

The Original Christian Gospel

It may surprise you to hear that the original Gospel—the Good News preached by Jesus Christ and His disciples—is quite different from what is prominently presented today by the vast majority of Christians in America. For many Christians, hearing this original Gospel will involve a major paradigm shift—a radical change in assumptions about God and about salvation, which is at the core of the Gospel.

The original Christian Gospel begins with—love.

John 3:16, 17 says: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” Furthermore, the Apostle John says, “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

What Is God’s Love?

The original Christian understanding of love and salvation are shockingly different from what we are often presented with in non-Orthodox Christian churches.

First of all: God *is* love—even *before* He creates; His love is not just an expression of His will towards creation, or simply an attribute, but rather God loves by nature—because of who He is. Love is intrinsic to His Unknowable Essence.

But how is it that One God, who is perfect and lacks nothing, can *be* love, when love necessitates a relation to another? The issue of *whom* God loves before the creation of the universe is resolved in Trinitarian Orthodoxy. God is understood to be not an absolute unity or monad, but a composite unity, a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each Person of the Blessed Trinity is fully divine and for eternity loves the other two. The Trinity is an eternal union of love, existing before the creation of the universe.

This understanding of what God's love is differs from the predominant non-Orthodox Christian understanding, which tends to see love as a *created* attribute of God and not essential to His Being or essence. For the Orthodox biblical Christian, God's love is uncreated. Love, more than any other quality—more than justice, mercy, knowledge, or power—uniquely communicates to us something essential of who God is.

God's love is manifest in His creating the universe, and in so doing condescending to make creatures that have authentic free will—and can even choose to resist His love. To create a universe that is capable of resisting His will, God had, to some degree, to withdraw His omnipotence—that is, to forbear from forcing His control over His creatures. This kind of distancing provides room in which His creatures, having free will, are able to respond to His love without being forced. Why is this essential? Forced love—which some Calvinist Protestants call *irresistible grace*—is not true love, because it is not given freely.

Is God Humble?

Is God's condescension in love—in creating the universe and in His Incarnation as a man, Jesus Christ—the same as humility?

Here is the heart and crux of the original Gospel. Because God is love and loves His Creation, to which He imparts authentic free will, and condescends even further by becoming incarnate as a man, Jesus Christ, God's love is a manifestation of humility. That is: God is humble!

The renowned author and lecturer Metropolitan Kallistos (Timothy) Ware expresses it this way: “It is as natural for God to be humble as it is to be Almighty.” He also says: “God is as humble as He is Almighty.” That is, God is *both* almighty and humble.

We have often heard that Jesus is humble. But we have always understood that it was only in His humanity that He was humble, not in His Divinity. The original Gospel and Metropolitan Kallistos are saying that God Himself—the Divine Creator of heaven and earth—is humble.

On one hand, God is the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Creator of the universe, eternal and in need of nothing. On the other hand, God is humble! Not only God in Christ, but also the other two Persons of the Trinity—God the Father Himself, and the Holy Spirit of God.

The Scriptures speak of God’s humility:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery [or something to be held onto] to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation [lit. “emptied Himself”], taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, *He humbled Himself* and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)

Jesus said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and *humble* [lowly] in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28, 29). In fact, Christ’s Passion—His last week prior to His Crucifixion—is called in the Orthodox Church His “extreme humility.”

Christ’s humility was viewed by the original Orthodox Christians not as moral weakness but as moral strength. God’s humility is not an expression of fault or inadequacy, but a manifestation of perfection. That is, because God is perfect love, He is humble.

God does not cease being humble after the Resurrection, as if humility has no eternal reality—as if it were merely a created, utilitarian, temporary quality needed to save man. Rather, God never ceases to be humble because He loves, nurtures, and sustains us without end. And this is one reason the original Christians believed that Jesus’ glorified human body retained its wounds after the Resurrection (as Thomas saw): because they are an everlasting visual reminder of His condescending humility.

That the Christian God is a God of love, who is love and manifests His love in humility, has implications for us that are staggering. This means, to begin with, that because God loves, we should love; because God is humble, we should be humble. It also means that God unconditionally loves all—the just and the unjust, now and forever—because it is only in God’s nature to love, not to hate.

Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies . . . that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:43–45). Jesus is telling us that we should love our enemies because God the Father loves His enemies. Indeed, even from the Cross the crucified God-Man prayed for His enemies, saying, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do!” And in loving our enemies, Jesus says that we become sons of our Father in heaven—that is, we become godlike (truly children of God). Then the concluding verse says, “for He (i.e. the Father) makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good.”

