

Marian College
Orthodox Appraisal of the Atonement

The most eloquent statement of this appeal of God's love is contained in the well-known passage from the Epistle to Diognetus. (2nd Century)

“The very Artificer and Creator of the Universe Himself

Him He sent unto them. Was He sent think you, as any man might suppose, to establish a sovereignty, to inspire fear and terror? Not so. But in gentleness and meekness has He sent Him, as a king might send his son who is a king, He sent Him as sending God, He sent Him as [man] unto Inca; He sent Him as Savior, as using persuasion, not force; for force is no attribute of God. He sent Him as summoning, not as persecuting; He sent Him as loving, not as judging. . . . For what man at all had any knowledge what God was before He came?

For God, the Master and Creator of the Universe, Who made all things and arranged them in order, was found to be not only friendly to men, but also long-suffering. And such indeed He always was, and is, and will be, kindly and good and dispassionate and true, and He alone is good. . . . And when our iniquity had been fully accomplished, and it had been made perfectly manifest that punishment and death were expected as its recompense, and the season came which God had ordained, when henceforth He should manifest His goodness and power (O the exceeding great kindness and love of God), He hated us not, neither rejected us, nor bore us malice, but was long-suffering and patient, and in pity for us took upon Himself our sins, and Himself parted with His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy for the lawless, the guileless for the evil, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but His righteousness would have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us lawless and ungodly men to have been justified, save only in the Son of God? O the sweet exchange, O the inscrutable creation, O the unexpected benefits; that the iniquity of many should be concealed in One Righteous Man, and the righteousness of One should justify many that are iniquitous.”

1. Here we do not see the late idea of justice but love is the secret of Atonement, for love and not force is the essential attribute of God. And in this love the Father and the Son agree. There is no question of an imposition of God's will upon the Son, for the Father's will is His also.

2. It is by man's sin that Atonement is rendered necessary, sin that might reasonably have incurred the wrath of God, that might reasonably have expected punishment and death. And there seemed to be no hope of any release from sin. Man is utterly incapable of that holiness which he needs. But this state calls forth not judgment upon him, but the pity of God.

3. God's pity is shown in the sending of His Son to be “a ransom for us.” The phrase is unexplained, though the writer quite plainly felt both the appeal to the hearts of men (as using persuasion not force) and the conviction that the place of

sinful man has been taken by another. It is clear, however, that that which makes the ransom effective is the righteousness rather than the suffering of Christ.

4. In that righteousness we are justified. The term is used, but the meaning is not forensic. The thought is not that of an externally imputed righteousness, but of a real change in the

in heart of man, and the writer seems to feel that the righteousness of Christ becomes actually ours.

The ransom paid to the devil

The first Christian writer to introduce the idea of payment was Origen of Alexandria.

“If then we were “bought with a price,” as also Paul asserts, we were doubtless bought from one whose servants we were, who also named what price he would for releasing those whom he held from his power. Now it was the devil that held us, to whose side we had been drawn away by our sins. He asked, there fore, as our price the blood of Christ. But until the blood of Jesus, which was so precious that alone it sufficed for the redemption of all, was given, it was necessary that those who were established in the Law should give each for himself his blood (i.e. in circumcision) as it were in imitation of the redemption that was to be.” (Commentary on Romans 2:13)

And again

“To whom gave He His life “a ransom for many”? It cannot have been to God. Was it not then to the evil one? For he held us until the ransom for us, even the soul of Jesus, was paid to him, being deceived into thinking that he could be its lord, and not seeing that he could not bear the torment of holding it.” (Commentary on Matthew 16:8)

Yet, it must be made clear that this was not a common idea among other Christians, and it was only a personal opinion. Origen says in other of his books

Gregory of Nyssa

“For as they who have bartered away their freedom for money are the slaves of those who have purchased them . . . , on the same principle, now that we had voluntarily bartered away our freedom, it was requisite that no arbitrary method of recovery, but the one consonant with justice should be devised by Him who in His goodness had undertaken our rescue. Now this method is in a manner this: to make over to the master of the slave whatever ransom he may agree to accept for the person in his possession.” (Catechesis 22)

Gregory says that the devil, urged on by “his own special passion of pride,” was very ready to accept a price more valuable than the souls which he held in bondage, and such a price was offered to him in Christ, the Deity being veiled in flesh so that the devil might feel no fear in approaching Him.

