

CHAPTER V

THE EARLIEST CONFESSION OF
THE ATONEMENT IN PAUL*

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WHEN I SPEAK OF THE EARLIEST CONFESSION OF THE ATONEMENT, I have in mind the earliest form preserved for us in which the *kerygma* of the atonement came to a certain fixed interpretation and functioned in that form as an authoritative tradition. The formula in I Cor. 15:3, in which Paul describes the redemptive significance of the death of Christ (i.e. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures") can be distinguished as such. The purpose of the following contribution, through which I am happy to associate with those who desire to honour the person and work of Leon Morris, is not only to study the content of this earliest confession as preserved by Paul but also to investigate how this traditional confession functions in the wider context of Paul's preaching.

That in these words, quoted from I Corinthians, we do indeed meet with an old, already existing, formula, and that they are not an original statement of Paul himself is evident in several ways from the text itself. Paul speaks here about the *tradition* which he has delivered to the church as the point of departure¹ for his preaching and which he himself had also received as such. He adds, and from this its fundamental significance is evident, that the church, if it is not to lose its firm foundation, must hold on to this tradition in the manner (literally: in the words²) in which he has preached it. Both the circumstantial paradosis-terminology,³ and the emphasis on the necessity to keep this tradition untainted, point to an earlier, authoritative formulation. This is also clear from the words with which Paul quotes the tradition in the verses 3 ff.,⁴ and which together form the *λόγος* of verse 2. It has been frequently pointed out that in this passage we come across a number of expressions which are not characteristic of Paul's phraseology⁵. Above all, however, the content of verse 3

* Translated by J. W. Deenick, Geelong, Victoria.

¹ ἐν πρώτοις, v. 3.

² τίνι λόγῳ, v. 2.

³ παρέλαβετε, παρέδωκα, παρέλαβον, but also ἐστήκατε and κατέχετε in vv. 1 and 2 belong to these (cf. Mk. 7:4; II Thess. 2:15).

⁴ Expositors disagree on how far this traditional *λόγος* continues and where Paul himself begins to speak again.

⁵ See for this, e.g. Jacob Kremer, *Das älteste Zeugnis von der Auferstehung Christi* (1967), p. 25.

is itself remarkable. In I Cor. 15 Paul addresses those who deny the resurrection of the dead. One would therefore expect that he would direct his argument exclusively to the resurrection. Instead he begins to speak of the *death* of Christ, of the significance of his death, of the evidence for it in the Scriptures, and further of Jesus' burial. All the more clearly this proves that Paul appeals to traditional formulas, traditions delivered at the beginning when he founded the church, and which he now brings to their remembrance.

The importance of this observation will become even clearer when we take further note of the content of this tradition. We limit ourselves to verse 3 i.e. to the part that refers to the death of Christ. Of great significance is the manner in which the redemptive character of Christ's death is expressed both in the words: *for our sins*, and in the addition: *in accordance with the Scriptures*, which is repeated in verse 4 when the resurrection is mentioned. In this way the tradition explicitly gains the character of an *interpretation*. One could argue that this applies to all of the tradition, as, for example, it comes to us in the synoptic gospels. Yet the words: "died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures", contain something like a "systematic" or "confessional" summary which distinguishes itself in this regard from the historical *kerygma* as we find it in the synoptic gospels and as Paul, for example, quotes it in I Cor. 11:23 ff. It is for this reason that we believe we may characterize these words as the earliest *confessional* statement concerning the atonement.

The element of atonement is naturally included in the manner in which in these words the death of Christ is related to "our sins". The expression "for our sins" or "for the sake of our sins"¹ is more specific than the more general formula "for us" or "for our sake" which also frequently occurs in statements relating to the death of Christ (cf. Rom. 5:8; II Cor. 5:15; I Thess. 5:10; also Rom. 5:6; 14:15; I Cor. 1:13; II Cor. 5:14; I Peter 3:18). The expression "for our sins" relates the death of Christ to our existence burdened with sin and guilt, and expresses no less than that by his death our sins have been done away with, eradicated and atoned for.²

This is confirmed by the addition "in accordance with the Scriptures", which must be taken in close connection with the words "for our sins". Because, even though the Scriptures are mentioned in general and no special passage of Scripture is referred to (which could well indicate again the early period from which the statement originates), most scholars assume that the words "for our sins" have been derived from Isa. 53:5. Most probably these words were already applied to the death of Christ in the Aramaic-speaking church³. Against this background of Isa. 53:5 the

¹ ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν.

