

The Necessity of the Cross

September 8, 2013

In the Gospel narratives the freedom of Jesus is tested in his assessment of a "must" (dei). We know, for instance, that Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must (dei) suffer many things" (Mark 68:31). In what did that must consist?

Was it a physical necessity? That is to say, did Jesus have to die in the same sense that the rest of us have to die?

Christian Theology rejects this possibility out of hand. Reflecting on the dominical affirmation quoted above—"I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again"—Christians have traditionally inferred that the humanity assumed by God's Son was not, like ours, in bondage to death. That is to say, his humanity, hypostatically united to the divine nature, was not obliged to die; Jesus was not subject, or subjugated, to sin and death. There was no physical necessity for him to lay down his life, because the power of death held no sway over him.

At the same time, nonetheless, Christian theology insists that Jesus was able to die; this is inferred from the fact that he consented to die. Consequently, the ancient catholic Fathers maintained, against various heretics, that his death was factual, not just apparent. What the eyewitnesses beheld on Calvary was a true death; the historical fact of it pertained to the faith once delivered to the saints: "I delivered to you, as of primary importance, what I also received: that Christ died . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Inasmuch as he died without a physical necessity to die, Jesus' humanity was like that of Adam before the Fall: He, too, was physically able to die but not subject to death. In both cases—Adam and Jesus—death is introduced in connection with a test of existential freedom. Furthermore, there is a deep irony in that introduction: Whereas Adam incurred death through disobedience, Jesus incurred death through obedience. As we shall see in the course of these reflections, the early Christians were very sensitive to certain theological parallels and contrasts between Jesus and Adam with respect to death.

If, however, there was no physical necessity for Jesus to die, how are we to understand the necessity of his death? Was there, perhaps, what might be called a "metaphysical" necessity for Jesus to die? Was there some inherent and essential postulate in rebus---for example, a compelling principle of eternal

justice, or a structural predicate within the created universe, or a transcendent obligation objectively imposed by God's offended honor---something requiring God's Son to die if man was to be saved?

I submit that there are at least two wrong answers to this inquiry: yes and no. Both answers are wrong, because—I hope to show—the question is ill conceived.

Some Christians have answered “yes,” the sacrifice of God’s Son was necessary for man’s salvation. This necessity, they assert, is based on the structure of reality, a postulate of either the divine honor, or the divine justice, or (heaven help us) the divine wrath.

The problem with this answer (as I hope to explain later and in more details) is that it has no foundation in Holy Scripture. The “explanation” of the necessity of the Lord’s Passion was taught neither by the Lord nor by his Apostles. Nor, as far as I can tell, did the Fathers of Church know anything of it.

Some Christians—indeed, many of them—have answered “no,” the death of God’s Son was not required for our salvation. They say that God could have chosen any number of ways to effect the Atonement.

I have the identical problem with this answer, as well; namely, it is based on speculation unwarranted by the teaching of Holy Scripture. Neither Jesus nor his Apostles seem to have been aware of any other means by which man might be saved. Indeed, the proposition seems to be explicitly denied—“without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22).

My problem with the question itself is this: Christian theology must start with Christ and with what Christ actually did. What might have been is simply not to the point. We must commence our thinking about salvation by considering salvation as a fact, a thing actually done by Christ. To speculate about salvation apart from this actual salvation is, I contend, an attempt to go around Christology by an imaginative appeal to metaphysics.

More on this next week.

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