“To have devised that the Divine power should have been containable in the envelopment of a body, to the end that the dispensation on our behalf might not be thwarted through any fear inspired by the Deity actually appearing, affords a demonstration of all these qualities at once—goodness, wisdom, justice. His choosing to save man is a testimony of His goodness; His making the redemption of the captive a matter of exchange exhibits His justice, while the invention whereby He enabled the enemy to apprehend that of which he was before incapable, is a manifestation of supreme wisdom.” (Catechesis 23)

The result of this play is stated by Gregory in a strange form:

“In order to secure that the ransom in our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh.” (Catechesis 24)

Gregory is quite aware that some may feel that such an act of deception is wholly unworthy of God, and devotes a chapter to its justification. He argues that two things are involved in justice and wisdom, first, that all should have their due; and second, that, while justice is done, kindness should not swerve from the aim of the love of man. In the redemption wrought by God both conditions are fulfilled.

“So in this instance, by the reasonable rule of justice, he who practiced deception receives in return that very treatment the seeds of which he had himself sown of his own free will. He who first deceived man by the bait of sensual pleasure is himself deceived by the presentation of the human form. But as regards the aim and purpose of what took place, a change in the direction of the nobler is involved; for whereas he, the enemy, effected his deception for the ruin of our nature, He who is at once the just, and good, and wise one, used His device, in which there was deception, for the salvation of him who had perished, and thus not only conferred benefit on the lost one, but on him too who had wrought our ruin.” (Catechesis 26)

As a typical statement of the theory in the writers following Gregory of Nyssa we may take the explanation of the Cross given by Rufinus in his Commentary on the Apostles' Creed.

In the first place he sets out to explain why the Cross was chosen for the Savior's death. It was, he says, a token of victory over “things in heaven and things on earth, and things under the earth” (Phil. 2:10). By being lifted up in the air He displayed His victory over the supernatural and celestial powers. By stretching forth His hands He made protestation to unbelievers and invited believers. By the part of the Cross sunk in the earth He signified the subjecting to Himself of the kingdoms of the nether world. Rufinus then goes more into detail.

“When God made the world in the beginning, He set over it and appointed certain powers of celestial virtues, by whom the race of mortal men might be governed and directed. . . . But some of these, as he who is called the Prince of this world, did not exercise the power which God had committed to them according to the laws by which they had received it, nor did they teach mankind to obey God’s commandments, but taught them rather to follow their own perverse guidance. Thus we were brought under the bonds of sin. . . . Under that bond then every man was held by those most wicked rulers.” (Commentary of the Apostles Creed. 15)

Over these rulers the Cross of Christ is a triumph, while to mankind it is an example of obedience.

The Cross of Christ, then, brought those who had wrong fully abused the authority which they had received into subjection to those who had before been in subjection to them. But to us, that is mankind, it teaches first of all to resist sin even unto death, and willingly to die for the sake of religion.

The actual triumph over the Prince of this world is stated thus, in language obviously based upon that of Gregory of Nyssa:

“For the object of that mystery of the Incarnation which we expounded just now was that the divine virtue of the Son of God— as though it were a hook concealed beneath the form and fashion of human flesh—might lure on the Prince of this world to a conflict, to whom offering His flesh as a bait, His divinity underneath might catch him and hold him fast with its hook, through the shedding of His immaculate blood. For He alone who knows no stain of sin hath destroyed the sins of all, of those, at least, who have marked the door-posts of their faith with His blood. As, therefore, if a fish seizes a baited hook, it not only does not take the bait off the hook, but is drawn out of the water to be itself food for others, so he who had the power of death seized the body of Jesus in death, not being aware of the hook of divinity enclosed within it, but having swallowed it he was caught forthwith, and the bars of hell being burst asunder, he was drawn forth as it were from the abyss to become food for others.” (Commentary of the Apostles Creed. 16)