² See, for example, H. Riesenfeld, *TWNT* VIII, p. 515 (E.T., p. 512).

³ See J. Jeremias, *Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu*³ (1960), p. 95 His argument is directed against the objections of H. Conzelmann, who wants to explain the formula from the LXX and so from the Greek-speaking church ("Zur Analyse der Bekenntnisformel I Kor. 15:3-5", *Ev.*

words "for our sins" gain a very clear context and one may reckon it to be evident that the interpretation of Jesus' death as an atoning death already belonged to the very early kerygma which in this fixed form has been delivered to us.

It is all the more clear that the words used in I Cor. 15:3 must indeed be understood in this sense from what Paul says a little later about Christ having been raised. There he writes to the church: if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and *you are still in your sins* (v. 17). Christ's resurrection is the indispensable complement of His death for our sins. Christ's death alone is for that reason insufficient. That is to say, His death is not merely the means of grace that is applied to us, viz., in the contrition and penance which His death works in us and so, through repentance, delivers us from a guilty conscience and the burden of our sins. No matter how much the death of Christ also imparts itself as a power to us and in us, his death has, in relation to our sins primarily an "objective" significance. It was an event that happened to, was executed upon, Christ before God's face and on our behalf. It was in His death that He atoned for our sins and in this He was recognized and accepted by God in His resurrection. For that reason we would "still be in our sins" had Christ not been raised. Christ's resurrection is the public recognition and acceptance by God of His (Christ's) sacrifice as the eradication and expiation of our sins.

The very same thought is expressed, even more explicitly, in another word central to Paul's kerygma: "who (Christ) was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). These words have been related closely to Paul's statement in I Cor. 15:3, and quite properly so. Many consider these words also as an already existing formula used by Paul to conclude his argument in Romans 4. However this be, the words "for our trespasses"¹ in Rom. 4:25 are in any case merely a variant to "for our sins" in I Cor. 15:3, and thus an alternative rendering of Isa. 53:5, where also for that matter in the *parallelismus membrorum* two different expressions are used. The preposition: "because of" (*διὰ* + acc.) in Rom. 4:25 and "for the sake of" (*ὕπερ* + gen.) in I Cor. 15:3 will have to be understood as two different renderings of the Hebrew *min* or the Aramaic *be*. It is further obvious that the more causal "because of" in Romans 4:25 does not merely mean that "we" (the human race) are the cause of His death, i.e., because "we", represented by the Jews, killed Him. No matter how much people have been responsible for Christ's death the logical subject of the words "put to death for our trespasses" is not Jesus' murderers but God himself. The expression "was put to death", or as the AV has it more accurately "was delivered", is thus an established passion formula (cf. Rom. 8:32; I Cor. 11:23; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2) in which either

¹ *διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν.*

Th. 25, 1965, pp. 1-11), maintained and expanded by E. Klappert, "Zur Frage des semitischen oder griechischen Urtextes von I Kor. XV. 3-5", NTS 13 (1966-1967), pp. 168-73.

God Himself (Rom. 8:32) or Christ (Gal. 2:20) is the acting person. Here, in view of the passive form being used and Jesus being the object of the delivering, only God Himself can be meant. In that case, our sins are *the reason why* He was delivered, i.e., our sins moved God to deliver Christ, namely to make Him atone for our sins; or, if one would take "because of" (*διὰ*) a little more final: in order to free us from our sins. But in both cases the real point is that Christ (suffering and dying) substituted for us so as to carry our sins and to atone for them, wholly in accordance with Isaiah 53.

Only in this way are the two parts of the statement in Romans 4:25 in agreement with each other. The second part, as we remember, speaks of Jesus having been raised by God for the sake of (*διὰ*) our *justification*. This last word has, as always with Paul, a forensic meaning. It speaks of our being *acquitted* by God. The resurrection of Christ is therefore here also (as in I Cor. 15:4) the divine reverse of Christ's deliverance by God into death. As He executed His judgement over sin in delivering Christ up to death so God executed our acquittal and justification in Christ's resurrection.

