

## Paul: The Nature of Christ

(Philippians 2:5–11 NRSV) Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, {6} who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, {7} but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, {8} he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. {9} Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, {10} so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, {11} and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Who did Paul understand Jesus to be?

The answer is rather easy – but understanding just what he meant by his answer is very difficult.

We need begin our examination before Saul became Paul → before he became a follower of the faith of Jesus.

The first undisputed ruler of the Roman Empire was born Gaius Octavius Thurinus and was adopted by his uncle, Julius Caesar.

After Caesar's death in 44BCE – Octavian, as he was then known, ruled with two other military leaders until ambition drove the Triumvirate apart in 31 BCE

Octavian was the last man standing after the death of Marc Antony

On January 16, 27 BC Octavian became the sole and first ruler of what became the Roman Empire and he ruled until his death on August 19<sup>th</sup>, 14 CE

With his consolidation of power Octavian once again changed his name, this time to: Caesar Augustus.

Does anybody know what Augustus means in Latin → Divine

A number of other titles were given to Caesar Augustus.

These other titles that were associated with Augustus before Jesus was even born include: Son of God, God from God, Lord, Liberator, Redeemer and even Savior of the World → not just Italy or the Mediterranean mind you – but of the entire world!

Other words were also associated with Augustus include – words like “justice” and “peace,” “epiphany” and “gospel,” “grace” and “salvation”. Even “sin” and “atonement” were connected to him.

All of these titles and assertions were associated to Augustus and were a part of Roman imperial theology long before they appeared in Paul’s theology and became inexorable linked to Jesus.

Which leaves a HUGE question: What exactly is the difference between Caesar and Christ?

Borg and Crossan in their newest book: The First Paul pose this question:

How was it even possible – let alone credible – that the exact same terms and titles were taken by Christians from Caesar the Augustus on the Palatine Hill in Rome and given to Jesus the Christ on the Nazareth ridge in Galilee – or, even worse, to the “King of the Jews” on a Roman cross in Jerusalem?

What did Paul and his communities mean when they denied those terms and titles to Caesar and transferred them to Christ?

Was it a joke?

Or was it high treason?

It is clear from reading Paul’s letter that he was saying that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not → but what does that mean?

Our scripture this morning tells us some important things about Jesus.

The scripture comes from the letter to the church at Philippi.

Philippi is a city in northern Greece and it was the first city in Europe that Paul began a Christian community at.

Compared to his other letters there is no hint at all that there was any difficulties or controversies that Paul had with this community.

The letter is filled with affection.

While this was not the last letter that Paul wrote, many scholars call this his farewell letter because he seems to have understood that he might never again be able to communicate to this community that he loved so much.

Paul wrote the letter from prison and seems to recognize that his imprisonment very well may end in his death.

We are going to look at this letter some more in two weeks when we conclude this series by looking at the life in Christ that Paul is calling all of us to live.

This morning we are looking at a section of the letter that became perhaps the first hymn of the emerging Christian community.

It is perhaps the best distillation of the theology of the authentic Paul. In verses 1–4 he talks about what life “in Christ” is to be like and in verses 6–11 he emphasizes the two things that we want to look at today: “Christ crucified” and “Jesus Christ is Lord”

Let’s look at those two important concepts because they define how Paul understood the nature of Christ.

(Philippians 2:7b–8 NRSV) And being found in human form, {8} he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

For Paul, the cross and resurrection go hand in hand

Resurrection gives meaning to the cross

And

The Cross gives meaning to resurrection

You cannot talk about one without the other → in Paul’s understanding

“Christ Crucified” is not simply a statement about HOW Jesus died → to Paul it had meaning.

To Paul it had SAVING significance.

To put it bluntly → to Paul it is our SALVATION

There is one slight problem, however.

We tend to understand that world “salvation” one way while Paul understood it in another way.

Paul believed in the afterlife

But for Paul → Salvation → being saved was about life before death

It was about what was already happening.

Paul would say that we are being saved NOW!

(2 Corinthians 5:15) Jesus died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

(Romans 5:8) while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Unfortunately we often misunderstand what Paul means.

One mistake we make is in thinking that that “Christ Crucified” means that we exclude talking about what Jesus was like – what he taught – what he stood for. For Paul, “Christ crucified” always included his actually life.

The second mistake is much bigger and more endemic in our culture today.

For many centuries, the death of Jesus has been understood by most Christians as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin – using the theological term, as a substitutionary atonement.

This is how most of us grew up understanding the death of Jesus

- ❖ Jesus died for our sins
- ❖ Jesus is the sacrifice for sin
- ❖ Jesus died in our place
- ❖ Jesus is the payment for sin

In this understanding, the notion of punishment, substitution and payment are central.

We deserve to be punished by God for our sins, and Jesus was the substitute who paid the price.

I don't know if you understand where this concept came from – not from Paul, as I will talk about in a minute, but rather it is first found in a treatise written in 1097 by Anselm of Canterbury. The title in English is “Why Did God Become Human?”