This understanding of the sun shining upon all alike was used by the early Christians as an example of the unconditional nature of God’s love. That is, the sun always shines light—never darkness. So then where does the darkness come from? The darkness we experience is not due to the sun withholding light; it is only due to our hiding from the light, our closing our eyes to the light. Our darkness is only due to our own blindness.

St. Anthony the Great of Egypt, founder of monasticism (fourth century), states this perfectly: “To say that God turns away from the wicked is like saying that the sun hides itself from the blind.”

Then what is the cause of suffering for those who reject the light of God in their lives? Their suffering is due to the impossibility of escaping light. The light and love of God is omnipresent; it pervades the universe, much like the Divine Light of God in the Burning Bush—the bush burned but was not consumed. And this is why David says in Psalm 139, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in hell, behold—You are there.”

This all-pervasive love of God was the main theme of the original Gospel. But in time, the understanding of this love became greatly distorted and perverted by unbiblical, un-Orthodox teachings.

Let us examine one such distortion of the original Gospel that pervades Roman Catholicism and Protestantism: the view that death is from God. This mistaken view is an outgrowth of the false doctrine prevalent among non-Orthodox churches that the guilt of Adam’s sin committed at the Fall is passed on from generation to generation to all mankind. This is called “the inheritance of the guilt of original sin.” This is a non-biblical teaching that neither the Jews nor the Orthodox Christian Church have ever held, either in biblical times or today.

Is Death from God?

The Scriptures say, “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Genesis 2:16, 17). Regardless of how the passage is interpreted—whether literally or figuratively—all interpretations assume that man turned away from God, and as a result fell from a position of intimacy with God to a state of confusion and death. This is called “The Fall.” Sin, mortality, and death, both spiritual and physical, were the direct result of man’s disobedience.

So far so good—until the next major assumption is made: that death was the direct result of a punitive sentence pronounced by God. That is, God made a law—“you shall not eat of the fruit, for if you do you will surely die”—and when Adam and Eve broke that law, death resulted from God’s punitive proclamation. That is, God Himself then made them mortal—made them die. The action and resultant punishment are understood as being of a juridical nature. In this non-Orthodox understanding of the Fall, God had no choice but to declare that Adam and Eve would die. The punitive action was demanded by a necessity to which God Himself was bound—the necessity of being just.

In contrast to this juridical view of the Fall, the biblical Orthodox view holds that when God told Adam he would die if he ate the forbidden fruit, it was a simple statement of fact. The Lord was essentially saying, “If you turn from Me, the only source of life, then death will be the outcome.” God did not say, “I will kill you,” but rather, “you will die.” Because God alone has life in Himself and is the source of all life, only life can come from Him. In turning away from God, the fountain of life, man turned towards death.

In eating of the fruit, Adam and Eve ceased desiring God. They ceased looking to Him for their sustenance, for their food, and instead ate a fruit, which represents the world. In eating the world, they looked to creation itself for sustenance instead of to God. So in this act, the first parents sought to exclude God from their lives and to live autonomously—independently of God.

In Orthodoxy, sin is much more than a moral shortcoming or the failure to live up to some external code of behavior. Sin is *the failure to realize life as love and communion*, the failure to be whole, healthy, complete. It is the rejection of personal communion with God. Sin is restricting ourselves, isolating ourselves in order to live autonomous, independent, and self-sufficient lives. In a sense, sin is an obsessive *self-love*. For the Orthodox, the absolute autonomy of the individual is sin, indeed *the* “original sin.” Our offense against God is not that we have “offended His honor,” but rather that we have turned from life itself. Sin is the denial of God’s image in man and of God Himself. It is self-destructive. God hates sin, not because of what it does to Him, but because of what it does to us.

The difference between these two views cannot be overstated: The non-Orthodox view (which is commonly accepted by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike) stresses that death is God’s direct retributive judgment on man for having broken His law. The Orthodox view stresses that death is a self-imposed condition resulting from man’s turning away from God, who alone is the source of life. In that sense it is a spiritual and physical suicide.

The differences between these two views are crucial, for if I believe that death is somehow from God, I would be tempted to view God Himself as an obstacle that must be overcome if I am to gain salvation. Clearly, the goal then comes to be the appeasement of an angry God. Sadly, some Christians even view the Trinity this way: God the Father is seen as a totally unapproachable Old Testament figure with a long, flowing white beard—fierce, harsh, vindictive, and unsympathetic. He is the God of justice and judgment, like the Viking god Odin who sent bolts of lightning upon puny, frail, mortal humans.

