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The Death and Resurrection: Necessary for Salvation?

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

Salvation comes through Jesus Christ, but what does that truly mean? Since the death of Christ, people have been pondering this ultimate question. Whether it has been a personal journey to understand the risen Christ, or if it has been a professional career, all Christians have tried to deepen their understanding of true mystery of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Due to these various inquiries, there have been numerous hypotheses and theories concerning the Resurrection, and in turn sheds light on who God is, who Jesus was, and the meaning of it all. The death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to Christians and their Salvation; however, there are many different definitions and/or analyses of these two events. Some theologians say the death on the cross was sufficient for our Salvation. This analysis will not only point out the various outlooks of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it will also discuss the reasons why we do need the Resurrection to fully receive eternal relationship with God.

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The Death and Resurrection: Necessary for Salvation
Thomas Whalen

Salvation comes through Jesus Christ, but what does that truly mean? Since the death of Christ, people have been pondering this ultimate question. Whether it has been a personal journey to understand the risen Christ, or if it has been a professional career, all Christians have tried to deepen their understanding of true mystery of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Due to these various inquiries, there have been numerous hypotheses and theories concerning the Resurrection, and in turn sheds light on who God is, who Jesus was, and the meaning of it all. The death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to Christians and their Salvation; however, there are many different definitions and/or analyses of these two events. Some theologians say the death on the cross was sufficient for our Salvation. This analysis will not only point out the various outlooks of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it will also discuss the reasons why we do need the Resurrection to fully receive eternal relationship with God.

We must, however, understand that our mortality and human nature limit our comprehension of Christ’s death and Resurrection. Thomas McGovern speaks of this human inadequacy: “We have to remind ourselves when dealing with these profound mysteries of the faith that we can only speak in analogical language, that our finite minds can only grasp in a very limited way the full truth of a mystery such as the Resurrection” (McGovern 1). In other words, we must be humble in our speaking of anything that has to do with God. This of course includes anything that deals with Jesus Christ, for “In the beginning...the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Understanding this, we shall now turn to the historical theories of the cross to better understand the Resurrection, and in turn better understand our Salvation.

The Cross

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the climax of the central mystery of Salvation. Why did Christ die? What was accomplished in Christ’s death? How is it relevant today? These questions have pondered theologians for centuries. There have been many arguments on the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross; however, four warrant our attention. These four arguments see the cross as sacrifice, victory, forgiveness, and as a moral example, respectively. Understanding the cross will better our understanding of the Resurrection.

Christ’s death as sacrifice

In ancient Israel, one of the main aspects of Jewish customs was ritual sacrifice. There were sacrificial rituals occurring every day. The Jewish Temple was viewed as a slaughterhouse where animals were sacrificed as an offering to God. For example, on the most holy of holidays in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, a lamb or goat was used for the forgiveness of sins. The sins of the people were “transferred” to the goat or lamb and subsequently the goat or lamb was slaughtered. The death of the people’s sins was congruent with the death of the goat or lamb. The term scapegoat derives from this special offering. Jesus Christ, in later times, would be seen as parallel, although quite different, to the scapegoat.

According to the Letter of the Hebrews, most associated with St. Paul, the author speaks of the sacrifice of Christ. The death of Christ is compared here to the ritual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (as noted above): “he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). Although the death of Christ can be linked with the ritual sacrifice on Yom Kippur, it is quite different in that Christ offered himself as the sacrifice, not of goats, lambs, or calves.

Alister McGrath sees this approach to Jesus’ death on the cross as a “perfect sacrifice.” He states, “the death of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice presents Christ’s sacrificial offering as an effective and perfect sacrifice, which was able to accomplish that which the sacrifices of the Old Testament were only able to intimate, rather than achieve” (McGrath 411). In other words, Christ’s death is the ultimate sacrifice, which need not be repeated. Athanasius argues this point more when he states, “The sacrifices which were offered according to the Law were not trustworthy, since they had to be offered every day, and were again in need of purification. In contrast, the Savior’s sacrifice was offered once only, and was accomplished in its entirety” (Athanasius 9). The “sacrificial lamb” image is present here; however, according to Athanasius, Christ’s sacrifice is permanent and ongoing, which is in contrast to the sacrifices of the Old Testament. It is reasonable to associate Jesus’ death with a sacrificial lamb, but...
we must understand that Jesus’ sacrifice was much more substantial and would never need to be repeated.