It is not necessary to pursue this strange metaphor through its later forms. As it stands in Gregory of Nyssa and Rufinus it is perhaps suggested by Job 41:1, “Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?” which is actually quoted by Rufinus as a prophecy of the snaring of the devil by the Cross. The metaphor occurs again in connection with the same passage in Gregory the Great:

“He immediately announces the coming of the Lord’s Incarnation, saying, in his eyes He will take him as with a hook. Who can be ignorant that on a hook the bait is shown, the point is concealed ? For the bait tempts that the point may wound. Our Lord, therefore, when coming for the redemption of mankind, made as it were a kind of hook of Himself for the death of the devil.(Moral duties 33:7)

Sometimes the metaphor takes curious forms. It will suffice here to quote two. Gregory the Great compares the Cross to a net for catching birds.

“The Lord deceived him like a bird when in the Passion He displayed before him His only-begotten Son as bait, but hid the noose.”(Moral duties 33:15)

And the strangest variation of all occurs in one of the sermons of St. Augustine, who compares the Cross to a mouse-trap, baited with Christ’s blood.

“As our price He held out His Cross to him like a mouse-trap. and as bait set upon it His own blood.”(Sermon 130:2;134;5)

It is clear that these later statements of what originated as a Ransom theory cannot have been in any degree adequate to the real thought of the writers who made them. The metaphor is now little more than a metaphor, and is only of service in so far as it throws into clear relief the utter hostility of God to the powers of evil.

This metaphor became a regular part of the stock-in-trade of later writers. Leo the Great) for example, refers to it more than once, (Letter 104:7 and also sermon 22:4 and Anselm considered it of sufficient importance to criticize it in his *Cur Deus Homo?* (Book 1:7) This suggests to us that it was well known.

The rejection of the payment by Gregory of Nazianzus:

“To whom was that blood offered that was shed for us, and why was it shed? . . . We were detained in bondage by the evil one, sold under sin, and receiving pleasure in exchange for wickedness. Now, since a ransom belongs only to him who holds in bondage, I ask To whom was this offered, and for what cause? If to the evil one, fie upon the outrage I If the robber receives ransom not only from God, but a ransom which consists of God Himself, and has such an illustrious payment for his tyranny, a payment for whose sake it would have been right for him to have left us alone altogether. But if to the Father, I ask first how? For it was not by Him that we were held in bondage. And next, On what principle did the blood of His Only-begotten Son delight the Father, who would not receive even Isaac, when he was being offered by his Father, . . . ? Is it not evident that the Father accepts Him, but neither asked for Him nor demanded Him; but on account of the providential plan, and because humanity must be sanctified by the Humanity of God, that He might deliver us Himself, and overcome the tyrant, and draw us to Himself by the mediation of His Son, who also arranged this to the honor of the Father, whom it is manifest that He obeys in all things? So much we have said of Christ; let what is more be revered in silence.” (Oration 45:22)

Nothing could be more explicit than this repudiation of the Ransom theory as usually stated. Gregory is clear-sighted enough to see that that theory is invalidated by the conception of God which results from it, and is daring enough to reject it, even though he has no alternative to offer.

Other passages may be quoted to illustrate this mystical side of Gregory's thought:

"God became man and died that we might live: we have died with Him to be purified; we are raised from the dead with Him since we have died with Him; we are glorified with Him because we have risen with Him from the grave." (Oration 45:28)

And "He has ascended the Cross and taken me with Him, to nail my sin on it." (Oration 24:4)

A Brief summary of the Teaching of St Athanasius of Alexandria in his book on the Incarnation

Athanasius begins with the origin of the universe. It was by the Word of God that the world, including man, was made out of nothing. But to mankind He gave a further special privilege.

