



STATEMENT DP060

THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST AND THE “FAITH” MESSAGE

by Brian Onken

There are many winds of doctrine that blow through the church from time to time. Some whip up for a brief, passing moment only to be wisely resisted by the maturing body of Christ. Unfortunately, other ill winds blow through the church with gale force; catching up believers, tossing them around, disrupting sound teaching and settled hearts. Such a wind seems to be upon us.

Since the days of E.W. Kenyon and others of similar mind, there has grown in the church a doctrinal "school" that has come to be known as the "Faith" message, "Positive Confession," the "Word of Faith" or the message of "the prevailing Word." With an emphasis on "speaking the Word" and an insistence that divine health and freedom from poverty are absolute rights of the children of God who "walk by faith," this school has grown to be a major force in evangelical Christianity here in the United States.

Occasionally, voices have been lifted up against these teachings pointing out extremes or imbalances in the areas of "guaranteed" health and wealth, the "speak it into existence" concept and the basic misunderstanding of faith.¹ In spite of what has already been done, nothing has surfaced that addresses what may be one of the movements most dangerous errors: the "Faith" teaching on the Atonement of Christ.

As Christians, we affirm that our salvation is based solely on what Christ did for us. And, we appropriate by faith what He has accomplished for us (Romans 3:21-4:5; Ephesians 2:8,9; II Timothy 1:8-11; Titus 3:4-7). By this affirmation we do not mean that saving faith involves nothing more than simply acknowledging that Jesus died for us, nor do we insist that a thorough and complete understanding of the Atonement is essential for salvation. Faith in the Lord Jesus Himself saves. And yet, such faith is based not only on who Jesus is, but on His finished work on the cross.

As Archibald Hodge clearly points out in his work on the Atonement, the doctrine of the cross is the central truth of the Christian message. Our conception of the Atonement necessarily affects our conceptions of all other basic doctrines -- everything from the person of Christ and the moral attributes of God to the place of faith and "hence the entire character of our religious experience."²

But, is it really crucial to have an understanding of what happened on the cross? Let's let Paul Little answer:

Some question the necessity for understanding the meaning of the Cross and the Atonement. After all, they argue, we are not saved by any theory of the Atonement, but by the actual death of Christ. This, of course, is true. We must be careful not to try to reduce the Atonement into merely a neat formula. On the other hand, just as what we believe about Christ's person is crucial -- even though we are saved by what He has done -- *so it is important for us to understand the meaning of His mission to die for man's sin. Otherwise we may find ourselves wittingly or unwittingly opposing the Gospel in one of its most vital and fundamental teachings*³ (emphasis ours).

And, these thoughts bring us to the question presented herein; namely, is the "Faith" teaching on the Atonement "another Gospel"? (II Corinthians 11:4, 12-15). Space would not allow us to adequately discuss the whole range of "Faith" movement theology in this article. Since the Atonement is such a crucial topic, and since those in the "Faith" movement have definite, controversial views on the subject, our analysis will be limited, for the most part, to this area of theology.

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Before we press on for a closer look at the "Faith" teaching on the Atonement, there are two points that need to be made at the outset. The first has to do with the mystery surrounding the Atonement while the second has to do with the need for a systematic and biblical approach to theology.

As Paul declares in his letter to the Romans, God's ways are unfathomable (Romans 11:33). His plans and counsels, infinite in majesty and wisdom, are not fully revealed to us -- nor could they be.

And, although the Lord has graciously revealed to us certain things about the Atonement in His word, there is still a great deal regarding the details of Christ's work that is not explained. As H.D. McDonald writes in *Jesus: Human and Divine*:

Metaphor after metaphor is used to give some understanding of what Christ wrought in the cross. The feeling comes to us that there is more in the cross than can ever be put into words.⁴

The second item that needs to be pointed out is the need for a systematic and organized approach to our theology. Unfortunately, this is somewhat lacking in the teachings of the "Faith" ministers. There seems to be little concern for precise views of doctrine or a systematic handling of biblical truth.

As long as the Scriptures are read with serious interest, and men and women seek to comprehend something of God's plan for mankind, definite views of doctrine and systems of theology will not be optional but an absolute necessity for the church. This need for definition and classification arises from these facts: that God has communicated His truth to rational and logical beings, and that the infinite Mind from which the revelation comes is, in *itself*, self-consistent and rational -- not illogical.

