

# The Teaching of Saint Paul

by Olin Alfred Curtis

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*Saint Paul's teaching on the death of Christ is that it is a propitiation, or means of reconciliation, between God and man, satisfying God's sense of justice and his love for men.*

**Scripture:** Romans 3:25, Romans 5:10, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 3:20, 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Titus 2:13

**Topics:** "Christ's Death", "Substitutionary Atonement"

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## Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the comprehensive plan of biblical theology, emphasizing the importance of starting with the Old Testament and studying the New Testament through the lens of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He highlights the centrality of Saint Paul's teachings, particularly focusing on the significance of Christ's death as the core of Paul's gospel message. Curtis explores the concept of Christ being made a sinner on our behalf, emphasizing the substitutional nature of His death and how it reconciles humanity to God. He also delves into the deep theological implications of Christ's death as a propitiation, emphasizing the harmonization of God's justice and love through the sacrificial death of Jesus.

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## Transcript

A comprehensive plan in biblical theology would require us to begin with the Old Testament, and then to study the New Testament entire, approaching it, not as many do through the gospels, but through the apology in the Epistle to the Hebrews. But for our work in systematic theology the teaching of Saint Paul furnishes all the more important data, and no further biblical study would essentially change the outcome.

Professor Denney has said: "The doctrine of the death of Christ and its significance was not Saint Paul's theology, it was his gospel. It was all he had to preach." Exception has been taken to Denney's view, and we have even been told that "Christ's death was but an incident in his life"; but Denney, beyond any other writer of our day, has understood the apostle Paul, and garnered the very life of the New Testament. Take out of the Pauline message the death of Christ, and every element of his teaching would become meaningless. Without his peculiar emphasis upon our Lord's death, you cannot fully appreciate even Saint Paul's practical opinions.

"Made to be sin on our behalf." "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5.21). At the very start, we can be sure of one thing, namely, that \*hamartia\* does not mean sin in the first clause, and sin offering in the second clause. It means just sin in each place. We can also see at once that the entire expression "who knew no sin" is a perfect equivalent of this: one not a sinner. And we can keep the apostle's striking contrast completely, if we consider the expression "made to be sin" (\*hamartian

epoiesen\*) as a strong rhetorical equivalent of this: one made or constituted a sinner. Jesus Christ, then, according to Saint Paul, was one not a sinner and yet one constituted a sinner. This much seems to me to be entirely convincing.

Now, as to this seeming contradiction, is there any clue? Yes, the clue is to be found in the fourteenth verse, "because we thus judge, that one died for all, therefore all died." The idea here is that of substitution. Christ died for all, or in behalf of all (\*hyper panton\*), and so it is really, potently, as if they died. That death of Christ belongs to them all as truly as if every one of them had died that death. They all have title-claim to the Lord's death just as one has complete right to the work of a substitute.

We are now thus far: Christ's death did not belong to him normally, but came to him as being a substitute for men, as standing in the place of men. Now we are ready for the sharp turn. In himself, Christ was not a sinner, but as a substitute, standing for men, he was a sinner. We can now touch the root of the apostle's conception: How could Jesus be -- how was he -- a substitutional sinner? Why, simply in the one fact that he died. Death, this bodily death, was the exact, historic, divine penalty for human sin; and this penalty of death came upon our Lord precisely as it strikes every human sinner. Christ was thus treated as a sinner is treated; by substitution he was "numbered with the transgressors" -- he was placed in the category of sin. And so he was not a sinner, and yet at the same time he was a sinner -- a made, a constituted, sinner.

"A propitiation, through faith, in his blood." "Whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood" (Rom. 3.25). Saint Paul's surface meaning in this passage may be fairly rendered thus: Christ was set forth, openly, in his blood, to be a propitiation, available by faith. The crucial word is \*hilasterion\*. And as to the meaning of the word, the exegetes have not been of one mind. But for their scholarly discussions we have no concern here. Whatever they do with the word, they are unable to destroy the idea of propitiation. As Professor Sanday says: "The fundamental idea which underlies the word must be propitiation." But deeply, what is meant by propitiation? Surely a propitiation is the means by which one is rendered propitious, or favorable, or open to plea. Inasmuch, therefore, as Saint Paul says that Christ was set forth, openly, in his blood, to be a propitiation, available by faith, the apostle's full thought is, I am confident, this: The death of Jesus Christ is the sacrificial means by which God is rendered propitious to one having faith.

We can now get the connections in Saint Paul's mind, if we start with the twenty-fourth verse: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood." "Being justified" -- but how? "Freely by his grace" -- how do we get this grace? "Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" -- but, more closely, what is meant by this redemption that is in Christ? The meaning is precisely this: The death of Christ renders God so propitious toward us that when we have faith in Christ set forth in his blood we can be justified freely by his grace. Thus, Saint Paul's conception is that justification is explained by free grace; that this grace is explained as a feature of redemption; and that redemption is explained by the propitiatory death of Christ, made personally available only by faith.