"He did not barely create man, as He did all the irrational creatures on the earth, but made them after His own image, giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of following the Word as his shadow, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness."(Chapter 3)

Athanasius says that God knew that man's will was free to fall He placed man in His own garden and gave them a law, "that if they transgressed and turned back, and became evil, they might know that they were incurring that corruption of death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and in corruption. . . By "dying ye shall die," what else could be meant than not dying merely, but also abiding ever in the corruption of death." (Chapter 4)

Athanasius is quite clear upon this distinction between physical and spiritual death, which is one of his most important contributions to the development of the doctrine. It is not so much that sin causes death as that it allows nature to take its normal finite course.

"For man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out of what is not; but by reason of his likeness to Him that is . . . he would stay his natural corruption, and remain incorrupt."(Chapter 4)

"But men, having despised and rejected the contemplation of God, and devised and contrived evil for themselves received the condemnation of death with which they had been threatened.

.....For transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they have had their being out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time." (Chapter 4)

So sin corrupted God's creation. It is note worthy that Athanasius hardly mentions the devil at all in this account, and that even then the responsibility is expressly laid upon man.

Men, having rejected things eternal and, by counsel of the devil, turned to the things of corruption, became the cause of their own corruption.(See, chapter 5)

It is “death” and not devil who is the main problem. It has a certain legal hold, and the law that gives it that hold cannot be evaded, because it was laid down by God. And so arose the great problem. Was God’s word to be broken, or was His creation, threatened by the corruption of death, to fail?

“For death, as I said above, gained from that time forth a legal hold over us: and it was impossible to evade the law, since it had been laid down by God because of the transgression, and the result was in truth at once monstrous and unseemly. For it were monstrous, firstly, that God, having spoken, should prove false. . . . For God would not be true, if, when He had said that we should die, man died not. Again, it were unseemly that creatures once made rational, and having partaken of the Word, should go to ruin, and turn again toward non-existence by the way of corruption. For it were not worthy of God’s goodness that the things he had made should waste away because of the deceit practiced on men by the devil.” (Chapter 6)

Justice must be considered, but, as Athanasius is careful to point out, this justice is in some part at least a justice towards God Himself.

What then was God to do? Would it suffice that He should demand repentance?

“But repentance would, firstly, fail to guard the just claim of God. For He would still be none the more true if men did not remain in the grasp of death; nor, secondly, does repentance call men back from what is their nature—it merely stays them from acts of sin.”(Chapter 7)

No writer of the early Church has grasped so clearly the twofold condition, that justice is to keep the law of God, and the necessity for a new nature in the sinner. This twofold condition could not be satisfied except by the Word as Creator. By coming in the flesh:

1. He could fulfill the law of death.
2. And as the author of life He could give new life to perishing man.

“And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature, because all were under penalty of the corruption of death He gave it over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father— doing this, moreover, of His loving-kindness, to the end that, firstly, all being held to have died in Him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lords body, and had no longer holding ground against men, His peers), and, secondly, whereas men had turned towards corruption, He might turn them again toward incorruption.”(Chapter 8 and Against the Arians 2:28)

In virtue of the oneness of the Word with us we in Him satisfy the demand of death. But further He is incorruptible, and therefore the body which he takes is incorruptible too, and so we in Him attain incorruption.

“.....that henceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the grace of the resurrection. Whence, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. For, being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by His death. And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the promise of the resurrection. For the actual corruption in death has no longer holding-ground against men, by reason of the Word, which by His one body has come to dwell among them.” (Chapter 9)

It is as when the king takes up his abode in the city. It was in the power of none other to turn the corruptible to incorruption except the Savior Himself that had at the beginning also made all things out of naught: and that none could create anew the likeness of God’s image for men, save the
No hostile force dare any longer make any attack upon
it. So now

“The whole conspiracy of evil against mankind is checked.” (Chapter 9)

In this well-known passage there is a combination of two quite distinct ideas as to the reason for the efficacy of Christ’s death: 1. In the first place it is the death of all, so that the sentence of the law against all is actually carried out.