These two points, the mystery of the Atonement and the need for a systematic approach, are brought together in balance in the excellent work by T.C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*:

In urging the student to classify, it is necessary to add a warning concerning the danger of carrying this process to extremes. There have been several examples in church history of devoted men who (pursuing their classification too far) attempted to reduce all doctrine to a cast-iron system. The outcome was not only that they themselves were forced into unscriptural statements, but that heresy and division were forced on the church.

It is necessary for the advanced theologian to learn that there will always remain unavoidable gaps in every theological system. Where divine revelation has not pointed the way, it is extremely unwise for human speculative philosophy to attempt to do so. When a classification has been extended to a point where (in any particular) it cannot claim the authority of Scripture, it has ceased to be useful and is rapidly becoming a danger. Reverent agnosticism is preferable to unauthorized speculation.⁵

This is precisely what lies ahead of us in this article. An attempt will be made to give a coherent overview of the "Faith" teaching in regards to the Atonement and compare it to the biblical teachings regarding Christ's work. We will strive to be systematic in presenting the biblical evidence, and yet, we will gladly refrain from extending to a point where there is no Scriptural warrant. Where the Scriptures speak, we will compare them to the "Faith" teachings; where they are silent, we will seek to avoid unwarranted and "unauthorized speculation."

As we turn to the teachings of the "Faith" ministers, there are many sources to which we could look; many men and women who are preaching this "Word of Faith." However, to avoid confusion and simplify the documentation of these teachings, we will be examining the message as expounded by two recognized leaders of the movement: Kenneth E. Hagin and Kenneth (and Gloria) Copeland.

A bibliography of the works that were studied specifically for this article appears at the end. Hopefully, the extensive direct quotations and footnotes will verify that a sincere attempt has been made to present the teachings of the "Faith" ministers on the subject of the Atonement in a fair and accurate manner.

When examining the "Faith" teaching on this subject, two "truths" stand out. It is taught that Jesus "died spiritually" and that, therefore, Jesus had to be born-again. Let's take a closer look at the "what" and the "why" of these views.

The place to begin is, obviously, to define "spiritual death." To understand the implications of Jesus dying spiritually, we need to understand the meaning behind the language used by these teachers.

Spiritual death means separation from God. The moment Adam sinned, he was separated from God. Spiritual death means something more than separation from God. *Spiritual death also means having Satan's nature*⁶ (original emphasis).

Spiritual death means having Satan's nature -- just as receiving Eternal Life means we have the nature of God in us. When Adam and Eve listened to the devil, the devil became their spiritual father and they had the devil's nature in their spirits. That is spiritual death. . . . Man is now united with the devil.⁷

. . . but when Adam committed high treason against God and bowed his knee to Satan, spiritual death -- the nature of Satan -- was lodged in his heart. Actually, Adam was the first person to be born again. He was born from life unto death, from spiritual life unto spiritual death.⁸

God was speaking of spiritual death, the sin nature. That day in the garden first Eve, then Adam, changed gods. The sin nature of their new god, Satan, took possession of their once righteous spirits. They died spiritually. The very nature of man was changed from one of righteousness or eternal life into one of spiritual death -- from the nature of God to the nature of Satan.⁹

From these representative quotes, we see that, according to the "Faith" message, spiritual death is more than a separation from God; it entails a distinct change in nature. Spiritual death includes having, in some sense, Satan's nature.

Building upon this, as we look at the Atonement, we need to next understand whether this "spiritual death" is what Christ suffered for us. The teachings seem to be clear.

He [Jesus] paid the price for Adam's sin. He suffered in His own body, and more important, in His spirit. Jesus experienced the same spiritual death that entered man in the garden of Eden.¹⁰

. . . He [Jesus] had taken upon Himself not our sins, necessarily, but He was made to be our sin -- our sin nature -- spiritual death. He died spiritually.¹¹

The Bible says in 2 Cor. 5:21 that He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. He who knew no sin was made to be sin. He did the same thing that Adam did in the garden of Eden. He made Himself obedient to death and put Himself into the hands of God's enemy, Satan. Only He did it, He committed this act, not by treason but by choice. He did it in order to pay the price for Adam's treason. See, He put Himself, He made Himself obedient unto death and the same thing happened to Him that happened to Adam: spiritual death.¹²

So it is clear that Jesus, according to these men, suffered the same spiritual death that Adam suffered. In some significant way, His nature must have changed as He took our sin nature -- and hence "Satan's nature" or "spiritual death" -- as His own. But, for such a one as Christ Jesus, what are the implications of this spiritual death?

