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Does the Pauline Doctrine of the Atonement Have Any Basis in the Gospels?

Gordon Molyneaux

It would seem at first that there is a glaring discrepancy between what Paul on the one hand and the Gospels on the other have to say about the death of Christ. The Evangelists (especially the synoptic authors) describe factually the events which took Jesus ultimately to his execution at the hands of his opponents outside the walls of Jerusalem. Paul, for his part, represents the atonement as a rich, well-developed doctrine with far-reaching, even cosmic, implications. The contrast has led many to stress the differences even to the point of asserting that the two positions are incompatible, accusing Paul of distorting the simplicity of the Gospel tradition to serve his own theological ends.¹

One possible explanation of the contrast is that Paul was an erudite theologian, steeped in philosophy and religious training, while the gospel writers were simple straightforward men from common walks of life. It is very understandable therefore that there should be two different ways of looking at the subject. The explanation is attractive but it will not do. For many years it has been acknowledged that the Gospels are theological works.² Each author selected and used his material with a view to convincing his readers of certain theological truths. John and Luke say so in almost as many words (Luke 1:1-4, John 20:35) and Mark makes it clear with his opening statement that he has a theological position to convey.

Another, perhaps more valid, explanation comes from acknowledging the difference between description and analysis, that is, between narration (Gospel authors) and reflection (Paul). The Synoptics were recording **what happened**. Paul was expounding **what was going on**. In this way, Luke, for instance, would write: "When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified him" (23:33). Paul, however, would declare "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood" (Rom 3:25). This distinction between description of the fact and significance of the fact would explain to some extent the difference between the Gospel and Paul.

The conclusions of form criticism would make the task before us more complex, situating the problem not between Paul and the Synoptics, but between the early Christian community on one hand (represented by Paul **and** the synoptic authors) and Jesus' understanding of himself and of his death on the other. Formgeschichte sets itself the job of attempting to distinguish in the Gospels between what Jesus actually said and thought about his identity and ministry, and what the Church came to understand later.

It is impossible in an article of this length to explore and fully refute this position. The widely divergent conclusions arrived at by different form critics should put us on our guard

against accepting too readily the findings of this type of criticism. Rudolph Bultmann, one of the most eminent of the form critics, certainly seems to go beyond the bounds of the historical neutrality and objectivity which form criticism is supposed to demand when it insists that Jesus never understood himself to be the the unique plenipotentiary of God and that we owe that idea to the Early Church.³ According to Bultmann (and it seems he owes his conclusion more to certain presuppositions than to textual evidence) the synoptics reflect the attitude of the Christian community rather than the self-understanding of Jesus himself. For textual and critical reasons (rather than merely apologetical reasons) the position of such theologians as Cullmann, Morris, Guthrie, and others⁴ seems more convincing, namely, that the Christology of the Gospels does not start with the early church, but goes back to Jesus himself.

We come back then to the problem expressed in the title: from an examination of the material in the Gospels, was Paul justified in his understanding of the death of Christ? What is striking in a careful analysis of the two is not the discrepancies, but the resemblances. Let us consider just three of these.

The Centrality of the Death of Christ

The first arresting fact is the sheer importance of the death of Christ in both Paul and the Gospels. For Paul the cross is, with the resurrection, the focal point of his experience and his preaching. It is this that explains his transformed life and his reversed ambitions (Gal 2:20). His sole boast is in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal 6:14). It constituted the major theme of his apostolic preaching however unpalatable it may have been to the Jews and Greeks (1 Cor 1:22,2:2). It is the basis of his Christian ethics (Romans 6:1-11, Col 2:20 ff).

In the Gospels no less importance is attached to Christ's crucifixion. It is normal in biographical works for the death of the person in question to occupy only a few lines at the end of the book. The decease is to the person's life what a full stop is to a sentence, it adds nothing to the meaning of what has preceded but merely serves to indicate its conclusion. Not so the death of Christ in all the Gospels. For them the death of Christ is the climax towards which all that precedes moves, and without which all that came before has little meaning. M. Kahler describes the Gospels as "passion narratives with long introductions."⁵ Nowhere is this clearer than in the second Gospel; it is as if the cross throws its shadow over the entire public ministry of Jesus. Hardly has he commenced his work of healing and preaching when there is a sinister opposition to his work and words (Mark 2:6-7,16,24), and soon after we read that "the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus" (3:6). The Epistles of Paul agree with the Gospels that the death of Christ (and his resurrection) is the single most important event in history.

Christ's Death Divinely Ordained

Next, let us notice that both Paul and the Gospel writers see the death of Jesus not as a tragic accident of history, but as the fulfillment of the plan of God. The Apostle insists that it was an absolute necessity, without which there is no solution for the sinner, no matter what his social or religious privileges might be. It is **God** who destined Jesus to be a sacrificial victim for sin (Romans 3:25). It is **God** who made him to be sin who knew no sin, in order that we in him might be clothed with the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21). The crucifixion of Christ is the tangible proof of the measure of God's love for sinners (Rom 5:8). It is the expression 'par excellence' of the extraordinary wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24). It is 'according to the Scriptures' (and not according to the whims of Pilate and the Jews) that Jesus died (1 Cor 15:3).

The Gospels, too, (and we would want to insist thereby that Jesus himself) understood the passion to be in accordance with the will of God, and not simply the incidental end-result of the conflict with the religious system of the day. Even less was it due to the treachery of his disciple Judas or the weakness of the Roman governor. His death is the fulfillment of the Scriptures, -- he **had** to suffer (Luke 24:25-27,46).