2. And, secondly, His body, as the abode of the Word, is infinitely precious, and is thus a real “equivalent” for our life. Athanasius clearly says that it is not only the cross but also the resurrection as both accomplish continuing presence of the Word among men in the power not only of the Incarnation but of the Resurrection also, completing what the Cross began.

It was thus to Christ’s death and following resurrection that the Incarnation looked. In the next few chapters Athanasius goes on to show that Christ’s coming was fitting for other reasons also, and especially that the ignorance into which man’s sin had brought him might be enlightened by His teaching, by the presence among men of incarnate Wisdom, revealing the invisible through the things of sense.

A summary of is then given in chapter 20:

1. “It was in the power of none other to turn the corruptible to incorruption except the Savior Himself that had at the beginning also made all things out of naught: and that none could create anew the likeness of God’s image for men, save the Image of the Father.”

2. “and that none other could render the mortal immortal save our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the very life.”

3. “and that none other could teach men of the Father, and destroy the worship of idols, save the Word that orders all.” things and is alone the true only-begotten Son of the Father.

4. “But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for, as I have already said, it was owing that all should die, for which especial cause indeed He came among us: to this intent, after the proofs of His

Godhead from His works. He next offered up His sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding His temple to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass, and further to show Himself more powerful even than death, displaying His own body incorruptible, as first-fruits of the resurrection of all.”

5. “The body, then, as sharing the same nature with all, for it was a human body, though by an unparalleled miracle it was formed of a virgin only, yet, being mortal, was to die also, conformably to its peers. But by virtue of the union of the Word with it, it was no longer subject to corruption according to its own nature, but by reason of the Word that was come to dwell in it, it was placed out of the reach of corruption. And so it was that two marvels came to pass at once, that the death of all was accomplished in the Lord’s body, and that death and corruption were wholly done away by reason of the Word that was united with it. For there was need of death, and death must needs be suffered on behalf of all, that the debt owing from all might be paid. Whence, as I said before, the Word, since it was not possible for Him to die, as He was immortal, took to Himself a body such as could die, that He might offer it as His own in the stead of all, and, as suffering, through His union with it, on behalf of all, “Bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is the devil; and might deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”

Christ Made “SIN” in the Ancient Commentaries

Origen on 2 Cor 5 21 and related passages: Christ who knew no sin was made “sin,” Origen thinks, when Christ took upon himself the burden of our sins and their penalty, like the Man of Sorrows of the Fourth Servant Song (Is 53). More often, however, Origen sees in atoning Jesus God, the lamb sacrificed for our sins. Reflecting on Rom 8: 3, he states that Christ was made a “victim” (or sacrifice) for sin, “and that he was offered for the expiation of sins, all the Scriptures testify, mainly Paul, writing to the Hebrews, ‘this he did once for all in offering up himself’ (7: 27) and also, ‘he who has not spared even his own Son but has delivered him for us all’ (Rom 8:32). By this sacrifice of his flesh, which is called (sacrifice)

for sin,’ ‘he has condemned sin in the flesh’ (Rom 8 : 3), as the Apostle says elsewhere, that ‘he has appeared for the destruction of sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Heb 9 : 26); and the prophet says: ‘our sins he bore, our iniquities he carried’ (Is 53). ‘ For sin’ then (Rom 8: 3), that is, by the sacrifice of his flesh, in order that the justification of the Law might be fulfilled in us (Rom 8:3f). For by this sacrifice of the flesh, which was offered for sin, he condemned sin, that is, he expelled it and took it away.”
Commentary on Romans, the Latin translation by Rufinus, IV:1 on Rom 8:3.

Cyril of Alexandria

Paul then says of the Father: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (Cor 5 : 21) It is as if he said: he wanted him who had never sinned to suffer what the great sinners must suffer, in order to reveal us as just, we who have received faith in him; because he has borne the cross, "despising the shame"(Heb 12: 2); one dies for all, he who was worth as much as all of us (*ho panton antaxios*).