What happened when Jesus died on the cross? Our sins were forgiven and we were made righteous before God. St. Augustine, in *City of God*, speaks of this matter more clearly when stating “By Jesus’ death, which is indeed the one and most true sacrifice offered for us, he purged, abolished, and extinguished whatever guilt there was by which the principialities and powers lawfully detained us to pay the penalty” (Augustine, Book 10, Ch. 20). Because of Christ’s humble and complete sacrifice, the guilt of our sins is wiped away and in turn we are seen as honorable before God. Our being has been transformed from eternal suffering and death to eternal life and relationship with God. Protestant theologian John Pearson applies this transformation more clearly: “The redemption or salvation with the Messiah was to bring consisteth in the freeing of a sinner from the state of sin and eternal death into a state of righteousness and eternal life” (Pearson 348).

Christ’s death has been seen as a sacrifice since his very death. The New Testament explicitly acknowledges it to be so, and theologians from the Patristic period to the Modern period have seen the death of Christ as a sacrifice. However, Christ’s death was not only a sacrifice, it was also a victory, and victory is where we shall now turn.

**Christ’s death as a victory**

The theme of victory has been widely used for Christ’s death since time of the New Testament writers. Christ, through his death and resurrection is seen as victor over sin, death, and Satan. Victory through the resurrection will be discussed later. However, we shall turn to the images constructed from this theme of the death of Christ as a victory. Two images warrant our attention: ransom and new covenant. Both of these images attempt to answer the question of why Jesus sacrificed himself.

We shall first turn to the image of ransom. According to Alister McGrath, the image of Christ’s death as a ransom became a central importance for the patristic writers (McGrath 415). He also suggests that the word “ransom” is related to “liberation,” “payment,” and “someone to whom the ransom is paid.” Liberation is something which achieves freedom from a person who is held in captivity; payment is a sum of money used to free this person; “Someone to whom the ransom is paid means” that a ransom needs to be paid to someone who is holding someone captive (McGrath 415).

The patristic writers, such as Gregory the Great took these related ideas and formed them into explanation of the death on the cross by Jesus Christ. Gregory the Great suggests that the devil is person to whom the ransom was to be paid, humanity was the person held in captivity and the liberation or ransom was the death on Christ on the cross. Gregory also suggests that the devil had “acquired rights over fallen humanity, which God was obliged to respect” (McGrath 415). Humanity had been taken captive and the only way to liberate us was the sacrifice of Christ being paid to the devil. Gregory suggests the metaphor of the baited hook: “Christ’s humanity is the bait, and his divinity the hook. The devil, like a great sea-monster, snaps at the bait—and then discovers, too late, the hook” (McGrath 416). Therefore, Jesus died like a human and when the devil came to receive the body (which was his right), the devil forfeited his rights because Jesus was also divine. This is a very controversial image. It suggests that the devil has rights in which God must obey, which in turn, denies God’s power over humanity and creation. It also suggests that the devil has power over God, which is idolatrous.