We are therefore free to say that Rom. 4:25, whether it is in this formulation originally Pauline or (as in I Cor. 15:3) an already fixed formula, makes completely transparent, in so far as that would still be needed, the meaning of the earliest Christian confession concerning the redemptive effect of Christ's death. It interprets this effect in accordance with Isaiah 53, it points to God as the acting person in the surrender and death of Christ, and it points to our sins as the cause and the motive for this action. So it characterizes Christ's death as a subjection to the divine judgement for our sake and in our place, and thus as the accomplishment of atonement for our sins.

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How much this basic thought of the earliest Christian kerygma functions in *Paul's whole preaching and theology* can be made clear in various ways. But here again we have to distinguish between different formulations of the kerygma which in turn may flow together or appear side by side. Relevant here are the thought of *atonement sacrifice* derived from the O.T. cultus; the concept, so characteristic in Paul's gospel, of *forensic justification*; and the idea of *substitution* combined with these last two conceptions.

The concept of the *atonement sacrifice* occurs in a passage that is particularly important for Paul's whole doctrine of redemption i.e., Rom. 3:21 ff., where it says in verse 25 that God has put forward Christ as an expiation which receives its efficacy from "his blood". Even though the atoning sacrifice is mentioned explicitly only here in Paul's letters, we find the

same thought in places where "the blood of Christ" is referred to i.e., apart from Rom. 3:25 also in Rom. 5:9; Eph. 2:13 and in Col. 1:20. It has quite rightly been pointed out that we have to understand this expression in *sacrificial* terms.¹ Crucifixion was not itself a particularly bloody execution. When therefore *the blood* of Christ is regularly referred to, it is not so much because of the manner of His death but because of its significance as a sacrifice, especially as an atoning sacrifice, in which the blood was shed to cover and eradicate sin. In that sense Paul speaks in I Cor. 5:7 of Jesus' death as a paschal sacrifice and as an offering for the eradication of sin; and, in the words of the Holy Supper, Paul speaks of the New Testament or covenant that is founded in the blood of Christ (I Cor. 11:25, cf. 27). We are therefore able to interpret the shorter formulations, to which we referred earlier, in the same light; such as "for our sins" (I Cor. 15:3; cf. also Gal. 1:4) or simply "for us" (Rom. 5:8; 14:15; II Cor. 5:14), "for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6) and other such phrases in which the death and self-surrender of Christ for our sake are expressed (Rom. 8:32; Gal. 2:20 *et al.*).

As mentioned already, the idea of atoning sacrifice is in Paul closely related to the concept of forensic justification. So, for example, in Rom. 3:25 where it is said that God has put forward Christ as an expiation to show His righteousness (vv. 25, 26), God manifests Himself in the death of Christ as the righteous Judge, who in Christ's death judges and condemns sin (cf. also Rom. 8:3) and who at the same time justifies and acquits "him who has faith in Jesus". Therefore it can be said that we are justified "through his blood" (Rom. 5:9). In both concepts Christ appears as the substitute; e.g., when it is said that "one has died for all" in II Cor. 5:14, where the "for us" of the atoning sacrifice is very closely related to the substitution² by the "One" for the "all". We find the same thought elsewhere, when the justification of the ungodly is founded on their sins having been accounted to Christ and when He thus substitutes for them; e.g. (and again in close correspondence to the terminology of Isaiah 53), in II Cor. 5:21: "for our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God". In both parts of this statement Paul uses the *abstractum pro concreto*: God made the sinless One the carrier of sin so that we in Him would be righteousness before God. Substitution and justification are closely related so that it can be said that Christ has delivered us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse (i.e., one cursed by God) for us (Gal. 3:13).

¹ J. Jeremias, *Der Opfertod Jesu Christi* (1963), p. 16.

² H. Riesenfeld, *TWNT VIII*, p. 516 (E.T., p. 513): "τῷ ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἀποθανόντι καὶ ἐγερθέντι in v. 15 is based on a kerygmatic formulation like that in I Cor. 15:3, and the prep. thus has the primary sense of "on behalf or in favour of". But in the more forensic expression εἰς ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπέθανεν in v. 14 the sense "in the place of" is predominant, as is shown by the development of the thought in the following clause: ἅρα οἱ πάντες ἀπέθανον."