2 Cor 5:21, PG 74, 974

More meaningful perhaps is what follows in the same context. Christ has not sinned, explains Cyril, but he has been given up for our sins, for Scripture calls also "sin" the "victim (offered) for sin," as in Hosea 4: 8 "They feed on the 'sin' of my people, and are greedy for their guilt." This is apparently a reference to the sacrifice for sin which was eaten by the priests in the ancient temple, so "sin" = "offering for sin" is explicitly connected with 2 Cor 5: 21. Several decades previously the Latin Commentator Ambrosiaster of the Latin tradition had proposed a similar interpretation, with a reference to Isaiah 53.

Having quoted again Hosea 4: 8, Cyril comments in Letter 41 to Acacius

"According to the Scriptures then, Christ has been made a victim (*sphagion*) for our sins." Hence the very wise Paul writes: him who knew no sin God has made to be "sin", that is, God made him a victim for the sins of the world. (Is 53; 1 Pet 2:24; Rom 5: 10) "In fact the Word of God, good and merciful, was made flesh - man that is - like us who are under the yoke of sin; he has accepted our lot (Heb 2: 5) and has given his life in exchange (*antallagma*) for the life of all." PG 77,209 In an early writing Cyril links 2 Cor 5:21 and Rom 8:3, to conclude: "Christ was made 'sacrifice for sin' (*thuma huper hamartias*), 'for Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed'"(1 Cor 5:7). Then Cyril explains his statement by quoting Lev 6:25-30 (the ritual of the sin-offering) and asking: "Do you understand that Moses has commanded to immolate the 'sin,' that is, the 'sacrifice for sin'? This ram," he continues, "was a figure of Christ, who for our sake 'has been made sin' (2 Cor 5:21), was 'reckoned among the wicked' (Lk 22:37; Is 53:12), crucified with the robbers, and called 'curse': 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'" (Gal 3:13; Dt 21:23).

Commenting on Jn 1: 29, Cyril mentions that we were in Christ when he gave his life as a ransom for all; "As we were in many sins, subject therefore to death and corruption, the Father gave up his Son as a ransom (*antilutron*) for us. One for all, because all are in him and he is better than all; who, because of us and for our sake (*huper*) died and rose again."

On John, PG 73, 103.

Christ did not become a sinner in the dialogue with a Nestorian

B is the one who asks

A is Cyril of Alexandria

B: Well, they say that the divine Paul writes about the Son as if he had become a curse and sin, for he says: "He who did not know sin, became sin for our sakes" (2 Cor 5:21); and again: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law when he became a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). But they would maintain that this does not mean he really became a curse and sin, rather that here the Holy Scripture clearly means something else. In exactly the same way, they argue, we should understand the phrase: "And the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14).

A. It is true that he has introduced this opinion that just as one says, "He became curse and sin," so in the same way did he "become flesh," and this notion holds a predominant place among his followers.

B. What do you mean? For when one says of him: "He who knew not sin became sin for our sakes and redeemed from the curse of the Law those who were under the law, becoming a curse for their sakes," then how could anyone doubt that this clearly refers to the time when the Only Begotten was incarnate and made man?

A. Well, when one speaks of the incarnation, one also implies all those other things that are applied according to the plan of salvation, brought to bear on the one who willingly suffered this "emptying out," as for example hunger and tiredness. How could he who has all power ever have been tired, or how could one ever say that he who is the food and life of all beings was ever hungry, if he had not appropriated to himself a body which by its very nature was subject to hunger and tiredness? In the same way one could never have counted him among the lawless (for this is what it means to say that he became sin) nor would he ever have become a curse, enduring the cross for our sakes, if he had not become flesh, that is incarnated and made man for our sake, submitting to a birth like our own, although it was from a holy virgin.

B. I agree. Your opinion is right.

A. Moreover it is foolishness to think or to affirm that the Word became flesh in just the same way as he became curse and sin.

B. Tell me why.

A. Did he not become accursed in order to lift the curse? And did not the Father make him sin in order that he might bring sin to an end?