Although the New Testament uses the image of ransom to view Christ’s sacrifice, Gregory the Greats analysis is skewed. In both the First Letter to Timothy and the Gospel of Mark, the term “ransom” is used. However, the passages from these respective books say that Jesus “gave himself a ransom for many” (1 Timothy 2:6; Mark 10:45). Although it has been translated into “ransom” the Greek λυτρόν literally is translated as “means of release” or “means of redeeming.” A ransom has a negative connotation in today’s times and many argue that a ransom paid to God denies his love for humanity. However, as noted before, because of Christ’s death, humanity is seen as righteous before God, and believing this, a ransom is not an adequate way of perceiving the sacrifice of Christ. Christ’s death, in contrast, redeems us for God, and not for the devil. God was not forced to pay a ransom due to the “powers” of the devil; he freely chose to sacrifice himself for the good of humankind. Alister McGrath explains this in summation: “[the “ransom” approach] seemed to rest upon the series of highly questionable assumptions about the ‘rights of the devil,’ and an implicit suggestion that God acted with less than total honesty in redeeming humanity” (McGrath 419).
Although the inadequate metaphor of “ransom” for Christ’s death has been used since the Patristic period, another image arose. Gerald O’Collins, gives a new look on the explanation for Christ’s death on the cross. O’Collins suggests that Christ’s death was intended to establish a new covenant with God and his people. A popular image of Christ is Mediator. Jesus is the intermediary between God and humanity. To establish a new covenant with his people, God sent the Son, the Word of God, to relay this promise to humanity. This new covenant is eternal salvation with God. O’Collins states that “the Gospels of Mark and Matthew report Jesus as speaking of a covenant that is instituted through his blood...” This meaning that the death of Christ on the cross instituted this new covenant of eternal relationship with God.

The Last Supper in the Gospels confirms, to a degree, O’Collins’ argument. The Gnostic Gospels are in contrast with each other. In the “Good News” according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus was eating with the twelve when he says “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24; Matthew 26:28). The “covenant” in these two Gospels seems to allude to the covenant with the ancient people of Israel. Thus, Jesus’ future death and resurrection is the fulfillment of this ancient covenant. This is quite different in the Gospel according to Luke. In Luke, Jesus says that “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 14:20). Here, the covenant is a different and new for humankind. O’Collins and others attest that this new covenant is the promise of eternal relationship and salvation with God obtained through Christ’s victory over death: the Cross and the Resurrection.

It doesn’t matter if the “covenant” which Jesus spoke of is a fulfillment of an old covenant or an entirely new covenant within. What does matter is the fact that these alleged words of Jesus Christ make a more compelling argument than the “ransom” image of the Patristic period and the baited-hook image of Gregory the Great.

Christ’s death and forgiveness

“Christ died for the forgiveness of sins.” Many churchgoers of the Christian faith hear this message at almost every service. What does it mean? What does this have to do with salvation? Answers to these questions are numerous and vague; however, this analysis will outline the major contributions to this topic.
significance of the death on the cross with Christ's divinity and humanity. This notion would be further argued by many theologians for centuries to come. This brings us to another contribution which is summed up by Alister McGrath.

This contribution is the culmination of theories in which forgiveness of human sin is directly related with the death of Christ. McGrath points out three models: representation, participation, and substitution. For representation, Jesus Christ, in his death on the cross is seen as the representative of all of humanity. McGrath states that, "Christ, by his obedience upon the cross, represents his covenant people, winning benefits for them as their representative" (McGrath 421). These benefits, McGrath continues, include the "full and free forgiveness of our sins" (McGrath 422). For participation, believers participate in the risen Christ, through faith. They are "in Christ," to quote St. Paul. McGrath says, "Believers" are caught up in him, and share in is risen life." By participating in the death of and the risen Christ, they attain the benefits won by Christ, and, according to McGrath, one of these benefits is the forgiveness of sins. Lastly, for substitution, Christ is seen as standing in for us on the cross. McGrath states:

Sinners ought to have been crucifies, on account of their sins. Christ is crucified in their place. God allows Christ to stand in our place, taking our guilt upon himself, so that his righteousness—won by obedience upon the cross—might become ours (McGrath 422).

Therefore, McGrath suggests that humans, due to their own sins, ought to be punished for them. However, Jesus, as Mediator, stands in our place, as a sacrifice, so that we might stand in righteousness before God.