. . . in 1 Tim. 3:16: God was manifested in the flesh and justified in the spirit. Now you can't get somebody justified and made righteous in the spirit if it [sic] wasn't first unrighteous. The righteousness of God was made to be sin. He [Jesus] accepted the sin nature of Satan in His own spirit and at the moment that He did that He cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" You don't know what happened at the cross. Why do you think Moses, obeying the instruction of God, hung the serpent up on the pole instead of a lamb? That used to bug me. I said, "Why in the world would you want to put a snake up there -- the sign of Satan? Why didn't you put a lamb on that pole." And the Lord said, "Because, it was the sign of Satan that was hanging on the cross." He said, "I accepted in my own spirit spiritual death and the light was turned off."¹³

Jesus became sin. His Spirit was separated from God. And He went down into hell in our place.¹⁴

Jesus died as our Substitute. He who knew no sin was made to be sin. He took upon Himself our sin nature. And He died -- He was separated and cut off from God. He went down into the prison house of suffering in our place. He was there three days and nights.¹⁵

There is no more sacrifice beyond this [the cross] because that God has given Himself. There's not any further that God can go cause that is part of Himself hanging on that cross. And the very inside of God, hanging on that cross, is severed

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from Him and in that moment of severing, the spirit of Jesus accepting that sin and making it to be sin, He's separated from His God and in that moment He's a mortal man; capable of failure, capable of death. Not only that, but He's fixing on being ushered into the very jaws of hell. And if Satan is capable of overpowering Him there, he'll win the universe and mankind is doomed.¹⁶

Dramatic indeed! And what do these excerpts teach us about Jesus' spiritual death? His nature was radically altered and He was ushered into hell to suffer for three days and nights.

What then follows Jesus' suffering in hell for three days at the hands of Satan? For those in the "Faith" movement, the mortal man Jesus is born-again.

After Jesus was made sin, He had to be born again. . . . Once again, He was the righteousness of God, and once again, eternal life was His nature.¹⁷

Not only was He physically resurrected -- His body resurrected -- but His spirit was made alive unto God again. He had died spiritually. He took upon Himself spiritual death -- for us. And He is the first one who was ever born again. His new birth is our new birth!¹⁸

See, you have to realize that He [Jesus] died; you have to realize that He went into the pit of hell as a mortal man made sin. But He didn't stay there, thank God. He was reborn in the pit of hell and resurrected.¹⁹

It is important for us to realize that a born-again man defeated Satan . . . Colossians 1:18 refers to Jesus as the firstborn from the dead. . . . He was the first man to be reborn under the new covenant.²⁰

Assuredly, these passages raise many questions. There are many possible implications of some of these assertions. And yet, in order to limit the scope of this article, we will confine ourselves to the following synopsis of the teaching explained above.

According to these teachers, then, Jesus Christ voluntarily took upon Himself our sinful nature and His very nature changed. He experienced, as spiritual death, an objective and real separation from the Father. That part of Him which is divine was severed from God, and He became a mere mortal man. As a man having our sinful nature, He was ushered into hell to be left in the hands of Satan. After three days and nights, He was born-again in hell and resurrected as an immortal, reborn man.

His [God's] purpose was to put Jesus through all the torments of hell. He bore our sins, our sickness, our disease, our griefs, our sorrow, and our pain. Then, at the command of God the Father the Spirit of God came blasting down through the eons of time and injected the very "zoe"²¹ life, light, and glory of God into Jesus' spirit and He came out of that place victoriously!²²

Now you can see His [Jesus'] inauguration in the first chapter of Hebrews and it begins to mean something when God turns to a reborn, resurrected man and calls Him God. "And He said to the Son, 'Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" God has successfully brought a man from the depths of hell, from being made sin, to the highest position that exists in the universe, and Satan said He couldn't do it. But He did. He turned to a man and called Him God. He is in a higher position now than He was before He headed to the cross. I don't know how He could be any higher, but God said He was. So that's enough for me.²³