B. They too would agree with this.

A. In that case, if it is true that the Word became flesh in exactly the same way that he became curse and sin, which is how they understand it, then surely he must have become flesh for the suppression of flesh? But how would this serve to exhibit the incorruptibility and imperishability of flesh which he achieved, first of all in his own body? For he did not allow it to remain mortal and subject to corruption, thus allowing the penalty of Adam's transgression to continue to pass on to us, but since it was his own and personal flesh, that of the incorruptible God, he set it beyond death and corruption.

B. How well you put it.

A. Somewhere Holy Scripture says that the first man, that is Adam, was made "a life-giving soul," while the last man, that is Christ, was made "a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45). Should we say, therefore, that as he became curse and sin for the destruction of that curse and sin, just so he became a life-giving spirit in order to suppress the state of being a living soul? These people nonsensically twist the significance of the word "became" and then maintain that he became flesh in the same way as he became curse and sin. This is the way that the incarnation, or rather the immanence of the Word, is destroyed. For if this approach is taken as the truth, then the whole sense of the mystery is lost to us; for Christ is not born, neither did he die, neither was he raised, in accordance with the scriptures. In this event, where is the faith? [Where is] that "word of faith which we proclaim" (Rom 10:8)? How did God raise him from the dead if he did not die? And how could he die if he had not been born according to the flesh? And "if Christ is not raised" (1 Cor 15:17) then where is that resuscitation of the dead which inspired in the saints the hope of everlasting life? And where is that revitalization of human bodies which is achieved by participation in his holy flesh and blood?

B. This is why we affirm that the Word became flesh in regard to that generation from a woman, according to the flesh, which is said to have taken place in the last times of this present age, even though, as God, he exists before every age.

A. Exactly so. For it was in this way that he "became like us in all things except sin" (Heb 4:15). The all-wise Paul bears witness to this when he says: "Since the children have a common share in flesh and blood he himself equally participated in these things so that through his death he could reduce to powerlessness the one who held the dominion of death, that is the devil, and that he might liberate those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For he did not take his descent from the angels, rather from Abraham's line, and thus it was fitting that he should be made like his brethren in all things" (Heb 2:14-17). And this likeness in all things has as a kind of beginning, or as the inception of the affair, his birth from a woman; his revelation in the flesh, even though in terms of his own nature he is invisible; his abasement in the human condition for the economy of salvation, even though he has the transcendent name; his humbling to manhood, even though he is raised high above the Thrones; and his acceptance of servile limitations, even though he is by nature the Lord (Phil 2:6). And all this because "The Word was God" (Jn 1:1).

B. How right are your thoughts on this matter! Nonetheless you should know that in their opinion it is inadmissible and even unfitting either to think or to affirm that the Word who was ineffably and incomprehensibly born from God the Father had to undergo a second birth from a woman. They maintain that it was enough for him to have been born from the Father once only, in a manner fitting to God.

A. In that case they are finding fault with the Son, and saying that his decision to undergo a voluntary self-emptying for our sake was misguided. Surely in this way the great and venerable mystery of piety is frustrated and rendered futile, for are they not implying that the Only Begotten's wonderful economy in the flesh served no purpose for the inhabitants of earth? The word of truth does not allow the babblings of such people as this to gain the upper hand; on the contrary, it shows them up for their most stupid ramblings wholly devoid of any knowledge of the mystery of Christ. God the Father engendered the Son from himself in one single act of generation, but it was his good pleasure to save the whole human race in him by means of the incarnation, or rather the immanence, which, of course, evidently and entirely depended on birth from a woman; and for this end, that by the likeness that the Word born from God had with us, the law of sin in the members of our flesh could be condemned, and so that in the likeness of the death of the one who knew not death, death might be destroyed. As it is said: "If we have been conjoined with him in the likeness of his death, so also shall we be in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom 6:5.). It follows, therefore, that He Who Is, The One Who Exists, is necessarily born of the flesh, taking all that is ours into himself so that all is born of the flesh, that, corruptible and perishing beings, might rest in him. In short, he took what was ours to be his very own so that we might have all that was his. "He was rich but he became poor for our sake, so that we might be enriched by his poverty" (2 Cor 8:9). When they say that the Word of God did not become flesh, or rather did not undergo birth from a woman according to the flesh, they bankrupt the plan of salvation, for if he who was rich did not impoverish himself, abasing himself to our condition out of tender love, then we have not gained his riches but are still in our poverty, still enslaved by sin and death, because the Word becoming flesh is the undoing and the abolition of all that fell upon human nature as our curse and punishment. If they so pull up the root of our salvation, and dislodge the cornerstone of our hope, how will anything else be left standing? As I have said, if the Word has not become flesh, then neither has the dominion of death been overthrown, and in no way has sin been abolished, and we are still held captive in the transgressions of the first man, Adam, deprived of any return to a better condition; a return which I would say has been gained by Christ the Savior of us all.