Christ's death as a moral example

This section deals with the love of God from humanity as the reason for the death on the cross. As noted before, humans fell away from God through sin and found themselves inadequate to redeem themselves. However, through the love of humanity, God gave his Son to stand in our place so that we may live in relationship with God. Clement of Alexandria describes eloquently and perfectly this love of God for humanity:

And just before he poured out his offering, when he gave himself as a ransom, he left us a new testament: "I give you my love" (John 13:34). What is the nature and extent of this love? For each of us he laid down his life, the life which was worth the whole universe, and he requires in return that we should do the same for each other. (Clement 37)

In summation, God, for the love he had for his people, became human and risked so much so that we can become righteous before him. Clement also alludes to the Fourth Evangelist in describing the love of God and the requirement of humanity. Let us further discuss the Fourth Gospel.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have love you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). This passage in the Gospel according to John describes the love of God has for humanity. The repayment that God requires from humans is not to bow down to God as a slave would, nor to be subject to God's punishment for allowing his Son to die for us; rather, it is the humble task of loving thy neighbor. God is love. By loving one another, we may be more like God.

Another passage from John's Gospel comes to mind when discussing God's love for humanity: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish by may have eternal life" (John 3:16). This passage from the Fourth Gospel is much more explicit as the previous passage. It clearly states that God loves the world and humanity, gave his Son to ultimately save humanity, and due to this love, humanity will be saved from sin and have eternal life with God.

Humane is saved through the death of Christ. Because of God's love and forgiveness, Christ sacrificed himself so that humanity may be righteous before God. Humanity is free, right? Wrong. The death of Christ is only the half of our salvation. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ not only completes the Slavonic work of Christ, but also begins our understanding of eternal relationship with God in the end. It is the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ that we shall now turn.

The Resurrection: Historical Inquiry

In this analysis of the Resurrection, we must first discuss the various historical viewpoints of this ultimate mystery. Four of these viewpoints warrant our attention: resurrection as non-event, resurrection as myth, the resurrection as an historical event open to critical inquiry, and resurrection as an historical event beyond critical inquiry. Each of these can put on a spectrum that
progress from skeptical to moderate. All of these are subject to debate.

**Non-event**

The Resurrection as non-event came out of the Enlightenment. This period in history included a critical outlook on the world through reason. This did not exclude religion. At this time the Church was under heavy scrutiny due to the Protestant Reformation less than a century earlier. The Enlightenment was another step backward for the Church. This led to a skeptical attitude toward the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. One of these skeptics is Gottholm Ephraim Lessing. Lessing concludes that if people are not raised from the dead today, than how can he believe that it happened to Jesus Christ? Lessing states that, "I deny that [the miracles of Jesus Christ] could and should bind me to have even the smallest faith in the other teachings of Jesus" (Lessing, 8.20) (Cf. The Christian Theology Reader 284-285). As a leader of the Enlightenment, it is not difficult that Lessing is skeptical of the Resurrection, as all religion was under a microscope during this period. Alister McGrath comments on Lessing by stating that his argument is surrounded by a central theme of the Enlightenment: human autonomy. McGrath concludes that, "Reality is rational, and human beings have the necessary epistemological capacities to uncover this rational ordering of the world...Truth is something which is discerned, not something which is imposed" (McGrath 398). Human autonomy is the notion that humans can comprehend reality and anything that cannot be explained is simply a fabrication. The Resurrection during this time period was seen as a fabrication, a non-event.

Even though this time period saw the scrutiny of religion, we must understand one simple notion: Anything that has to do with God is unexplainable. As noted before, humans do not have the capacity to comprehend who God is and how God acts. Humans can come close, but we will never know the trueness of God. Knowing this, it is understandable why the Enlightenment thinkers like Lessing concluded the Resurrection to be a non-event; it is because of the need for proof to understand the world. However, Christianity is not something to be proven. God acts through revelation and the Resurrection that was revealed to the disciples and to future believers.