From this whole complex of pronouncements, to which still others could be added, also from the so-called deutero-Pauline letters, it becomes very clear that Paul's kerygma entirely agrees with what has been delivered to us as the earliest Christian confession concerning the atoning power of Christ's death and presents with rich nuances a broad unfolding of it. The basic thought behind it is found in the cultic-juridical aspect, the deep significance of which consists in this that God Himself gives the atoning sacrifice that is needed to cover sin (Rom. 3:25) and that He in order to condemn sin where it demanded condemnation i.e., in our human existence, sent His own Son so as to condemn sin and to atone for it in Him (Rom. 8:3). The initiative of the atonement rests with God's grace. It is He who in Christ reconciles the world unto Himself. Yet sin must be atoned for, must be eradicated and condemned. That is the atoning power of Christ's death according to the earliest Christian confession, and according to Paul's kerygma and doctrine as well.

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It has been frequently argued that, while Paul took over the tradition concerning the redemptive character of Christ's death which had already been established before his time, yet with him all of this gained different dimensions in depth and breadth. E. Käsemann, for example, writes¹ that Paul often expressed what he really had in mind with the help of traditional formulas. Also according to Käsemann I Cor. 15:3 ought to be referred to in this connection. There the words "for us" represent the central motif, containing both meanings i.e., "for our sake" and "in our place", and establishing our inability to work out our own salvation.² In this way a certain shift occurred with Paul, respecting the tradition, characterized by Käsemann as a "radicalization".³ Particularly the sacrifice motif as interpretation of Christ's death is moved completely into the background. Paul certainly knew the concept of sacrifice and used it without objection (*bedenkenlos*), but other interpretations moved so much to the forefront that for that reason alone the sacrifice motif is given very little real significance.⁴ The same applies to the early concept of the vicarious suffering of Christ, the carrying of the punishment for our sins. According to Käsemann, Paul's texts give no support to this idea. Paul knew the concept of substitution (*Stellvertretung*) but not in the sense that Christ offered the sacrifice in our stead, or carried the punishment for sin in our place. The effect of the cross on *people* so much determined Paul's thinking that its effect upon *God* does not come into the picture at all. The substitution consists in the deep *shame* of Christ's incarnation as the price of redemption, accomplished as it is without our help.⁵ On the cross

¹ "Die Heilsbedeutung des Todes Jesu nach Paulus", in H. Conzelmann, E. Flesseman-van Leer, E. Haenchen, *Zur Bedeutung des Todes Jesu. Exegetische Beiträge* (1967), pp. 11-34.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 18. ³ *Op. cit.*, p. 22. ⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 21. ⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

it becomes manifest that the true God alone is the Creator who has to accomplish His purpose with the help of that which is nothing, as the One who raises from the dead; and also on the cross it becomes evident that man is sinner, who cannot save himself or conquer the distance between God and himself. Paul interpreted the received tradition of the cross of Jesus in the sense of his own doctrine of justification.¹ And this justification is to be understood as atonement because it makes an end to the enmity, and grants peace from God to those who otherwise would remain enemies but are now through the *pax Christi* led back to obedience.² Here too the current tradition is used in order to present the theology of Paul himself in clearer outline, and in this way the tradition itself is given a different emphasis. Did the tradition speak of forgiveness of earlier trespasses because of the atonement accomplished through Jesus' death (Rom. 3:25; II Cor. 5:19)? For Paul, salvation is not primarily the end of perdition and guilt, which once separated us from God, but (acc. to Rom. 5:9 ff.; Rom. 8:2) salvation is *liberty from the power of sin*, death and divine anger; it is more particularly the possibility of the new life. "Er hat die von ihm aufgegriffene Überlieferung also radicalisiert".³

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In his *Theology of the New Testament*, Bultmann is of the opinion that Paul's interpretation of the redemptive character of Christ's death indeed follows the tradition dating from the earliest Christian church, but that for him the most typical concept is *not* contained in that tradition.⁴ With regard to the first – the tradition – Bultmann also points to those statements in which Paul describes the death of Christ as the atoning sacrifice designated by God, and refers to Rom. 3:25 ff. and Rom 5:9 as well as to I Cor. 15:3. However, for Bultmann too, this tradition does not represent the most essential and typical elements in Paul's concept. We see rather that in other places Paul enhances the categories of cultic-juridical thinking (*gesprengt*). The death of Christ is then no longer merely a sacrifice that takes away the guilt of sin, i.e., eradicates the punishment evoked by sin, but also becomes a means by which one is liberated from the powers of this aeon, of the law, of sin and of death.⁵

