
The Paradoxical Death of Christ

The paradox of the Incarnation – The Word remains transcendent in the Incarnation and the One who is Life suffers death

The Word of God who is born ineffably from the being of God the Father, has honoured our nature by taking up the human condition, but he did not thereby become alienated from his own transcendence but remained God even in his manhood. This is why we do not say that the temple born from the holy virgin (i.e. Christ's humanity) was assumed in the order of an instrument, but rather we follow in the faith of the sacred scriptures and the sayings of the saints and we maintain that the Word became flesh in the senses already exposed by us so often before.

He has laid down his life for us, for since his death was to be the salvation of the world he 'endured the cross, scorning the shame' (Heb.12.2) even though, as God, he was Life by nature. How can Life be said to die? It is because Life suffered death in its very own body that it might be revealed as life when it brought the body back to life again.¹

The Word suffers death in his "very own body"

Emmanuel ... was the Word in his own body born from a woman, and he gave it to death in due season, but he suffered nothing at all in his own nature for as such he is life and life-giver. Nonetheless he made the things of the flesh his own so that the suffering could be said to be his. The same is true of his rising up on behalf of all. Having died for the sake of all to redeem all that is under heaven with his own blood, and to acquire for God the Father all that is on the face of the earth...

He who alone was more worthy than all others laid down his life for the sake of all and for a short time, in an economy, allowed death to pull down his flesh. But then, as Life, he destroyed death, refusing to suffer anything contrary to his own nature; and he did this so that corruption should be weakened in the bodies of all and so that the dominion of death should be destroyed. 'For just as all men die in Adam, so all of us shall be made alive in Christ' (1 Cor. 15.22). For if he had not suffered for us as man he would not have achieved our salvation as God. So first of all he is said to have died as a man, but then to have come back to life again since he is God by nature.²

¹ *Letter to the Monks 23* (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, p.259)

² *Letter to the Monks 24-25* (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, p.260)

If “Word-flesh” did not die, death is not destroyed and we are not saved

If the Christ is neither true Son, nor God by nature, but merely a man like us and an instrument of the Godhead, then we are certainly not saved in God but rather saved by someone like us who died on our behalf and was raised again by external powers. But in that case how could death have been destroyed by Christ (1 Cor. 15.54)? Nonetheless I hear him clearly saying about his own life: ‘No one takes it from me for I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again’ (Jn.10.18).

For he who did not know death descended into death alongside us through his own flesh so that we too might rise up with him to life. And coming back to life he despoiled Hell, not as a man like us, but as God alongside us and for us in the flesh. Our nature is enriched with incorruptibility in him as the first, and death has been crushed since it launched a hostile attack against the body of Life itself. Just as death conquered in Adam, so was it ruined in Christ.³

The Word must have truly become flesh for the overthrow of death and abolition of sin to have occurred

In short, he took what was ours to be his very own so that we might have all that was his. “He was rich but he became poor for our sake, so that we might be enriched by his poverty” (2 Cor 8:9). When they say that the Word of God did not become flesh, or rather did not undergo birth from a woman according to the flesh, they bankrupt the economy of salvation, for if he who was rich did not impoverish himself, abasing himself to our condition out of tender love, then we have not gained his riches but are still in our poverty, still enslaved by sin and death, because the Word becoming flesh is the undoing and the abolition of all that fell upon human nature as our curse and punishment. If they so pull up the root of our salvation, and dislodge the cornerstone of our hope, how will anything else be left standing?

As I have said, if the Word has not become flesh then neither has the dominion of death been overthrown, and in no way has sin been abolished, and we are still held captive in the transgressions of the first man, Adam, deprived of any return to a better condition; a return which I would say has been gained by Christ the Saviour of us all.⁴

³ *Letter to the Monks* 26 (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, pp.260-1)

⁴ *On The Unity of Christ* (McGuckin, pp.59-60)