

Systematic Theology 2

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For Dr. Gary Deddo

Worship: *In Christ Alone*

In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save
'Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live

There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

No guilt in life, no fear in death
This is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath
Jesus commands my destiny
No power of hell, no scheme of man
Can ever pluck me from His hand
'Till He returns or calls me home
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

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Analysis

There is much to commend in this expression of worship, musically in its use of Irish cadence and melody, and theologically in its use of the 'in Christ' language. The phrase 'in Christ' opens the first two stanzas, echoing Paul's thought in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Corinthians in particular, and phrases from those letters pepper the song ('all in all'; 'fullness of God'; etc.). 'He is my light' carries the meaning that Christ is not only my illumination and my guidance into truth, but my revelation of God in a full theological sense. 'My strength' carries the meaning of Jesus strength made available to me by faith and in the Spirit to live empowered in relationship with God. 'My song' can be understood as Jesus being our song to God; since he is our *liturgos*, our worship leader, where our songs are cleansed and purified by him and then presented to God; it can also be explained as Jesus being the substance of that which I am most deeply emotional and want to poetically internalize. The emotional relief of having the burden of striving, fear, and guilt-motivation lifted from my shoulders is captured in the first stanza as well. The concluding line, 'here in the love of Christ I stand'

However, we move rather quickly from infancy in the first three lines to crucifixion in the fourth through eighth lines. In fact, the hymn injects a strong element of the penal substitution view of the atonement:

'Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live

While I concur that Jesus at the cross engaged with God's wrath, death, and human sin, I do not agree with how penal substitution arranges those concepts. These lyrics make it sound like what is important is that God inflicted some amount of supernatural pain on Jesus while he hung on the cross. The song encourages us to identify 'the suffering of Jesus' and even 'the spiritual torture of Jesus' as the vital transaction: 'as Jesus died...every sin on him was laid.'

However, according to the earliest theology of the church, God is not 'satisfied' by simply doling out an equal amount of pain on Jesus for the pain humanity caused Him, or for the 'elect' over against those who are 'damned' according to this theological system. Rather, Jesus took on flesh (Jn.1:14) in order to live faithfully by the love of the Father, therefore condemning sin in his own flesh (Rom.8:3). By his death, he crucified the old self (Rom.6:6), that is, he finished pouring out the wrath of God on his own flesh, and removed the corruption of sin that had set into human nature. In his resurrection, he returned as God's new humanity, with a human nature that had been cleansed, healed, and transformed by the love of God. This is the patristic and Eastern Orthodox theory of the atonement called the physical theory, or the recapitulation theory.

John Calvin said this: 'When it is asked how, after abolishing sins, Christ removed the discord between us and God and acquired a righteousness, it may be replied generally that he provided us with this by the whole course of his obedience...From the moment he put on the person of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation for our redemption...In order, however, to define the manner of salvation more surely, scripture ascribes it to Christ's death as its property and attribute. Yet there is no exclusion of the rest of the obedience which he performed in his life; as Paul comprehends the whole of it, from the beginning to the end, when he says, 'he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'...Nor was this without inward conflict, because he had taken our infirmities, and it was necessary to give this proof of his obedience to his Father. And it was no mean specimen of his incomparable love to us, to contend with horrible fear, and amid those dreadful torments to neglect all care of himself, that he might promote our benefit.' (John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5) Calvin himself says that Jesus' death was not the only atoning part of Jesus' work. His whole life was atoning. His whole life, lived in obedience recapitulating the life of Adam and our lives, was the undoing of human sin and the forging of a new humanity in his own body.

The assumption made in the penal substitution theory is that God's wrath operates by aiming at the personhood of people. However, in classical theology and Eastern Orthodox theology, God's wrath is not directed at our personhood, but at the corruption in our nature. The contrast is between the wrath of a judge who can only mete out punishment on the bodies and persons before him, whereas the wrath of a surgeon burns against the cancerous corruption in our human nature, because he loves us as persons. This makes sense of why the governing motif of

salvation and cleansing from the Old Testament is circumcision: the cutting away of an impure part of the person, but it was not the death of the person per se. Jesus died to conquer the flesh in the fallen humanity he had taken on, to cut off the impure corruption in himself (what Paul called 'the circumcision of Christ' in Col.2:12), to rise new in his resurrection as a new, God-soaked humanity.

I propose the following change to this song, in the second stanza:

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe
Poured out His love in righteousness
Daily to cleanse, redeem, and save
And on that cross, where Jesus died
He cast all fear and shame aside
With dying breath, He conquered sin:
Calling us to be joined to Him

These lyrics shift all the verbs from the passive tense to the active tense. Previously, things were done *to Jesus* by the Father ('Every sin on him was laid'). In my version, Jesus is the active one: He poured out... to cleanse, redeem, and save... he cast...he conquered...calling us. Jesus is not the victim; he is the victor.

Moreover, these lyrics make clear the call to be joined to Christ which is so evident in the Gospel of John and the letters of Paul. Paul's 'union with Christ' teaching in Romans 6, Colossians 2 – 3, and Ephesians 1 – 3, for example, are better represented by my modification. We must die and rise with Christ so that he, by his Spirit, can remove from our core identity the corruption of sin.

The third stanza focuses on Jesus' resurrection and its effects for us. The song correctly states that 'sin's curse has lost its grip on me.' The reason for this, in the song, is one of possession (I am his, he is mine) and economic transaction (bought with the...blood). The thought, which originated in penal substitution, can be rethought in physical redemption terms: Our life was bought by Jesus as he cleansed his own blood through his obedient life, sin-conquering death, and humanity-cleansing resurrection. This concurs with the sacrificial system of the Old Testament: God received impurity from Israel because of the pollution within Israel's blood, and returned uncorrupted animal blood as a gift of life. In the Temple sacrifices, God was acting like a kidney dialysis machine. In Christ, God purified the blood and humanity of Jesus so that Jesus could act as a spiritual organ donor to us. In that sense, yes, we were 'bought with the precious blood of Christ.'

The fourth and final stanza concludes with (basically) the doctrine of assurance of salvation and the relevance of Jesus' return. Emphasis is placed on 'the power of Christ in me' in lines 2 and 8, reminding us of Ephesians 1:15 – 2:10, etc. The phrase 'Jesus commands my destiny' has a pleasant double entendre: it refers to both present and future – Jesus' present lordship over my life and Jesus' lordship over my future and who I will be.