Bultmann believes that Paul describes these concepts, so typical for him, in terms which he borrowed from the Hellenistic mystery religions (in which the initiated also participate in the death and resurrection of the deity) and which he then further interprets in the categories of the Gnostic myth. According to these Gnostic notions there would exist a kind of cosmic unity between the redeemer and the believers redeemed by him, a *soma*, so that what happens to the redeemer (or has happened to

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 20. ² *Op. cit.*, p. 22. ³ *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴ *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (1953), p. 291.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 292.

him) also happens to those who belong to his *soma*. By using Gnostic categories Paul would have been able to characterize the redemptive significance of Christ's death and resurrection not only as a sacrifice offered once and for all on our behalf or as a punishment suffered in our place, but also as a redemptive event that can be interpreted as *an event that indeed happens to man*.¹

In the theology of both Bultmann and Käsemann, we find a tendency to establish a certain distance between the oldest Christian tradition concerning the death of Christ on the one hand and Paul on the other. Paul would link up with the tradition but it would not be typical for his own thinking. While the tradition emphasized what once "objectively" happened for us but without us, Paul was more interested in the liberating effect of the death of Christ as an event that in reality happens *to man*. While Käsemann, in the essay from which I quoted, tries to make this clear particularly with terms derived from the Pauline doctrine of justification (the death of Christ sets us free because it robs us of presumptuousness and places us under God's liberating regime), Bultmann refers to the categories of Gnosticism as the means preferred by Paul to express the existential liberation which the death of Christ means to the individual man.

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In my opinion one will indeed have to distinguish, in Paul's doctrine of the atonement, between a twofold explication of the earlier tradition as we have it in I Cor. 15:3 – or, more precisely, one will have to recognize that Paul endeavours to unfold the full content and consequence of the "Christ died for our sins".

The epistle to the Romans in particular gives us a clear insight in the development of Paul's thinking. In studying this letter we have to remember all the time that here Paul unfolds his kerygma in constant confrontation with the redemption pattern of the Jewish synagogue. Therefore, when he expresses the redemptive nature of Christ's death above all in the juridical-cultic categories of expiation and justification (as in the central passage of Romans 3:25 ff.) it is not merely an adaptation to a tradition which would be hardly, if at all, characteristic for his own train of thought but it far rather expresses what is fundamental to his whole gospel, which is partly also determined by this confrontation with the equally juridical elements at the basis of the Jewish doctrine of redemption. That also explains why the doctrine of justification receives such disproportionately strong emphasis. This in itself is no "radicalization" of the tradition, nor is it a shift (concerning the effect of the atonement) from what once happened for our sake (the removal of the guilt

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 295.

and punishment of sin) to that which now and constantly again happens to us (the liberation from sin as an actual power and the possibility of the new life in liberty). With Paul the doctrine of justification even in its most radicalised form remains rooted in what Christ once accomplished for us and without us (*pro nobis et extra nos*). With a full range of motifs and metaphors it points to this "objective" significance of Christ's death and resurrection as the only and unrepeatable act of atonement, as becomes unmistakably clear, for example, from the idea of reckoning and imputation elaborately worked out in Romans 4 and from the concluding statement in Romans 4:25; "who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

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To be sure the Apostle does not leave it at that: he also explains the redemptive significance of Christ's death as a liberation of the whole life of the believer. I do not think one ought to say that in this respect Paul transcends the earlier tradition, because there is no reason to believe that the tradition of the death of Christ would have to be understood *exclusively* in the juridical and cultic categories. Already the words of I Cor. 15:3, oriented as they are to Isaiah 53, have – we may say – a naturally wider implication than one limited to the juridical. However, this does not detract from the fact that we find in Paul – particularly in the letter to the Romans – a far clearer and far more extensive explanation of the all-embracing import of the atonement.