Quite a scenario, is it not? However, in spite of its dramatic appeal and the popularity it is enjoying today, the question that needs to be asked is "Is it biblical?" Consider the words of T.J. Crawford:

The Atonement is a pure matter of revelation. Whether as regards the truths which it embodies, the principles on which it rests, or the ends to which it is conducive, we have no reliable means of information beyond what God has given us in His Word. In approaching such a subject our question ought ever to be, "What is written in the Scriptures? How readest thou?" Nor can we be too careful lest we advance any position but such as, on full and fair inquiry, has been found to be either expressly set down in the Holy Scriptures, or by good and necessary consequences deducible from them.²⁴

Dr. Crawford's words to us here are sound and valuable. Our question, when looking at the concept of the Atonement of Christ as taught by Hagin and Copeland, needs to be "Does it conform to the plain teaching of Scripture?"

Seeing that the doctrine of the Atonement touches on such a wide spectrum of important concepts -- such as the hypostatic union,²⁵ the biblical concept of sacrifice, the moral attributes of God, etc. -- it will be necessary to again limit our focus to certain pivotal questions. The three questions that arise from the "Faith" teaching documented above for which we will seek biblical answers will, therefore, be:

- 1) Do the Scriptures teach that Jesus suffered a "spiritual death" on the cross that severed His union with God, and made Him a mere mortal man with a sin nature?
- 2) Do the Scriptures teach that Jesus descended into hell -- a place of torment -- to there suffer at the hands of Satan for three days and nights?
- 3) Do the Scriptures teach that Jesus was, subsequent to His death on the cross, born -again and is now an exalted, resurrected, *reborn* man?

The proponents of this teaching assert that Jesus *must* have experienced spiritual death (as they define it) in order to redeem His people from their sins. They insist that since death (i.e., spiritual death) is man's "wages for sin," for Christ to atone for our sins He must endure that same spiritual death in our stead. Although this may appear reasonable to some degree, it is scripturally unjustifiable.

In answering the first of these questions, let us look at the extent of Christ's humiliation as recorded in Scripture and then some select verses cited by proponents of this teaching. In our examination of the passages used by these teachers, we will examine why their extreme view is unwarranted, and develop a biblical picture of some of the aspects of Christ's atoning work.

The place to begin our biblical answer to the first question is in Paul's letter to the Philippians. In the second chapter he presents a concise overview of Jesus' work.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him . . . -- Philippians 2:5-9

It is of importance here to note that in describing the depths Christ went to in reaching out to mankind, no mention is made of His suffering spiritual death or experiencing a change in nature. Paul asserts that Jesus, eternally existent as God, entered into human history as a bond-slave. Paul gives no support to the "spiritual death" idea advanced by the "Faith" teachers.

Regarding this passage, Alexander Bruce, in his work *The Humiliation of Christ*, says the following:

Notwithstanding this change, the personality [referring to Jesus] continued the same. Kenosis²⁶ did not mean *self-extinction* or metamorphosis of a Divine Being into a mere man. He who emptied Himself was the same with Him who humbled Himself: and the *kenosis* and the *tapeinosis*²⁷ were two aspects of the same mind dwelling in the same subject.²⁸

What Bruce so aptly points out is that this passage teaches that Christ's divine nature did not change. His humbling and emptying of Himself did not result in His becoming a mere mortal man, as the "Faith" teachers proclaim.

In other scriptural passages where we are given an account of the steps that Jesus took in order to redeem man, this same truth is borne out. Although He came as a servant and died on the cross, there is not evidence to support the extreme idea that He died spiritually and underwent a change into *mere* moral humanity.²⁹ (e.g., Mark 9:31; Acts 2:22-24; I Corinthians 15:1-4). As Bruce clearly states elsewhere:

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, when he would commend Jesus as the pattern of patience, says of Him simply, that He 'endured the cross, despising the shame.' Paul, when he would exhibit the humility of Christ in its utmost depth of self-abasement, indicates the limit of descent by the phrase, 'obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.' It did not occur to him to say, 'even death spiritual,' or 'even death eternal,' or 'even death of the damned.' It may safely be concluded that such extreme phrases are not required for a correct statement of the true doctrine, and that it will suffice to say in general terms that Christ suffered in body and soul all that it was possible for a holy Being to suffer.³⁰

At this point, although it may not be fully clear what the Lord did experience in His death on the cross, it is evident that it did not include a spiritual death which resulted in His becoming a mere mortal man. To so assert, in the absence of any biblical warrant, is to move beyond sound doctrine and into unscriptural and potentially dangerous speculation.

