

The Necessity of Christ's Death

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Personal Note: Dear Tomas, feel free to go straight to the last two paragraphs.

My dear friend Jan Antonsson called me recently and asked if I'd be willing to contribute some thoughts to a friendly dialogue she was having by e-mail with a gentleman she calls Tomas (not his real name). Having previously received a "snail-mail" copy of what had transpired thus far, I found myself already interested in putting in my "two cents" worth. (It takes a powerful intervention of God to keep me out of a juicy theological discussion). So some thoughts had been percolating in my mind even before Jan called.

As I understand it, Jan had posted an essay entitled, "Saved by His Life," on hers and husband Lenny's web page., "The Glory Road, A Kingdom Highway." In the essay, she addressed a question that she had heard asked on more than one occasion, the question being: "If all men are going to be saved, why did Christ have to die?" . Although the question, as it stands, is non-sensical, rather like asking, "If the day is going to dawn tomorrow morning, why should the sun bother to rise?" Knowing Jan, I'm sure she treated it graciously. In the course of things, Tomas E-mailed a friendly challenge saying that her answer to the question was a presentation of the Biblical assertion that Christ's death was necessary for the salvation of all men, but did not actually answer the question, "Why was it necessary?" to his satisfaction.

Tomas' challenge seemed to be in the spirit of honest inquiry and from a precise and analytical mind. I like to believe that God delights in such a question and that there was in it an element of child-likeness that Jesus said was necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven. Before I dive into this, I think some things need clarifying. the original question stated, "If all men are going to be saved, etc..." and then Tomas, I believe unintentionally changed it to, "If all men are saved, etc..." Either form of the question is legitimate and can be answered along the same lines since Christ has already reconciled us to God by His death and saved us by His resurrection life, but we

are not all knowingly, believingly and experientially participating in that salvation yet. (Please be patient Tomas, if you haven't already skipped to the last two paragraphs, I am getting to the "Why.") Also, I must say that the issue of salvation is not one of "going to heaven" (an expression nowhere to be found in scripture) but, rather, the issue is being made alive after being "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) so that we can live in communion with God, whether before or after the death of the physical body.

One more clarification is needed: Christian Universalists believe that all men must face the "Krisis" (Greek for judgment, from which we get our word "crisis") of encountering Him who will settle for nothing less than our salvation. That crisis must be faced on this side of life or the other and always involves that which is symbolically portrayed as "the lake of fire and brimstone," (Brimstone is translated in the NIV as sulfur) (Rev. 19:20; 20:14-15) where our false persona and all that pertains to death and Hades are consumed and refined out of us, in order to free us to be what we are in Christ. God, in his love is that "Consuming fire." (Heb. 12:29).

Now, let's look at the necessity of the sacrificial death of Christ that meets every need in man to be reconciled to God. Simply stated, Christ had to die because we were dead; and we were dead because we were appointed to die; (Heb. 9:27)>. and we were appointed to die because paradoxically, our ultimate destiny is life and life abundant. The very life of God is to be our life, and only the experience of death can prepare us for this life. The extremity of need, which is death, is the only worthy complement to the bounty of His life. Death is a spiritual vacuum that, when exposed to the life of Christ, whose life is perfect union with God, causes us to fill our lungs like a man underwater who has run out of air and breaks the surface gasping for breath. Death is the compression of the human spirit like the compression of the bulb on a syringe, the result being that when the compression is released, we suck in the water of life. Christ was named Emmanuel (God with us) and He joined us in our death that we might join Him in His life. He was subjected to death so that in the flesh, as one of us and as our forerunner, the firstfruits (I Cor. 15:20,23) of all mankind, He would be "raised from the dead by the glory of the Father [so that] we too may live a new life." (Rom. 6:4). The last enemy, Death is defeated by being forced to be an instrument for life, and then it is vanquished forever.

Death is not the result of the abuse of man's free will. God planned for it to be the temporal, all-pervasive condition of humanity to prepare us to experience His life in all its fulness. Nothing but sin and death can bring out the best in God. They bring out a quality of His love which reveals the passion in God to be with us, even though it means he became flesh in order to participate in the slime pits of our human condition. So Jesus, Immanuel, joined us and died on the cross bearing spiritually, soulically and physically our sin and all its consequence. Without sin and death, the love of God would be experienced as merely benign, but when that love comes to us bearing our sin and death and all the effects on spirit, soul and body, it is revealed in all its depth, brilliance and fire.

We had to be lured by the temptation to be independently self-sufficient like we were led to believe God was; tempted to be gods who control their own destinies. We didn't know that not even God is self-sufficient in that mode. He is relational by nature. He is the Father/Mother/Son/Daughter God and He draws His sufficiency from His relational being. We have to experience that which is alien to our nature (independence and separation) before we can ever assimilate that which is native to us (dependence and union). This union is to be found in the Spirit of God. (Gal. 2:20). So we say with St. Paul "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection from among the dead." (Phil. 3: 10-11).

Sorry Tomas, 25 words or less just wouldn't do it. I stand trembling before God in my inability to describe such majesty.

Stay tuned for future serious, seminal samplings.

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