Listen to Anselm, himself:

Because of our disobedience to God, we are all sinners.

Forgiveness requires that compensation be made. For God to forgive sin without payment would imply that sin doesn't matter very much to God. The price of our disobedience must be paid.

But our debt to God as an infinite being is infinite. Therefore, no one who is finite can pay the price. Only an infinite being can pay an infinite debt. Thus the necessity of Jesus. As the incarnation of God, he is that infinite being whose death as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin pays the price of our disobedience. Therefore we can be forgiven.

If you saw Mel Gibson's 2004 movie *The Passion of the Christ*, you saw a very graphic portrayal of substitutionary atonement.

But this was not what Paul meant when he talked about “Christ Crucified.” Substitutionary sacrifice was foreign to his mind.

In order to understand Paul we need to keep in mind that death and resurrection go together → each gives meaning to the other.

For Paul, it was not about substitutionary atonement.

The word atonement literally refers to the reconciliation of God and humankind.

I like the play on words  
At-One-Ment

The question is – how does at-one-ment → how does atonement occur?

For Paul the answer to that question is through a number of means.

We must remember that Paul did not see Jesus dying as part of some master plan of God.

Jesus was crucified!

And crucifixion was a Roman way of death

Crucifixion happened to only two groups of people during Roman rule: those who challenged Roman imperial rule (violently or nonviolently) and chronically defiant slaves.

Crucifixion was a very public, torturous and slow way of death and in it Rome gave the message → “Don’t you dare defy Rome – or this will happen to YOU”

To proclaim “Christ Crucified” was to shout that Jesus was an anti-imperial figure.

The EMPIRE killed Jesus

But it wasn’t the end

Rome said NO to Jesus – but through the resurrection, God said YES  
Paul was once again saying Jesus is Lord – and Caesar is not!

But also for Paul – “Christ Crucified” and risen revealed the way to new life “in Christ.”

What Paul is suggesting is that we participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we die and rise with him → and thereby enter into a new life in Christ.

This does not mean that Jesus died for us as a substitute and we no longer need to → instead it is metaphorical language that radical internal change must take place inside of each of us if we are to LIVE IN CHRIST.

This is exactly what happened to Saul – when he was resurrected as Paul.

The old Saul died and a new Paul was born.

(Galatians 2:19–20 NRSV) I have been crucified with Christ; {20} and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.

We might want to call this an identity transplant

Paul's old identity was replaced by a new identity "in Christ."

This is what we will focus on in two weeks – how we can experience this kind of identity – or spiritual transplant.

A third understanding of "Christ Crucified" for Paul is that in it he sees the depth of God's love and Christ's love for us.

For Paul – God and Christ love are one and the same for -- Paul saw Jesus as the decisive revelation of God.

Jesus reveals what God is like.

In Jesus we see what can be seen of God in a human life.

Jesus life shows us the nature or will of God.

And for Paul, the answer is that the death of Jesus --- Christ Crucified --- reveals God's character or nature as love and God's will or passion as the world.

Again --- let me be clear – this is not about seeing Jesus as a substitution or dying for others as a payment, or sacrifice for sin.

Dying for someone does not mean dying in their place.  
It means dying for their sake or benefit.

Let me try to illustrate:

Archbishop Oscar Romero was an advocate for the poor and a critic of the ruling class in El Salvador. In March of 1980, he was killed by an assassin who had been sent by the powerful. Oscar Romero died because of his love for the Salvadorian people. In this sense, he died FOR them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed on April 9, 1945 just a month before the end of WWII, because of his involvement in a plot to overthrow Hitler. He died because of his love for the German people and those who were being victimized.

Martin Luther King Jr. was killed because of his love for his people and his passion for a different kind of world.

The root of the word sacrifice is in Latin “to make sacred”

These martyrs died because of their love for their people and their passion for a different kind of world for those same people.

“When Paul speaks of Jesus dying for others and as a sacrifice, he uses this language to refer to the depth of God’s love and Christ’s love for us. Paul’s claim is that God’s character and passion are revealed in Jesus. What we see in Jesus reveals what God is like.”

Paul sees that Jesus love and passion for humankind is what led to the cross. For Jesus wanted for all of us a new world – not a world dominated by some.

For Paul the cross is a revelation of divine generosity – grace that is available to everyone!

Hopefully you can now see why sacrificial atonement is bad theology.

What does it say about the nature or character of God?  
About what God is like?

At its heart God is a lawgiver and judge who demands payment for sin.  
It emphasizes God’s wrath.  
God’s wrath needs to be appeased, placated, satisfied.  
God required that Jesus die!

Paul saw God’s character and nature differently

The Cross reveals God’s passion for the world – a world different from the one Jesus (and we) live in.

God desires us to experience internal transformation – the path to becoming “in Christ” by dying and rising with him

And God’s generosity is that this love is for all!

Finally, for Paul the resurrection was the confirmation that this was all possible.

Jesus is Lord --- not Caesar and God’s great transformation of the world – God’s great cleanup was underway and we are invited to participate in it.