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However, the "Faith" teachers do turn to a handful of selected verses in an effort to substantiate their view. It may be helpful to examine a few of the more important passages they cite.

One of the verses that is heavily relied upon for substantiating the doctrine of Jesus' "spiritual death" is II Corinthians 5:21:

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

As we have seen, the "Faith" message teaches that this means that Jesus "took upon Himself our sin nature," accepted in His own spirit "spiritual death," and that He, as a result, ceased to be the God-man and became a mortal man.

In examining this passage, one of the first things to be noted is that the word "sin" is used as an abstract noun. As such, biblical commentators have noted that the expression "to be sin" must be *metonymical*.

A metonym is "a figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated (as in 'lands belonging to the *crown*')."³¹

Metonym is often used in Scripture, as in the example where Jesus comments that "those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). It is clear that Jesus is not making a dogmatic assertion concerning *how* an individual who "takes up the sword" shall specifically die, but simply stating a general truth. Thus, the phrase "perish by the sword" is one example of a metonym.

T.J. Crawford, in his excellent work *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement*, offers important insight into the metonymical expression in II Corinthians 5:21.

Still, though on these grounds our common translation is to be preferred [over rendering the phrase "to be sin" as "to be a sin-offering"], there can be no doubt that the expression is *metonymical*, since it is impossible that Christ, or any person, could be literally made "SIN." The abstract word "sin" must necessarily be held to be here put for some concrete. And there is no concrete that we can think of as denoted by it, except either "a sinner," or "one who bears or suffers for sin." Now, that Christ "was made a sinner for us" is inconsistent, not only with the testimony which the Scriptures elsewhere bear to His immaculate holiness, but with the express statement in the adjoining clause, that "He knew no sin." Accordingly, we are shut up to the other interpretation, that Christ was "made sin for us" in the sense of being divinely appointed to bear the burden or to suffer the penal consequences of our transgressions.³²

We see from the above that, taking into account the language and context, the meaning of the expression "made to be sin for us" is that Christ suffered the legal consequences -- the penalty -- for our sin. Although Jesus identified with sinners, it is unjustifiable to read the passage to imply that He took on our sin nature (and, according to the "Faith" teachers, "Satan's nature" -- spiritual death).

The author Philip Hughes concurs with this in his commentary on Second Corinthians where he writes:

"He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed, . . . and Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5f) -- that is the meaning of Christ's having been made sin for us. Not for one moment does He cease to be righteous, else the radical exchange envisaged by the Apostle here . . . would be no more than a fiction or a hallucination.³³

And, this understanding is the consistent testimony of Scripture: Christ was "made to be sin" in the sense that He bore the penalty of our sins.

To elaborate, there are two words in Hebrew that have the precise meaning of "to bear" and, when construed with "sin," convey the idea of carrying the burden or penalty of that sin. For example, in Lamentations 5:7 we read: "Our fathers sinned, and are no more: it is we who have borne their iniquities." Obviously, this can only mean that they bore the penalty or consequences of their father's sins (Cf. Leviticus 5:17,18; Numbers 30:15).

Thus when the Lord, through Isaiah, speaks of the Messiah saying, ". . . the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities . . ." (Isaiah 53:11), the meaning is clear. This prophetic passage affirms that Christ would suffer the penalty of consequence of the sins of others.

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Earlier in this Messianic section, there are other clear indications that the suffering Servant of the Lord would suffer on behalf of sinners, be subject to the penal consequences of their sins and, in that way, "bear" their sins (Isaiah 53:5,8). This is the consistent testimony of the Scriptures; Christ took the place of sinners and, in their stead, bore the punishment their sins required (e.g., Romans 4:25; I Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 1:4; I Peter 2:24).

In light of this, some insist that if indeed Christ was to bear the penalty for our sins, then He must have had to suffer "eternal death," since that is the penalty sinners suffer for their sin. The error in this view stems from a misunderstanding of the penalty Christ bore. Christ did not bear the penalty for sins in a pecuniary way; He did not offer satisfaction for sins as if He were paying off a monetary debt.