In contrast, Jesus Christ is viewed as the loving, compassionate, gentle Lamb of God who as Son seeks to appease His angry Father. (The Holy Spirit is the odd Person out, so He is often ignored.)

In the original Orthodox understanding of the Gospel, the issue is not legal or juridical, but what in theological terms is called ontological, that is, dealing with the essence of who we are—the interior state of our heart.

The Orthodox refusal to view the Fall and sin as a primarily juridical issue has a most profound impact on all further theological developments. Because death is not viewed as a juridical issue, neither is its cure. In Protestantism, salvation essentially means to flee from hell and go to heaven. In Orthodoxy, salvation means being saved not from God's wrath, but from the power, the control, the sting and the poison of the three great enemies: sin, death, and the devil.

How Fallen ARE We?

The answer to this question depends on two things: What was the state *from which* we fell, and *to what state* have we fallen? In non-Orthodox Christianity, *both* the height from which we fell and the depth to which we have fallen are held to be much greater than in Orthodoxy. The extreme form of this view, Calvinism, sees man as having fallen from a state of absolute perfection to a state of total depravity, retaining no ability within himself to return to God.

In his book, *The Orthodox Church*, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says the Orthodox “cannot agree with Augustine, when he writes that humans are under ‘a harsh necessity’ of committing sin, and that ‘human nature was overcome by the fault into which it fell, and so *came to lack freedom.*’” The Orthodox position is that “the image of God is distorted by sin, but never destroyed.” He continues, “in the words of a hymn sung by Orthodox at the Funeral Service: ‘I am the image of Your inexpressible glory, even though I bear the wounds of sin.’ And because we still retain the image of God, we still retain free will, although sin restricts its scope. Even after the fall, God ‘takes not away from man the power to will—to will to obey or not to obey Him.’”

According to Irenaeus (second century), man's original state was one of spiritual childhood, innocence, and simplicity joined to moral purity. Man was to gain the divine likeness through a slow process. He does not view man's fall as a full-blown rebellion, but rather as an impulsive desire to grow before his time.

The metaphor of the damaged eye is helpful in understanding the difference between the two views. The total depravity model views the Fall as having destroyed man's spiritual eye so that he is no longer capable of having any spiritual sight whatsoever. His only hope is to be given a completely new eye from God. In Calvinism, God unilaterally decides who is given a new eye and who is not. This is called double predestination, because God alone decides (predestines) who will be given irresistible grace and go to heaven, and who will not be given faith and will go to hell.

In contrast, in the original biblical Orthodox view, the Fall damaged the spiritual eye but did not totally destroy it. We are not totally blind. Why? Because having been created in the image and likeness of God, we still retain free will and some degree of desire for God.

How a problem is defined determines what type of solution is sought. That is, if we have a legal/juridical problem, we go to a lawyer. If, on the other hand, we have a medical problem, we go to a physician. Very early in Western Christianity, the faulty view of our fallenness as primarily a juridical issue resulted in proposed solutions that the Eastern Orthodox Church never felt a need for.

The view of death as a curse or judgment from God resulted in the development among the non-Orthodox of various theories of appeasement or atonement which are not biblically based. These distorted views of atonement—or means of salvation—present the Christian God as a vengeful, vindictive God who must be appeased before He destroys us.

Solutions to Problems That Don't Exist

Historically, Western Christianity has developed four major theories of atonement.

1. Will There Be the Devil to Pay?

The first significant unbiblical theory of atonement is called the “ransom” or “bargain” theory. Its position is that in the Fall, Adam and Eve sold humanity to the devil. Because of this, we have all come under the devil’s ownership, and justice demands he must be paid a ransom for our freedom. From this idea comes the expression, “There will be the devil to pay.”

The solution presented in this theory is that God tricks the devil into accepting Jesus’ death as a ransom. Death and Hades could not maintain a hold on Jesus, but His sacrifice and death nevertheless satisfied the devil’s claim for justice. In providing Himself as the sacrificial Lamb of God, Jesus has freed fallen humanity from the devil’s claim over us. This view dominated Western Christianity during the first thousand years after Christ.