**Myth**

We shall now turn to the Resurrection seen as a myth. The leading writer on this approach is David Friedrich Strauss. Although Strauss testified that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is foundational to Christianity, he believes it to mean something quite different. In his, *Life of Jesus*, Strauss attempts to explain that "the origin of faith in the resurrection of Jesus without any corresponding miraculous fact" (Strauss 758). This is to say that Strauss explains the belief in the Resurrection as a process and not as a historical event. According to McGrath, this approach then views the Resurrection as "A dead Jesus [that] is thus transfigured into an imaginary risen Christ—a mythical risen Christ" (McGrath 399). In other words, that Jesus rose from the dead was a formation in the mind of the believers. As a creation myth in the Aboriginal religions is handed down to each generation, so is the belief in the Resurrection of Christ.

While other writers, like Hermann Samuel Reimarus, viewed the Resurrection as a complete and deliberate fabrication, Strauss introduced the category of myth. McGrath comments on Strauss’ category: "The resurrection [according to Strauss] was to be viewed not as a deliberate fabrication, but as an interpretation of events...in terms which made sense in the culture of the first-century Palestine..." (McGrath 399). Palestine during this period was fixated on a mythical worldview. So, to a first-century Palestinian, the story of the Resurrection made sense, in that it had a mythical overtone. The Resurrection was not viewed as the beginning or foundation of Christian faith; it was viewed as the product.

**Historical event beyond critical inquiry**

The next viewpoint down the spectrum is the Resurrection seen as outside the realm of history. The leading theologian who argues this point is Karl Barth. Frequently, Barth compares the Resurrection with the empty tomb. For Barth, faith is not a response to the empty tomb, but to the risen Christ. Barth says that St. Paul and the other apostles were not looking for the “acceptance of a well-attested historical report” but for “a decision of faith” (Barth Vol. 4, part 1). The Resurrection did not have to be proven. It was faith that the early followers depended on. Faith, by definition, seems to suggest the unnecessary need for historical proof. Barth continues to speak of the Resurrection not proven by the empty tomb. The empty tomb,
according to Barth, is not a way of knowing Christ had risen from the dead.

McGrath also discusses Barth’s view on the Resurrection. McGrath states that, “[Barth’s] assumption [is] that the resurrection of Christ is part of a much larger network of ideas and events, which cannot be disclosed or verified by historical inquiry” (McGrath 401). While this seems to be intriguing, it lacks credibility. Yes, the actual Resurrection was not witnessed by anyone; however, it does not mean that it happened outside of history. The fact that Jesus was once dead and then seen three days later by Mary Magdalene and the other disciples makes it history. The empty tomb, therefore, is a sign or symbol of the risen Christ. The Resurrection seen as a historical event is discussed more clearly by Wolfhart Pannenberg, to whom we shall now turn.

**Historical event open to critical inquiry**

Wolfhart Pannenberg claims that the Resurrection, like all other theological questions, deserves a historical look. He states, “All theological questions and answers have meaning only with the framework of the history which God has with humanity, and through humanity with the whole creation, directed towards a which is hidden to the world, but which has already been revealed in Jesus Christ” (Pannenberg 1). Here, Pannenberg claims that the Resurrection of Christ is an objective historical event. In response to Barth, Pannenberg’s argument is that although the Resurrection is beyond human understanding, the fact that Jesus rose from the dead full body and spirit and was witnessed by his disciples, makes it history. Jesus simply did not leave the tomb as a ghost and came to his disciples solely as spirit. Jesus’ Resurrection included body and spirit. The empty tomb, then, is proof that the Resurrection did indeed happen within the framework of history. Pannenberg, like theologians, were scrutinized. More viewpoints were discussed, and the trend does not seem to be stopping anytime soon.

**Soteriology of the Resurrection**

We have now outlined the theological developments of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We must note that these developments are progressive and have a direct bearing on the time in which they were written. For example, the Enlightenment saw much skepticism on the world. This included religion, and more importantly to our discussion, the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We now turn to how the Resurrection, along with the death of Christ, has a direct bearing on our Salvation.