By way of clarification, it can be said that the "debt" owed by a sinner is not like a promissory note that needs to be repaid penny for penny, dollar for dollar. Divine justice does not require such a payment for sin. Sin is a moral debt rather than a pecuniary one, and is discharged differently.

Perhaps, at this point, an illustration would be of help; but, a word of clarification and caution is needed. The atonement of Christ is a wholly unique event -- no analogy will ever adequately do justice to Jesus' work of substitution on the behalf of sinful men. However, to help illustrate the concept of substitution in Christ's atoning work, the following analogy may be of help.

Jimmy Olsen, reporter for the *Daily Planet* and friend of Superman, has been kidnapped by Lex Luthor. The villain Luthor has chained Olsen to the wall of his laboratory and has pointed a large Electro-Generator Gun at him. When Luthor pulls the trigger, millions of volts of electricity will be fired into Jimmy Olsen's body. At the instant before the gun is fired, Superman breaks into the room and stations himself between Olsen and Luthor's terrible machine. The trigger having been pulled, the electrical charge is sent at Superman who bears the full brunt of what Jimmy would have received had Superman not stepped in his place. The charge Superman receives is identical to that which Jimmy would have received, but he bears it differently.

In some remotely similar way, Christ stepped in to bear the full discharge of God's wrath against sin that was due us. Although God is hardly meant to be typified by the villainous Luthor, the analogy does illustrate the idea of full substitution that is different than the simple payment of a pecuniary debt.

Therefore, in discussing II Corinthians 5:21 and the interpretation offered by the "Faith" teachers --although we have hardly exhausted what could be said -- certain truths are clear. Christ "was made sin for us" by becoming the legal substitute for sinners. He suffered precisely that kind, degree, and duration of suffering that the absolute, just wisdom of God determined was a full equivalent for all that would have been required of individual sinners. The assertion that He suffered spiritual death and underwent a change in nature is unsupported by II Corinthians 5:21 and goes against the plain teachings of Scripture that we have examined. It will suffice to say, in the words of Alexander Bruce, ". . . it was needful that the sin-bearer, though divine, should endure *all that it was possible for a holy Being to suffer in the way of penalty*"³⁴ [original emphasis].

A second passage that often surfaces in the teaching that Jesus died spiritually is Galatians 3:13. Paul writes:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree . . ."

After the careful look we took at Paul's declaration in II Corinthians 5:21 (" . . . made to be sin for us . . .") the parallel with this passage is evident. Christ "became a curse" for us in the sense that He bore the effects of God's judgment (curse) against sin that was due us.

It is clear from the testimony of Scripture that Christ, in and of Himself, was not accursed by God. We must not forget John 10:17 when the Lord says, "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life . . ." Although He suffered the penalty and "curse" due our sin, Jesus Himself was always the "beloved Son." Never was Christ more the Son in whom the Father was well pleased than when He was willing to accept the utmost consequence for the sins of men.

The last passage of Scripture called on to support the "spiritual death" of Jesus teaching that we will look at is found in Matthew's Gospel.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?" That is, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" -- Matthew 27:26

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Here, at what may well be the height of agony for the Lord Jesus, we would do well to proceed with great care. The ground on which we walk, so to speak, as we examine these words of the Savior is indeed holy. It is most likely that no man will ever fathom what was truly involved in this cry and, in analyzing it, we need to be very careful about undue speculation and theorizing, or we will soon find ourselves beyond the truth of Scripture.

It is of great importance to note that this passage is not didactic but narrative; that is, this verse in Matthew is not specific teaching about Christ's atoning work but is rather a record of what transpired before the eyes of witnesses. Caution is needed because, although we have a record of what Christ said, what He meant by these words is open to question.

The "Faith" teachings indicate that these words of Christ meant that He who was God the Son was severed from God the Father and, as a result of that separation, ceased to be God and became a mere man.

However, from the passages that have been examined thus far, it is clear that such a change in nature is not taught in the Scriptures. It is evident that even at His death, Christ was the Lamb "unblemished and spotless" (I Peter 1:18,19), the Just One (I Peter 3:18), and the very Lord of Glory Himself crucified for the sins of men (I Corinthians 2:8). In fact, Paul declares that it was indeed God who purchased the church with His blood (Acts 20:28), thus clearly undermining the teaching that Christ was less than God when He offered Himself as a ransom for many.