2. A Payment to Appease an Angry God?

In the eleventh century, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote, *Why Did God Become Man?* This critique of the ransom/bargain theory resulted in its virtual abandonment. Anselm’s critique held that the devil is an outlaw and has no claim on humanity. Thus God does not have to pay him anything in order to free us.

Anselm’s view of atonement has come to be called the “debt” or “satisfaction” theory. It was based in part on the concept of total depravity, which holds that man’s sin against God (which is total) must be punished by God absolutely. According to this theory, God’s honor and justice demanded that to avoid punishment, the debt owed Him by the human race must be paid or satisfied. By ourselves we could not pay the debt owed God, because we are all fallen and sinful. Only Jesus Christ could pay what we owe to God, because He is sinless and perfect. In dying on the Cross, Christ completely paid this debt for

each of us. If we believe in Jesus' substitutionary atonement, then we are forgiven, and God is free to bestow on us His grace and mercy.

In the ransom or bargain theory of atonement, the debt was owed to the devil. In the debt or satisfaction theory, the debt is owed to God. In this understanding, even if we repent, God is unable to forgive us our sins outright because He is constrained by the demands of what is called "divine justice." Divine justice and offended honor demand a payment, a sacrifice, and a punishment to meet the demands of justice before God can forgive us. Though God is love, unless His fierce wrath was placated, He had no choice in this view but to punish sinners.

Central to the debt or satisfaction theory of atonement is the concept of "necessity." This necessity is akin to the impersonal Fate (Gr. *anangke*) that governed pagan gods. The problem with this concept of necessity is that it can create a God above God. If God is truly sovereign, then He is under no necessity whatsoever. He is what He is and will do what He will do without constraints.

An essentially legal view of sin leads inevitably to a legal view of salvation. If salvation is primarily about the Father punishing the Incarnate Son in our stead, then as a judicial necessity, our failure to believe in Jesus compels God to punish us. Such theologies see the Cross as saving us from the punitive, legally determined wrath of God —God the Son saving us from God the Father. Viewing God as vindictive can cause us great damage, particularly if we believe that the physical and spiritual harm we inflict on ourselves through sin comes from God (when in actuality it comes from us). Confusing our guilt with God's anger can cause us to fear and flee from Him, which only weakens us further.

The debt or satisfaction theory became the dominant theory of atonement in virtually all non-Orthodox churches. It is reflected in the words of many Western hymns, including the lyrics of a popular Protestant hymn, "He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay."

3. The Penal Substitutionary Theory of Atonement

The Protestant Reformers built upon the satisfaction theory and developed a third theory of atonement called the “penal substitutionary” theory. Whereas the debt/satisfaction theory emphasizes that Christ paid the debt that we owe God, the penal theory emphasizes that Christ received the punishment we deserve. In this view, justice demands that our sins be punished. In suffering and dying on the Cross, Christ received God’s punishment for us so that we no longer need to be punished. This view has gained great popularity and is perhaps the best known of the three non-Orthodox theories of atonement we have discussed so far.

On a popular level, the ransom/bargain theory, the debt/satisfaction theory, and the penal substitutionary theory of atonement are combined, so that in Christ’s death, payment is seen to be made to both the devil and God the Father, and additionally the Son of God is punished for our sins.

An interesting modern variation of this penal theory of atonement which has gained prominence among some Protestant circles is the view that because Jesus suffered the punishment due us, we should not have to suffer in this life or in the next. This view, called the “gospel of success,” claims that if Christians in faith claim healing derived from Jesus’ suffering on our behalf, we need not suffer and will be prosperous in every way. This extreme view is held by a narrow but growing segment of Protestants and is especially popular among TV evangelists.

It can be difficult for us, living in such a secular and prosperous age, to fully comprehend the tremendous impact the juridical understanding of atonement has had on non-Orthodox Christianity. The view of God as a fierce Judge—angry, vindictive, pouring out His divine wrath upon His Son Jesus because of “love” for us sinners, appears ludicrous to many non-Christians. It explains in part why so many are repulsed by institutional churches and only admit to admiring Jesus on a strictly private and non-institutional level. This view is expressed with astonishing force in Jonathan Edwards’ most famous sermon,

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (quoted in my book *Surprised by Christ*, Conciliar Press, 2008, pp.).

Certainly there is need to recognize that but for the grace of God, we would all descend into the abyss of everlasting sorrow and pain. Focusing on the judgment we deserve can bring some to repentance. Yet this presentation of God as vindictive, indeed ruthless—a dictator whose wrath somehow expresses a deeper love—is not in accordance with the God more fully revealed to us by Christ. It is no wonder that so many presented with this image of God recoil and pursue other religions, or become atheists and anti-Christian.