"Reconciled to God through the death of his Son." "For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life; and not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (Rom. 5. 10, 11; compare with Col. 1.21, 22, and with 2 Cor. 5.18, 19). The word translated "reconciliation" is \*katallage\*; and our first question is, Does it mean reconciliation by means of a change taking place in men? or is there an actual change which takes place in God? From our English usage, it

would, at first glance, seem as if the reconciliation were by a change in men, God himself being favorable all the time. But our English usage is altogether misleading. The change is primarily in God. We know this conclusively for two reasons: First, this reconciliation, Saint Paul says, was "through the death of his Son." And, already, in this very epistle, as we have seen, the apostle has taught that the death of Christ was a propitiation, or means of changing God, or making him propitious. That is, Saint Paul is but saying in a new way essentially what he had said before. To say that by the death of Christ God is made favorable to men is essentially the same thing as to say that by the death of Christ God is reconciled to men. And just as the propitiation becomes available by personal faith, so the reconciliation is completed by men becoming reconciled to God. Second -- but we do not need to go back to the third chapter, for the decisive point is given in the passage before us. Saint Paul here tells us that "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son"; and then, a bit later, that we have "now received the reconciliation." In the first place, that is, before men did a thing toward it, God became reconciled to men by means of the death of his Son; and now we accept by faith the divine offer of reconciliation. In this connection there is one further item of important suggestion. The fact that the reconciliation of God to men involves the bodily death of Christ is made emphatic in the Epistle to the Colossians (1.21, 22) where we read: "And you, being in time past alienated and enemies in your mind in your evil works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death." Bishop Lightfoot explains the passage in this way: "In Christ's body, in Christ's flesh which died on the cross for your atonement, ye are reconciled to him again."

"That he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus." "To show his righteousness (\*dikaiosyne\*) because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; for the showing, I say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just (\*dikaios\*), and the justifier (\*dikaios\*) of him that hath faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3.25, 26). This remarkable passage is Saint Paul's nearest approach to a philosophical doctrine of the atonement, and so it demands our most careful consideration.

We notice at once that the apostle makes a distinction between God's forbearance toward sinners and his justification of sinners. This forbearance was best in times past; but it could not satisfy God, and so it had to be done away with by a very different thing, namely, by justification - justification by faith in harmony with God's being just. "That he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus."

But why does God have this end of justification in view at all? Why does he want, under any conditions, to justify the sinner? No one familiar with Saint Paul's writings can possibly doubt what his answer would be -- Because God loves the sinner. And so, in the divine depths, justice must be harmonized with love's demand. How is this profound harmony to be secured? Saint Paul's answer is this: By the manifestation of the righteousness of God in the death of Christ ("for the showing, say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just, and the justifier").

Now we reach the critical point. What does Saint Paul mean by this righteousness of God -- this \*dikaiosyne theou\*? That he does not mean bare justice is evident for two reasons: First, a philosophical reason. God's purpose is to harmonize justice with the demand of love, and this harmony could not be achieved by expressing justice alone. Second, a biblical reason, a reason in the consistency of Pauline theology. Saint Paul's own usage is contrary to the view that the righteousness of God means bare justice. Turn, for a case, to 2 Cor. 5.21: "That we might become the righteousness of God in him." We find here the same expression, \*dikaiosyne theou\*; and it cannot mean justice -- that we might become the justice of God in him. Righteousness is, I am sure, a larger term than justice everywhere in the Bible. Sometimes it means moral concern; sometimes it means "the sum of all moral excellence" (Sanday); and sometimes it

means moral love. Speaking of this very passage in Romans, Professor Stevens says: "Here \*dikaiosyne\* must mean the self-respecting attribute of holiness in God, the reaction of his nature against sin which must find expression in its condemnation. Holy love is the best definition of Paul's conception of the ethical nature of God." A full statement of the matter may be given as follows:

The righteousness of God is the holiness of God, sometimes in one bearing of emphasis and sometimes in another; but in the complete bearing, perfect moral love. And Saint Paul uses the term to express the complete bearing. With this understanding of the apostle's usage, the great passage in Romans can be paraphrased as follows: God cannot forever deal with sinners in a partial way. Sooner or later, he must satisfy himself completely. To do this, he must, at one stroke, satisfy his sense of justice and his love for men. There is only one way to accomplish all this, and that is to express his entire nature as it is gathered up in holy love. This perfect manifestation of holy love is in the death of Christ.