If, indeed, there was no change in the nature of the Son (and, therefore, no dissolution of the union in nature shared by the Son and the Father), in what way are Christ's words of desolation true? How is it that He cries out from the cross that He is "forsaken"?

Theologian Francis Turretin offered these words that underscore Christ's union with God the Father while touching on His "forsakenness":

With a voice of deepest sadness, He complained that he was forsaken by God the Father, though not by a dissolution of the union, nor by withdrawing a participation of holiness, nor by withholding his supporting power, yet by withholding from Him the beatific vision, by suspending the sense and fruition of full felicity.³⁵

Turretin is saying that Jesus' fellowship with the Father changed and, for that moment, He no longer enjoyed the full, joyful fellowship that He had enjoyed for eternity past. As previously shown, Christ became the legal substitute for sinners, receiving in His own person the punishment that was due them. As the wrath and judgment of God were unleashed on the Son, the Father could not share the fellowship with Him that they had so long enjoyed. The Son was treated as if He were a sinner, because he was standing in our place. This, however, does not necessitate a change in His nature or that He was essentially severed from God:

T.J. Crawford explains:

In order to give its just meaning to His language, we can hardly suppose less than that, amidst His other sufferings, the sensible joys and consolations of His Father's fellowship and countenance were withheld from Him. Nor is it any very difficult matter to conceive that even in the case of the beloved Son of God some such spiritual privation may have been endured. For it is not beyond the bounds of human experience that the favour and love of God should actually be possessed, while not felt support and encouragement are derived from them. Although it be an unquestionable truth that "the Lord will never leave nor forsake His people," and that "nothing can ever separate them from His love," yet there are times in the history of His most devoted servants, in which we find them bitterly deploring that the light of His gracious countenance is hidden from them, and that they derive no conscious satisfaction from the joys of His favour and the comforts of His fellowship. May we not say, then, that this was the main source of the Savior's lamentation on the cross? It certainly appears to be the kind of affliction which His words most naturally and obviously suggest.³⁶

Therefore, there is no need for asserting that Christ's nature changed, or that His ontological³⁷ union with the Father was severed on the basis of His words from the cross. As many Christians can attest, even those times when they are not fully experiencing the blessings of fellowship with the Father, the truth of their relationship with Him remains constant; such was the case with Christ.

Now, let it be made clear that this hardly implies that the Lord Jesus' suffering was bodily only. In bearing the penalty of our sins He suffered in body and spirit. Obviously, such suffering had impact on Him as a total being. But, there is no basis for insisting that such suffering altered His very nature. (Some Christians hold that the *experience of alienation* that Christ suffered in His

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spirit could be considered a "spiritual death" but, such a definition of spiritual death is significantly different than that advanced by the "Faith" teachers.)

We now, therefore, have a reply to the first and perhaps most difficult question. In answer to whether the Scriptures teach that Jesus suffered a "spiritual death" on the cross that severed Him from union with God and resulted in His becoming a mere mortal man, the Scriptures indicate "No."

The Word of God clearly demarcates the extent of Christ's humiliation in death and it does not include such a "spiritual death." Scripture declares that Christ "bore our sins on the tree" but also makes it clear that in "bearing sin" His nature did not change. Even our Lord's cry of desolation gives no ground to the teaching that He was severed from His essential union with God to become a mere man, as previously seen.

The second question needing an answer is this: do the Scriptures teach that Jesus descended into hell -- a place of torment -- to there suffer at the hands of the devil for three days and nights?

For the "Faith" teachers, this is an integral part of their beliefs. As we have seen, according to their view of events, after Jesus became a mortal man, He was ushered into the waiting grasp of Satan. They feel that this must be part of the atoning work of Christ.

There is some question in many Christian's mind about Jesus' "descent into hell," because the phrase "He descended into hell" appears in the commonly called Athanasian Creed. Therefore, it may be of value to take a brief look at the history of the phrase in question in regard to its place in the creeds of the Church.

According to church history, the phrase "He descended into hell" was not in any of the recognized creeds of the Church prior to the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325); neither was it a part of any creed drawn up by that council or the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381). Apparently, it first appeared in the Creed of the Church at Aquileia (c. A.D. 400). These words were not in the Old Roman form of the Apostle's Creed, but were included in the form given by Rufinus (c. A.D. 400). When the phrase does appear in the so-called Athanasian Creed, it reads "descendit ad inferos" -- "He descended to the underworld."