Here too we have to take into account that he wishes to maintain the gospel of the atonement and justification by faith over against the Jewish doctrine of redemption. Even this Jewish doctrine did not limit itself to the juridical aspect. In relation to this we observe, beginning with Romans 5, a clear progress and extension of thought. Here Paul does his best to clarify the fact that justification by faith as proclaimed by him is not just an isolated, abstract juridical judgement that would not effect any concrete change in our human life which is full of temptation and strife, such as could easily create among his opponents the impression of a mere assertion not in agreement with the reality of life. Over against this he contends that precisely this justification by faith controls all of life and also as "peace with God" gives foundation to the hope of participating in the total liberation of life, the glory of God. For that purpose he appeals precisely to the forensic character of Christ's death as a death for the ungodly. For if the death of Christ, while we were yet sinners, reconciled us with God, how much more shall we, now that we have been reconciled, be saved by His *life*? Therefore justification is not merely a divine acquittal, once executed in the death of Christ; it is also an invitation into a relationship with the saving power of the life of Christ (Rom. 5:10) or, as

Paul calls it in the remainder of chapter 5: "justification to life"¹, and "justification to eternal life"² through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:18, 21).

So here we see an expansion of the concept of justification or, rather, a connexion between "justification" and "life", whereby on the one hand the concept of "justification" wholly retains its forensic meaning, whereas on the other hand, through its connexion with the concept of "life", it is further and more directly qualified as a *life giving* and *life related* justification.

Added to this we find in Rom. 5:12 the highly remarkable parallel between Adam and Christ. The fact that Paul introduces this here is obviously related to the argument in Romans 5:1–11 – that justification by faith is not an *abstractum*, not merely a divine acquittal, but that it also constitutes the foundation of hope for the future and grants participation in the life of Christ. This is clarified through the participation of "the many" in "the One", on the one hand Adam, on the other Christ whose type Adam was (5:14). Now while the participation of the many in Adam means participation in sin, so the participation of the many in Christ is participation in the abundant grace of God and in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:15). This also means participation in the triumphant *life* of Christ – "those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ"³ (v. 17) – which leads Paul twice to qualify justification as a justification that grants life (vv. 18 and 21).

As we see, this concept of justification also remains predominantly the foundation in the Adam–Christ parallel (cf. also v. 20). At the same time, this parallel serves to extend the idea of the atonement (vv. 10, 11) which is being worked out, particularly in chapter 6. It is precisely this antithetical parallel between Adam and Christ which enables Paul to involve the church in a more comprehensive manner in the death and resurrection of Christ. What is effected in the obedience or the disobedience of the One applies also to the many. They, Adam and Christ, represent the two turning points in human history. They include in their person all who belong to them. It is not merely a question of one or more isolated acts, which the One does to the advantage or disadvantage of the others, but it is the totality of life which they represent and in which the many are included with them.

This expansion of the concept is also demonstrated in the terminology. While the juridical–cultic notion of the substitution is generally expressed in the prepositions *ὑπέρ* and *περί*, whereby Christ is the subject ("Christ

¹ δικαίωσις ζωῆς (Rom. 5:18).

² δικαιοσύνη εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον (Rom. 5:21).

³ ἐν ζωῇ βασιλεύουσιν (cf. v. 21: ἡ χάρις βασιλεύσῃ διὰ δικαιοσύνης εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον).

has died for us”), now the participation of the church in Christ’s death is also further expressed with the help of the preposition *σύν*, whereby the church is the subject (“crucified, died, raised with Christ” etc.). For the transition from the one concept to the other, scholars have often appealed to II Cor. 5:14: “one has died for all, therefore all have died.” However, this transition can also be traced in the course of the argument in Romans 5 and 6. In Rom. 5:6 ff. Paul still uses the traditional formulation: “Christ died for us,” in which the cultic-juridical significance of Christ’s death comes to the fore: “we are justified by His blood”. Yet, after having introduced the concept of the One and the many he speaks in chapter 6 of our having been crucified and our having died with Christ. And so we are no longer dealing merely with justification but specifically with the church having been redeemed from the *power* of sin. For the church is included in the death and resurrection of Christ and thus has died *to sin*¹ (Rom. 6:2) and now is dead *to sin* and lives for God (v. 11).² In that way he lays the foundation for his further exposition in chapters 6, 7 and 8, in which he interprets the redemptive nature of Christ’s death and resurrection not merely in terms of justification and acquittal, but also in those of liberation from the power of sin, of renewal of life and of sanctification.

