

On the Soteriology of the Third Century Eastern Fathers

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Unlike the Western Church which tends to approach the salvific work of Christ very monolithically (e.g., Christ substituted Himself for us in order to save us from the penalty of our sins), the Eastern Church's approach to the great mystery of mankind's salvation, known as "soteriology" (from the Greek *soterion* for salvation or deliverance), is multi-faceted. There is not one view which dominates the others but rather the various soteriological models (which all derive from the Holy Scriptures) serve as safeguards against excess and help us to better grasp the great mystery of our salvation.

In the early Church the city of Alexandria was one of Christianity's great centers of theological learning. From Alexandria in the 3rd century came two prominent Christian writers, Clement and Origen. St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215), made use of the "ransom model" of soteriology which ultimately derives from Holy Scripture (e.g., Ps. 48:8-9, 16 LXX; Hos 13:14; Mt 20:28; 1 Tm 2:6; Ti 2:14; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Rev 5:8-9). Thus St. Clement, "speaks of Christ's laying down His life as a ransom on our behalf, redeeming us by His blood, offering Himself as a sacrifice, conquering the Devil, and interceding for us with the Father" (Early Christian Doctrines, Kelley, 183).

But for Clement, Christ is recognized more as the teacher Who gives to us the truth, and shows us the way to love and righteousness. This model, known as the "illuminative model," is based on the Scriptures which speak of Christ as our teacher (e.g., Mt 5:1ff-7:28-29; Jn 7:46; Jn 13:34-35). According to Clement, Christ teaches everyone at a level which is appropriate to their understanding. The *gnostic* receives instruction "through mysteries, the believer by good hopes, and the hard-hearted by corrective chastisement" (Kelley, 184). As our teacher Christ also acts as our "all-healing physician." He thus bestows "immortality as well as knowledge." Clement states that "God's will is the knowledge of God, and this is participation in immortality" (Kelley, 184).

St. Clement is also an early witness to the doctrine of *Theosis*. He writes, "The Word... became man so that you might learn from man how man may become as God." This is known as the "reciprocity model" of soteriology. Christ became what we in order that we might partake of what He is. This model is also based on certain scriptural texts (e.g., 2 Cor 5:21; 8:9; Heb 2:17-18, 2 Pet 1:3-4). Clement also taught that as God, Christ forgives our sins, but as man, Christ provides us with a model to direct us away from living lives of sin. Kelley concludes, "It is clear that Clement's soteriology issues in a Christ-mysticism in which the Lord's passion and death have little or no redemptive part to play (184).

Origen of Alexandria (184-254) shared a mystical doctrine of redemption close to that of St. Clement. For Origen, Jesus' humanity was "progressively deified through its union with the Logos" (Kelley, 184). This idea had important implications on Origen's soteriology. It summarizes his understanding of the process of the restoration of mankind and of all rational beings. Origen, like St. Justin the Philosopher before him, sees Christ as our teacher, lawgiver, and model. Through our association with Him we are restored to life. We also are freed of our irrationality, becoming "divinely possessed and rational." Since Christ is our model, our "pattern

of perfect life,” and our “exemplar of true virtue,” Christians can be transformed into His likeness and thereby participate in the divine nature (Kelley, 184). As Origen writes, “Discoursing in bodily form and giving Himself out as flesh, He summons to Himself those who are flesh, in order that He may first of all transform them into the likeness of the Word Who has been made flesh, and after that may exalt them so as to behold Him as He was before He became flesh” (Kelley, 185). Thus Origen saw Christ as an exemplar of our deification. This is akin to the “reciprocity model” taught by St. Clement.

