. Jesus did not congratulate Lazarus’ sisters on the liberation of his soul [from his corrupt prison of earthly flesh] but brought Lazarus’ body back to life”<sup>33</sup>

The early theologian Tertullian emphasised the bodily resurrection. Paul speaks of the new “spiritual” body as one freed from the mortal principle and subject to different physics but still flesh. Jesus spoke to Thomas to feel his flesh and bone and was able to appear in their midst<sup>34</sup>.

## Conclusion

It has been found that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ , the Son of God, are key components that give meaning and context to orthodox Christian belief. The death was not a defeat but was an expression of God’s love for Man. The Resurrection was the sign that the power of death and its architect Satan had been defeated for all eternity. Man was free to be reconciled to God, to live ‘life in all its fulness’<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Placher, *op. cit.*, p172

<sup>34</sup> Luke 24:39, John 20:27

<sup>35</sup> John 10,10

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