According to Bultmann, Paul borrowed this idea of the participation of the many in the death and resurrection of the One from the Hellenistic mystery religions and from the Gnostic concept, which envisaged a cosmic inclusion of believers in the *soma* of the Redeemer. From this it would then be evident that the typically Pauline elements in the doctrine of atonement ought to be explained from the Gnostic-Hellenistic *Lebensgefühl* of subjection to the powers of sin and death, rather than from the tradition which interprets the redemption given in Christ’s death in juridical and cultic categories.

Now the Gnostic background of the Pauline conception of the *soma* of Christ has, on closer examination, proven to be a very dubious *interpretamentum* for Paul’s doctrine of redemption, as also the reference to the cultic-myths of the Hellenistic mystery religions and the so-called “myth of the redeemed redeemer”.³ Yet, however that may be, it seems to me that in this way – in the footsteps of the old liberal tradition⁴ – an increasing distance is posited, improperly, between Paul’s thinking and the early Christian tradition concerning the death of Christ. For although it is true that in chapters 6–8 the essential point of the argument has shifted, since from here on all emphasis is placed on the fact of liberation from the power

¹ ἀπεθάνομεν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ.

² νεκροὺς μὲν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, ζῶντας δὲ τῷ θεῷ.

³ See, for example, H. M. Schenke, *Der Gott “Mensch” in der Gnosis: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Beitrag zur Diskussion über die paulinische Anschauung von der Kirche als “Leib Christi”* (1962); C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythos* (1961).

⁴ Cf. H. N. Ridderbos, *Paulus: Ontwerp van zijn Theologie*³ (1973), pp. 10 ff.

of sin in our human existence, yet this transition is to be understood again in the context of Paul’s confrontation with Jewish thinking and not with the Hellenistic-Gnostic climate of thought, whatever that may be. What Paul introduces as an objection against his doctrine of justification and grace (Rom. 6:1: “are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”) is precisely the classic and fundamental *Jewish* objection against this doctrine (cf. Rom. 3:8).¹ And when in what follows in chapters 6, 7 and 8 he further emphasizes the fact that Christ has also liberated us from the power of sin, then this is done because in the Jewish synagogue’s doctrine of redemption the battle against the power of sin in the life of the faithful did certainly receive as much attention as the question of how one is justified (on the ground of the works of the law) in God’s future judgement. It is for that reason that in chapters 6–8 (especially in chapter 7) the law according to Jewish thinking is once again brought into the picture in the apostle’s argument, but now from a point of view that differs from that in chapters 2–4. For according to Jewish thinking the law was given for a double purpose: on the one hand so as to derive from the works of the law the ground for acquittal and justification in God’s judgement, but on the other hand, and no less so, to assist man in his battle against the power of sin and to give him, in the inner conflict between good and evil (the good and evil *yetzer*), the moral strength to obtain victory over the evil inclination (which Paul calls “the flesh”).

Over against this Paul (in chapters 6–8) puts it in an argument, as sophisticated as it is basic, that also in this battle against the *powers* of sin the believer lives not under the law but under grace (cf. 6:14; 7:5). Here too he emphasizes first of all (cf. 6:1–12) the decision which has occurred in the death of Christ: for Christ in His death obtained for His own not only acquittal from sin but also broke once and for all the power of sin. Once² He died to (the power of) sin. That is to say, by dying He disposed of the power of sin (Rom. 6:10) because He who has died has paid the toll. He is free from sin (6:7).³ One may say, therefore, that the believer’s liberation from the power of sin is founded in the same way in the death and resurrection of Christ as is his liberation from the guilt and punishment of sin. Only the representation and the terminology are different. Whereas in the last instance One dies *in the place* of all, in the first instance there is mention of a dying of the many *together* with the One because they have been incorporated in Him through baptism⁴ (Rom. 6:5; cf. I Cor. 12:12) and thus what once has happened to Christ is now applicable to them. In both cases, however, the same unique redemptive event is meant. One cannot distinguish between that which once (“objectively”) happened

¹ See, for example, Strack-Billerbeck IV.i (1928), pp. 466 ff.