4. Too Hard to Bear: The Moral Exemplar Theory of Atonement

These juridical views were repulsive to many besides myself. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal Christian desire to discover a softer, gentler, and more approachable God led to their reinvigorating a fourth view of atonement, called the “moral exemplar” theory, first popularized in the eleventh century by the theologian Peter Abelard.

Shortly after Anselm presented his debt/satisfaction view of atonement, Peter Abelard reacted energetically against Anselm’s teaching by asking why God demands satisfaction for sins that He can simply forgive. Abelard held that the Father does not *need* the sacrifice of His Son and that the primary purpose of Christ’s life was to provide the perfect moral model and example of love for us to follow. Abelard deemphasized the crucifixion and emphasized Christ’s life of love. Hundreds of years later, Abelard’s views were taken up by liberal theologians who sought to emphasize a social gospel of softness, kindness, and love.

Though this view of Christ is to some degree true—for Jesus does say, “Follow Me”—the Orthodox hold that the moral exemplar view is inadequate. It underemphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection as God Incarnate. Also, it ignores the spiritual, mystical, ontological, and eschatological—indeed the cosmic—dimension of Christ’s life and instead confines His life to a strictly earthly, moral dimension.

The Original Biblical Orthodox Understanding of Salvation

The original Orthodox Christian understanding of atonement is incarnational. It has as its basis not the law or the courtroom, but God’s unconditional love and grace. We begin with the understanding that forgiveness and atonement (“at-one-ment” or reconciliation with God) are not essentially legal or juridical concepts. They are principally therapeutic, organic, synergistic, transformational, and ultimately ontological in nature. In fact, the Greek word translated as “salvation” is *soterias*, whose root meaning is “health.”

So being saved means more than being saved *from* something, such as death or hell; it also means being healed or made whole. When Jesus says, “Your faith has *saved* you” (Luke 7:50), He means, “Your faith has *healed* you,” or “Your faith has *made you whole*.” Forgiveness and atonement pertain to God’s participation in His creation in order to renew His image and likeness in us, bringing us to wholeness and fulfillment. To be healed, we don’t go to a lawyer or to a judge. To be healed, we go to a physician—and Jesus is the Great Physician.

In Orthodoxy, we experience God not only as Judge, but as He is referred to in Orthodox services: “the Lover of Mankind.” Orthodox incarnational theology, which is at the core of the original Gospel, teaches that God Himself, the second Person of the Trinity, became incarnate, not in order to pay a debt to the devil or to God the Father, nor to be a substitutionary offering to appease a just God, but in order to *rescue us* from our fallen condition and transform us, enabling us to become godlike.

The way God chose to deliver us from our condition—our illness, fallenness, mortality, corruption, and sin—was by taking upon Himself our human nature and participating with us in the limitations that creaturehood encompasses. Forgiving our sins is part and parcel of a much larger whole, as forgiveness in itself is *not enough* to ensure healing, purification, illumination, wholeness, and transfiguration. Actual organic participation in the life of the Incarnate God is required, in addition to being forgiven.

The original biblical Gospel often speaks of salvation as an organic experience that is preeminently non-judicial. The words and phrases used include: being crucified *with*, dying *with*, being buried, resurrected, and living *with* Christ and *in* Him, being *united with* and *together with* Him, as well as *putting on* Christ. They also include *abiding in* Him and *He in* us, being *one with*, *married to*, *members of His Body*, and of *one flesh with* Christ.

Placing the Fall, sin, and death into a legal framework leads to viewing the Person and work of Christ as part of that same framework. Accepting our inheritance of Adam's guilt leads to viewing judicial guilt for sin as our main problem, which results in the belief that once divine justice is satisfied on the Cross, redemption is complete.

That is why many expressions of Christianity seem shallow and simplistic: sanctification, virtue, holiness, life in Christ, transfiguration, union and communion with God were held to be added onto redemption and salvation, not integral to their very essence.

The original Gospel emphasizes that Jesus takes upon Himself our humanity in order to purify, heal, illumine, and transfigure it. We are saved *from* something (namely, death, sin, and the devil) in order to be saved *for* something else (union and communion with God). Union and communion with God is a journey of ever-deepening love that begins in this life, and—because God is infinite—continues forever.

by Fr. James Bernstein 2009.

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