But according to Origen’s soteriology Christ’s redemption goes beyond illumination and mystical redemptive exchange. For Origen Christ’s death has “effected a beginning and an advance in the overthrow of the evil one, the Devil, who dominated the whole earth” (Kelley, 185). Christ was in conflict with the cosmic forces of evil from the time of His nativity. His death and resurrection show forth their final defeat. Origen teaches that Colossians 2:15 makes evident that Christ’s death has a two-fold effect. It serves as “an example” and also “a trophy” of His victory over the devil, in effect nailing him to the cross with all of his evil hosts. Thus Origen conceived of Christ’s work as a cosmic battle with -and ultimate victory over- evil and demonic forces. This “Cosmic Battle” model of Christ’s redemption is mentioned in the 2nd century by St. Justin the Philosopher also and it plays a significant role in Origen’s soteriology (cf. Lk 10:17-20; Eph 6:11-13; and Rev). This model consisted in the idea that the Devil (who personifies death) was self-deluded into imagining that through the Crucifixion, he had triumphed over Christ. But when the Lord rises from the dead, death’s apparent victory over life becomes his divisive defeat.

Origen uses yet another soteriological model which Sts. Irenaeus and Clement used before him. This is the model mentioned above based on the Gospel metaphor of “ransom” in regard to Christ’s saving work. Origen speaks of Christ offering Himself up, not to God, but rather to the Devil “in exchange for the souls of men which the Devil had claimed as his due because of their sinfulness” (Kelley, 186). According to Origen, although the Devil accepted this exchange he had not the power to hold Christ in death. Christ was too powerful for death to hold Him bound and thus the Devil was despoiled of his victim. Although Origen elaborated fully on this “ransom model,” as Kelley writes, he “thinks much more in terms of Christ’s conquest of the Devil than of any actual transaction with him” (186).

Origen witnesses to another model of soteriology. Origen is the first of the Fathers to write at length on the subject of Christ’s death as “an act of vicarious substitution or propitiatory sacrifice” (Kelley, 186). This can be referred to as the “sacrificial model.” Thus Origen views the Lord’s death not just as an act of obedient surrender to the Father’s will, but also as act of sacrificial offering which positively influences the Father. As head of the Church which is His body, He voluntarily takes our sins upon Himself, bearing them upon the cross for us. But Jesus is not only “the sacrifice” of propitiation for our sins, He is also “the priest” who offers this sacrifice of Himself and propitiates the Father. This sacrificial model uses such scriptures as Is 53 (cf. 1 Pet 1:18-20; 1 Pet 2:21-25) as its source. Origen summarizes this teaching stating that “the punishment which was owing to us, in order that we might be chastised and might obtain peace, has fallen on Him” (Kelley 186).

Yet another Eastern Father of the 3rd century is St. Methodius who was one of Origen’s greatest critics (especially in his questionable teachings). Methodius took up St. Irenaeus’s

soteriological doctrine of “recapitulation” and taught this in a more subtle form. He taught that Christ is the new Adam because He assumed our human nature. As all die because of the first Adam, all can be made alive in the second Adam. Through the incarnated Christ’s death and resurrection, mankind now triumph’s over the judgment of death which the Devil had brought upon us. Methodius identifies Christ with Adam and “remarks how appropriate it was that the only-begotten Logos should unite Himself with the first-born of men” (Kelley, 188). While Irenaeus placed great importance on Christ’s death as a supreme act of obedience, Methodius almost completely passes over this point. Instead Methodius focuses on the Lord’s true humanity as the instrument by which He manifests the resurrection of the flesh. As Kelley writes, “More important in his eyes than the conquest of sin and death on the cross is the fact that the Logos ‘took to Himself this suffering body in order that... what was mortal might be transformed into immortality and what was passible in to impassibility’” (188, cf. 1 Cor 15:53-55). Methodius reworks Irenaeus teaching of recapitulation focusing less on Christ’s atoning death and more on mysticism.

Thus these Eastern Fathers of the 3rd century laid down and developed the soteriological foundation which the great Church Fathers of the 4th century (e.g. Athanasius the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom, etc.) would build on. These soteriological models of “ransom,” “illumination,” “reciprocity,” “cosmic battle,” “sacrifice” and “recapitulation” are taken up again by these Fathers and developed into the great doctrinal truths of our faith. Thus by having varying models of soteriology the Church has “strength in numbers” thereby safeguarding the great mystery of man’s redemption through Christ our Lord.