² Dative τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ ἀπέθανεν, v. 10 (cf. v. 2).

³ ὁ γὰρ ἀποθανὼν δεδικαίωται ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας.

⁴ σύμφυτοι γεγόναμεν.

for our sake and that which now ("subjectively") happens to us; not only our justification from guilt but also our liberation from the power of sin resides on Calvary. *There* Christ died for our sins, but *there also* our old nature has been crucified with Him. *There* He bought us free from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13) but *there also* did we escape from the slavery of the law and *there* have we been brought under the new dominion of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6; Gal. 2:19 ff.). In both cases the unique and unrepeatable redemptive event of Christ's death remains central.

From the other point of view, one may also argue that the death of Christ can be interpreted in *both* respects as an event that is in reality executed *in the life of man*. In this context, the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ is proclaimed in both respects not merely as an indicative but also as an imperative. Because Christ has been made to be sin for us (the justification), therefore comes to us the call: "be reconciled to God" (II Cor. 5:20, 21). And because we have died with Christ and so have died to the power of sin, therefore it is said to us: "let not sin reign in your mortal bodies" (Rom. 6:8, 12). In both instances the point in question is the effect which the atonement has in the believer's life, the liberation from the law; and in both instances life under the dominion of the Spirit is signified. For since the forgiving love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:1-5, 21), justification is life also; peace with God; and boasting in suffering and hope. On the other hand, liberation from the power of sin consists in this, that we live no longer under the impotent regime of the law but through the power of the Spirit. This matter of the second confrontation with the law is raised by Paul in a most vivid way in Romans 7 and 8. First we are confronted with the moral impotence and conflict of the man sold under sin, who in his battle against what he does not want still seeks his power in the law; after that in chapter 8 we are shown the power of the Spirit who leads us out of the bondage of sin into the liberty of the children of God.

Thus there develops, in close connexion and parallel with each other, a double confrontation with the law as a means of redemption. This can be described on the one hand as the contrast between *the law and faith*, on the other hand as that between *the law and the Spirit*; on the one hand as being delivered from "the law of works" and brought under "the law of faith" (Rom. 3:27), on the other hand as a being freed from "the law of sin and death" and as a life under "the law of the Spirit of life" (Rom. 8:2).

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Summarizing, we may conclude that the earliest confession concerning the atonement: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures", constitutes the point of departure for Paul's doctrine of the atonement. He

provides for this confession, that had been delivered to him, an exposition which possibly remains without peer in all of the New Testament. If we could include in our field of study the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, still wider and even cosmic dimensions would come into view. However, Paul remained faithful to the original Christian confession and his explication of it, no matter how grand and vast it becomes, does *not* mean its liquidation or the repeal of its original character. By understanding the death of Christ in the light of the Scriptures, the earliest Christian church did not start from its own experience, but from the significance of the person of Christ and from the history of the divine work of redemption. It is precisely this redemptive-historic character of the death of Christ that dominates and directs Paul's preaching as well as his explication of the atoning power of Christ's death and resurrection. In various ways, no doubt, he makes the transition from the history of redemption to our human existence, from the *historia salutis* to the *ordo salutis* and he translates the redemptive effect of Christ's death and resurrection in a rich variety of anthropological categories; but his christology determines his anthropology, and not the other way round. This does not merely apply to his doctrine of justification which derives its deepest tones from the fact that Christ once died for the ungodly as a manifestation of the divine judgement executed upon Him and of the divine acquittal granted in Him. Not improperly, therefore, one could speak, and has spoken, of the eschatological character of Paul's doctrine of justification. Yet also when he describes the effect of Christ's death in the liberation of man from the power of sin, Paul refers back to what once happened in Christ to those who have been incorporated in Him through baptism. In Romans 6, Paul starts as it were all over again from the beginning, i.e., he derives *every* effect of the atonement in the lives of people from what happened to and with Christ.

To preserve that order, to remain faithful to the earliest Christian confession, and to the explication which Paul gave of it in increasingly wider concentric circles, is the not so simple but, as I see it, highly necessary task – and one of the greatest relevance – of Christian theology in our time – a task to which he too to whom we dedicate this book has given his energies, and for the fulfilment of which we desire to recognize and to honour him.