This necessity, expressed in Greek by the particle 'dei' rings again and again as Jesus foretells his approaching death. Fully realizing what awaited him in Jerusalem, Jesus sets his face to go there (Luke 9:51), and when one of his disciples tries to dissuade him from going the way of the cross, Jesus replies with exceptionally strong language (Mark 8:33) (Who in the community where Peter was so highly respected, would ever have invented such an incident?). Jesus seems almost pre-occupied in the Gospels with the necessity of his death (Mark 8:31,9:31, 10:33). The fourth Gospel is entirely in agreement "No-one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (John 10:18). He had come to do the will of his Father, and in the garden of Gethsemane he deliberately aligns himself with that will, namely to drink the cup (of suffering and death) which the Father had prepared. Indeed it was for this very reason that he had come to this hour.

Christ's Death as a Substitute for Sinful Man

We have seen that the Pauline writings are in full agreement with the Gospels upon the central importance of the death of Christ, and that it was by divine decree. But what of the significance of that death? For after all, it is at this point that most of the accusations of distortion are aimed. So monumental is the death of Jesus Christ that it should not surprise us if it can be considered from a variety of angles. However, it would be true to say that Paul understands it primarily as being a sacrifice for sins, -- **the** sacrifice for sins. Jesus the righteous dies in the place of the sinner. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a

curse for us (Gal 3:13). The Sinless One is made sin for the sinful ones (2 Cor 5:21). Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5:6). It is in him, because his blood was shed, that we have the remission of our sins (Eph 1:17). As in the Old Testament the God-ordained death of a blameless animal atoned for the sins of a guilty man, so under the new covenant, Christ our Passover Lamb is sacrificed for us (1 Cor 5:7).

Is this understanding of the meaning of Christ's death to be found in all the Gospels? We may not find there the same reasoned, systematic exposition of the cross that Paul gives us, but there is ample evidence to show that Jesus himself understood his ministry in terms of the Suffering Servant of whom Isaiah spoke-- the one who would bear the iniquities of his people and suffer in their place (Is 42:1-4, 49:1-7, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12). Jesus is recorded in Luke as saying: "It is written: And he was numbered with the transgressors (Is 53:12), and I tell you this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment" (Luke 22:37). Manson comments: "Jesus finds the true meaning of his career in the poem of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah . . . Events are moving inevitably in one direction for Jesus. There can only be one end to his ministry; and that is the end foreshadowed in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah."

It is true that this passage in Luke is the only time that Isaiah 53 is quoted directly. Nevertheless, there are many passages where the Suffering Servant theme is unmistakably alluded to. The words of institution at the Last Supper with their emphasis on "for many" reminds us of the substitutionary language of Isaiah 53. Cullmann, reflecting on the terminology of the Last Supper concludes that in the majority of the "logia" (sayings) where Jesus speaks in a general way about the necessity of his death, Isaiah 53 is in the back of his mind.⁷ Jeremias concludes in a similar way, declaring that "without Isaiah 53 the eucharistic words remain incomprehensible."⁸ Perhaps the best known example of Jesus' use of the expression "for many" is in Mark 10:45, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." By this declaration Jesus shows that he understood the meaning of his favourite name (Son of Man) in terms of the "ebed Yahweh", the Servant of the Lord, who would lay down his life in the stead of sinful man and for his redemption. Jesus had considered the question of the necessity of his death and had found the answer to this question in Scripture, primarily in Isaiah 53, the chapter about the Suffering Servant. When the Apostle Paul uses the language of substitutionary atonement to explore the meaning of the death of Christ he is certainly not in glaring contradiction with the Gospel writers; both he and they faithfully reflect Jesus' own understanding of his destiny.

We may conclude then that for the Gospel writers and for Paul the atoning death of Christ is, so to speak, the center of gravity. This convergence of their opinion is to be explained by the fact that Jesus himself was aware of his role as the substitutionary sacrifice ordained by the Father, foreshadowed by the pascal atonement of the Old Covenant, and foretold by Isaiah. For the Gospel writers the death of Jesus and his resurrection

are seen as the climax of their accounts. For Paul, it is the inaugural event, which has cosmic implications. It is as if the Gospel writers draw a circle whose center is the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul draws a circle much bigger than theirs -- it encircles the entire universe. But the two circles are concentric.

¹ For an historical survey of the "Jesus vs Paul" issue during the 20th Century, cf H. Ridderbos **Paul and Jesus** 1958 3-20.

² cf H. Conzelmann, **The Theology of St. Luke**, London, Faber, 1960 and G. Bornkamm, **Nouveau Testament, Problemes d'Introduction**, Geneve, Editions Labor et Fides, 1973, 72-79.

³ R. Bultmann, **Jesus: Mythologie et Demythologisation**, Paris, Seuil, 1958, 38.

⁴ O. Cullmann, **The Christology of the New Testament** London, SCM, 1963.

⁵ Quoted by G. Bornkamm, **Jesus of Nazareth**, London, 1960, 17.

⁶ T.W. Manson, **The Sayings of Jesus** London, SCM Press, 1964.

⁷ O. Cullmann, **Christology** 59.

⁸ J. Jeremias, **New Testament Theology** London, SCM Press, 1971, 291.