Before going further, let us summarize what we now have of Saint Paul's teaching:

1. Jesus Christ was constituted a sinner in our behalf by the simple fact that he died a bodily death, and so bore the exact historical penalty which belongs to man. He was a sinner by substitution.
2. By bearing this penalty of death Christ rendered God propitious; or he reconciled God to man, so that individual justification by faith became possible and ready.
3. The reason why the death of Christ was such a propitiation, or means of reconciliation, was that it satisfied, at one stroke, God's inherent sense of justice and his boundless feeling of love for men.
4. And, last, the reason the death of Christ could do such work in harmony, could satisfy God's sense of justice and his feeling of love, was that it manifested the divine moral love which is the holiness of God, the entire ethical nature of God, consummated in the perfection of the divine personal experience. In the death of Christ God ceases to express fragments toward men, and manifests all he is. And by manifesting all he is, he is supremely satisfied.

"A people for his own possession." "Looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession" (Titus 2.13, 14). In this passage Saint Paul passes clearly from the idea of redemption from iniquity to the idea of Christ's obtainment of a holy people for himself. The same thought appears in Rom. 8.29 -- "that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." Besides this, under the conception of Christ as the second Adam, there is the thought that our Lord's redemptive work is to result in a holy company of men. Besides all this, and in deep association with it, is Saint Paul's conception of a glorious church, "holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5.27), which Christ gave himself up for, and which he nourishes and cherishes, "because we are members of his body." All these teachings indicate plainly that redemption through the death of Christ, as Saint Paul understands it, is to have a great social outcome. Jesus Christ does not die to smite sin in the abstract, nor to save, here and there, an isolated moral person; he dies to obtain a people, a church, a holy community, so perfectly inherent in him that he and they constitute one body.

We have the same idea of a holy social organism in many places in the New Testament, and it is especially noticeable in our Saviour's last prayer, "that they may be one, even as we are one" (Saint John 17.22); but here I desire only to bring out the social expansion of Saint Paul's central conception of the redemptional significance of the death of Christ. By his death our Lord not only reconciles God to man,

and renders possible the justification of the separate sinner, but also obtains a people for his own possession.

"That Jesus died and rose again." "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him" (1 Thess. 4. 14). This association of our Lord's death with his resurrection is often found in Saint Paul's mind. It is found in Rom. 4.25, where Jesus is spoken of as "delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." It is found in that great fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, where the apostle says: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he hath been raised on the third day." And it is also found in 2 Corinthians (5.15), where Saint Paul says of our Lord and his people "that they that live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto him who for their sakes died and rose again." By studying all of these passages in their full connections it will be clearly seen that in Saint Paul's thinking our Saviour's resurrection is not merely an event which historically follows his death, it is an event which teleologically follows his death in the plan of redemption.

"Conformed to the body of his glory." "For our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able even to subject all things unto himself" (Phil. 3.20, 21). This passage is of the most intense interest. Speaking of this passage, in his treatise on Immortality, Cyprian exclaims, Who would not crave "to arrive more quickly to the dignity"! It is in this very epistle to the Philippians, in the chapter before, that we have Saint Paul's most extended reference to the Incarnation. Evidently he looks upon our Lord's body there as merely a part of that humiliation which was completed in his being "obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. The natural body of Jesus had no significance to Saint Paul save as it was the instrument of a supreme ethical self-sacrifice. But how exceedingly different is Saint Paul's conception of the significance of our Lord's body of glory! That is the type according to which shall be fashioned all the final, glorious bodies of his own people.

Now I will give, as I understand it, the closer interlacing of the most important features of Saint Paul's entire view of our Lord's redemptive work:

1. Jesus Christ died. In this bodily death our Saviour bore the exact, historic, divine penalty for man's sin, and therefore was a sinner in category, or a sinner by substitution. Bearing this penalty of death, our Saviour satisfied the holiness of God by fully expressing that holiness in its personal consummation of moral love. By thus satisfying the divine holiness Christ rendered God ethically open to the possibility of justification conditioned on faith.
2. Jesus Christ rose from the dead. By this event of his resurrection our Lord made justification more than possible -- he made it redemptionally feasible. And through this process of justification actually carried out our Lord is gradually forming, person by person, believer by believer, a new spiritual community -- a people organic in him -- *\*tois en christo lesou\** -- one body in vitality of moral life, in identity of aim, and in the service and fellowship of love.
3. Jesus Christ rose from the dead with a glorified body. This spiritual community of saints who live in Christ is to be objectively completed in their organism when, in their resurrection, every one of them shall take on, not the body of the grave, but a spiritual body "conformed to the body of his glory." The saints are to be like Christ, not only in moral person, but also in their actual bodily life.

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