On the Unity of Christ, SVS 1995.

Gregory Nazianzus

Gregory, called Gregory the Theologian, wrote to Amphilochius, bishop of Iconium,: “Do, then, the greater thing, by celebrating the liturgy, and loose the great mass of my sins when you lay hold of the Sacrifice of the Resurrection (*tēs anastasimou thusia*). Most reverend friend, cease not both to pray and to plead for me when you draw down the Word by your word, when with a bloodless cutting you sever the Body and the Blood of the Lord, using your voice for the lance.”

Letter 171, PG 280

Elsewhere he calls the Eucharist, “the external sacrifice, the antitype of the great mysteries.” Or 2 PG 35,497

“What an example of humility Christ gave us!” exclaims Gregory, “he who was without sin accepted to be called sin itself (*auto amartia*), curse itself (*autokatara*).” It is improbable that Gregory really read in Paul that Christ personified “sin” or “curse” (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13), since such a proposition appears unacceptable. In fact, Gregory insists again: “Christ did not become ‘sin,’ but he was called so, setting for us an example of humility.” In another oration he proposes a fuller explanation.

“You must connect with this your subordination of the Son to the Father.” 1 Cor 15:25. “Why? you will say. Is he not subordinate now? If he is God, does he need at all to be made subordinate to God? You are talking as if he were a bandit or an opponent of God!

No—look at this fact: the one who releases me from the curse was called ‘curse’ (Gal 3: 13) because of me; the one who takes away the world’s sin was called ‘sin’ (1 Cor 5:21) and is made a new Adam to replace the old. In just this way too, as head of the whole body, he appropriates my want of submission. So long as I am an insubordinate rebel with passions which deny God, my lack of submission will be referred to Christ. But when all things are put in submission under him, when transformed they obediently acknowledge him, then will Christ bring me forward, I who have been saved, and make his subjection complete. In my view Christ’s submission is the fulfillment of the Father’s will. As we said before, the Son actively produces submission to the Father, while the Father wills and approves submission to the Son. Thus it is that he effects our submission, makes it his own and presents it to God. ‘My God, my God, look upon me, why have you forsaken me?’ (Ps 21:1 LXX and Matt 27 46) seems to me to have the same kind of meaning. He is not forsaken either by the Father or, as some think, by his own Godhead, which shrank in fear from suffering, abandoning the sufferer. Who applies that argument either to his birth in this world in the first place or to his ascent of the cross? No, in himself, as I have said, he expresses our condition. We had once been the forsaken and disregarded; then we were accepted and now are saved by the sufferings of the impassible. He made our thoughtlessness

and waywardness his own, just as the psalm, in its subsequent course, says the Twenty-First Psalm clearly refers to Christ.”

Or 30:5 which is the 4th theological Oration, PG 36,109, see new translation 2002 SVS

Theodoret of Cyrus

He goes on to add to the aforesaid the dishonor of the passion. After all, the one who did not know sin he made sin for our sake so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (5:.21): though free of sin he underwent the death of sinners in order to undo people’s sin, and bearing the name that we have he gave us the name what he himself is — that is, he regaled us with the riches of righteousness.

Commentary on the Letters of Paul, Vol, 1, 274

Edited by R Hill 2001