We have noted in detail that death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice of Christ to forgive humanity of its sins. God, because of his unconditional love for his people, became man, suffered, and died so that we may be righteous before God and ultimately be with God in eternal relationship. Now that humankind is saved, what happens next? The Resurrection shows what will happen to humanity now that it is saved from sin.

We first turn to the Bible. Paul, in his letter to the Romans discusses the saving power of the Resurrection: “It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom 4: 24-25). Here, St. Paul discusses the salvific role of the Resurrection. Jesus Christ was raised for our justification. Justification comes from faith. F.X. Durrwell discusses this further: “The Resurrection is the principle of our justification because of the faith it elicits” (Durrwell 26). The Resurrection requires us to believe, and if we believe, we are justified before God. However, it is fitting to note that not only does the Resurrection elicit faith in us; it is the object of our faith. In other words, our faith revolves around the Resurrection. It is the basis for our faith and, in turn, our justification before God.

If the Resurrection is our basis for faith, then what do we have faith in? In simple terms, we have faith that God will resurrect us, like Christ, in the end of time. St. Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” often. This has implications in the saving power of the Resurrection. By being in Christ, we shall rise like him in eternal relationship with the Father. St. Paul states, “even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2: 5-6). The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foreshadowing of our resurrection in the eschaton—or end times.

Thomas Aquinas also comments on the saving power of the Resurrection. He states that “It behooved Christ to rise again for the raising of our hope, since through seeing Christ, who is our head, rise again, we hope that we likewise shall rise again” (Aquinas III Q. 53 Art 1). The Resurrection gives us hope to be resurrected like Jesus, to a new life and eternal relationship with God.

Durrwell also gives rise to this issue. He states, in response to the passage from Paul’s Letter
to the Ephesians, that, "The Father has given us life by raising up Christ, we are included in the one life-giving act which was performed for our Lord" (Durrwell 31). The issue of the "one life-giving act" now warrants our attention. Many ask, how can all of humankind be taken up in this single act of the Resurrection? It is the precisely the question that gives us the answer. The Resurrection is not a single act in realm of history. It is an ongoing process. Durrwell explains this more clearly: "...our justification is in fact a single, unbroken reality" (Durrwell 31). In other words, our entire ideology has changed. We are "reborn" into a state of grace and we are now, through faith, "in Christ." When Jesus told his people to "repent" (cf. Matt 3:2), he does not mean to ask for forgiveness. He quite literally means to "change one's mind" or to "change one's heart" (Greek μετανοεῖν). In other words, Jesus wants us to change the way we think because our life has been will be changed from a state of sin to a state of eternal relationship with God.

Conclusion

In summation, salvation comes through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We note before the effects of the death on the cross (i.e. forgiveness of sins, sacrifice, etc). We have also discussed the reasons why the Resurrection is essential, if not foundational, for our salvation. The Resurrection not only is the victory over death by Jesus Christ and the foundation of our faith in God, but it is also the foreshadowing of humanity's ultimate outcome: we will be resurrected, like Jesus, to a new life, into eternal relationship with God. The death and Resurrection are not independent events of Jesus' history. These events coincide and depend on each other. There is no salvation without the death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Many people may think that "being saved" means Salvation. This is in fact not the case. While the cross saved us from sin, the Resurrection completed our Salvation. Salvation in Christ means Salvation in all of Christ. This means Salvation does not come with the death of Christ, but also through Resurrection as well.

We must also note that Salvation is something this is yet to come. Salvation has an eschatological dimension. According to St. Paul, Salvation has a past, present, and future component to it. While we are justified in the past and sanctified in the present, we attain salvation in the future (cf. McGrath 410). At the end of time, we shall be with God in eternal salvation (i.e. eternal relationship with God). It is concluded through this analysis that Salvation is shaped by the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. McGrath concludes that, "Jesus Christ provides a model or paradigm for the redeemed life" (McGrath 409). By his perfect sacrifice of dying on the cross, Jesus saved us from sin; however, it is through the Resurrection that we find the faith that we will ultimately be in eternal relationship with God.

Works Cited


Clement of Alexandria. Quis Dives Salvetur.


