



Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement

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Divine Child Abuse?

We need a doctrine of the cross which faces up realistically to the enormity of the Father's involvement at Calvary. Why did God do this – *have* to do this – to his Son?

[And] what of the more specific claim that the cross is an example of 'child abuse' (the adjective 'cosmic' is quite redundant here, since it was not the cosmos, but God the Father, who was allegedly guilty of abuse). The charge is completely inept, because it isolates the story of the crucifixion from the total New Testament witness to Jesus.

It ignores, for example, the fact that for most of his life Jesus enjoyed the love, protection and encouragement of his heavenly Father. This is why he was able to live a life free from anxiety, confident that he was never alone (John 8:16) but that God was always within earshot; and this is why, too, he could say it was his meat and drink to do the will of the one who had sent him (John 4:34). An abused and damaged child he was not.

Similarly, the charge willfully ignores the obvious fact that at the time of the alleged 'abuse' Jesus was not a child, but a mature adult, able to make his own free choices and willing to take responsibility for them. From this point of view, and even at its grimmest, the cross no more amounts to child abuse than did the action of the British government in dropping grown men and women behind enemy lines as agents of the Special Operations Executive during the Second World War. Like them, Jesus was a volunteer. Once in the world, he had freely chosen the path that led to Calvary (Phil. 2:8), and, equally freely, he had resolved to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13). In accordance with this, he made no attempt to escape when the arresting party approached, even though he had often evaded his enemies before. He says simply, 'Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?' (John 18:11).

Even more glaringly, the child-abuse charge ignores the clear New Testament witness to the unique identity of Jesus. Not only was he not a child; he was not a mere human. He was God: the eternal Logos, the divine Son, the Lord before whom every knee will one day bow (Phil. 2:10). This is no helpless victim. This is the Father's equal. This is one who in the most profound sense is one with God; one in whom God judges himself, one in whom God condemns himself, one in whom God lets himself be abused. The critics cannot be allowed the luxury of a selective use of the New Testament. It is the very same scriptures which portray the cross as an act of God the Father which also portray the sufferer as God the Son, and the resulting doctrine cannot be wrenched from its setting in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The 'abused child' is 'very God of very God'. It is divine blood that is shed at Calvary (Acts 20:28) as God surrenders himself to the worst that man can do and bears the whole cost of saving the world.

Yet Jesus is never, not even for a moment, man's helpless victim. He is indomitable in his

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BOOK EXCERPT

Donald Macleod (MA, University of Glasgow; DD, Westminster Theological Seminary) served as professor and chair of systematic theology at the Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh and also as the school's principal. He pastored Kilmallie Free Church for six years and also served at Patrick Highland Free Church, a bilingual congregation in Glasgow, Scotland. He is well known as a previous editor of *The Monthly Record* of the Free Church and as a columnist in the *West Highland Free Press* and *The Observer* newspaper.

Spirit-filled humanity; and when he completes his mission by giving up his Spirit, God, the allegedly 'abusive' Father, exalts him to the highest place, commands every knee to bow and orders the entire universe to confess him Lord of all (Phil. 2:9-11).

But what can we say as to the precise nature of the Father's action at Calvary? The New Testament answer is breathtaking. He acted in the role of priest. Just as Jesus 'gave' his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45) so God the Father 'gave' his one and only Son; just as Christ 'delivered up' himself as a fragrant offering (Eph. 5:2) so God the Father 'delivered up' his own Son (Rom. 8:32). Clearly, then, corresponding to the priesthood of the self-giving Son there is a priesthood of God the Father. From this point of view, Golgotha becomes his temple, where, far from abusing a child or sadistically inflicting cruelty, he is engaged in the most solemn business that earth can witness. He is offering a sacrifice. The cross is his altar, and his own Son the sacrifice.

The evidence that Jesus and his apostles understood the cross in terms of sacrifice is overwhelming. There is something deeper here, however, than the struggle of bewildered disciples to find concepts by which to explain the tragedy which had overtaken their master. It was not human ingenuity that discovered in the Old Testament sacrifices an interpretative framework for the cross. On the contrary, God himself had provided that framework. In the order of knowing, the Levitical sacrifices came before the sacrifice of Calvary; but in the order of being, the sacrifice of Christ came first. He was the Lamb ordained before the foundation of the world, and the Levitical system was but his shadow. We need to be careful here. Christ was not a priest only metaphorically. He was the true priest, and his sacrifice the real sacrifice. It was the Aaronic priesthood that was figurative, and its sacrifices that were metaphorical. Just as Jesus was 'the Root of David' (Rev. 5:5), so he was the root of the Passover, the sin offering and the scapegoat, all of which were divinely configured to prefigure him. The understanding of Jesus' death as a sacrifice is not a human convention, but a divine revelation.

—Adapted from chapter three, *"The Divine Paradox: The Crucified Son"*

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