Therefore, it is evident that the idea was not articulated until many years after the church began. In addition, regrettably, there is a great variety of opinion about what the formulators of the creeds intended to convey by the expression. Although it may be likely that the phrase was added to respond to certain docetic³⁸ views of the person of Christ, the meaning is, at best ambiguous. Therefore, the value of this creedal statement is rather limited. We must look directly to the Scriptures for help.

When turning to the Scriptures, however, a certain ambiguity again arises. The idea that Christ "descended into hell" finds its basis on a small group of passages, all of which appear to open up a variety of views or interpretations.

Perhaps the clearest reference is found in Acts 2:24-32 (Cf. Psalm 16:10-11 and Acts 13:34-37). Peter, preaching, quotes a prophetic Psalm and goes on to explain that Christ was not "abandoned to Hades" (2:31). As noted scholar A.T. Robertson points out, "Hades is the unseen world, Hebrew Sheol . . . It does not mean the place of punishment, though both heaven and the place of torment are in Hades (Luke 16:23). 'Death and Hades are strictly parallel terms: he who is dead is in Hades' (Page)." ³⁹ Therefore, the most that can be legitimately concluded from this reference is that not only did our Lord's identification with mankind lead to His death on the cross, but He subsequently experienced that which any man would (i.e., the separation of soul and body).

In Romans 10:6,7, Paul quotes a passage from Deuteronomy that some take as referring to a "descent into hell" by Christ. However, it also appears as though this reference is simply alluding to Christ's death.

Commenting on the seventh verse -- 'Who will descent into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead), R.C.H. Lenski comments:

"Abyss" is the extreme opposite of "heaven." Paul himself indicates in what sense he uses this term, namely as referring to Christ's death and resurrection . . . The reference is to Christ's resurrection, to His going down into the abyss of death and the grave and His being brought up from the dead in his glorious resurrection. ⁴⁰

Apparently, then, these two references most-likely refer to Christ's death, and not a three-day visit in hell as the "Faith" teachers believe.

More problematic still is Ephesians 4:9,10 where Paul writes:

Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all heavens, that He might fill all things.

The question here is to determine what Paul meant by *the lower parts of the earth*.

Paul explains that Christ "ascended far above all the heavens" and contrasts that to His having "descended into the lower parts of the earth." Many feel this may simply be a reference to His incarnation (i.e., His descent to earth) and that it is simply a dramatic comparison of the lowliness of earth in comparison to His high heavenly home (Cf. Isaiah 44:23 for another reference to the "lower parts of the earth" indicating, poetically, the earth itself). Others hold that the reference is to Christ's humiliation in enduring death. (There is a third view -- that Christ did descend to hell in order to make a proclamation -- but we will examine that as we look at the next passage in question.)

Whatever the interpretation held, it is clear that this passage is hardly a substantial basis for teaching that Jesus Christ descended to hell as a mortal man to be tortured by the devil.

The last reference to this "descent" of Christ is found in I Peter 3:18-20. Although the reading appears to be quite straightforward, there is nonetheless, some question about the meaning of this passage as well.

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

As has been mentioned, a variety of views are held regarding these verses.⁴¹ However, rather than working through them all, attention should be called to two salient facts concerning this passage.

Notice that, according to Peter's words, after Christ's death (in the flesh) He is then made alive. And, it is *subsequent* to this vivification that He "went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison." Thus, for the "Faith" teachers who insist that Christ's vivification came *after* His time in hell, the sequence of events here is a significant problem.

Second, Peter tells us that Christ went and "made proclamation" to the spirits. The word here used by Peter is "to herald" or "proclaim." (It is not the word used in referring to "preaching" -- i.e., the Gospel.) The point seems clear that whatever else Peter may be speaking of, Christ did not go to the "prison" to be tortured by Satan, but He went announcing and proclaiming (what we would assume to be) His victory.

Therefore, although it may be unclear as to *precisely* what Peter intended to convey by these words, the passage will not allow for the portrayal of Christ as a spiritually dead mortal man tortured by the devil in hell.

Having examined the Scriptural references to Christ's "descent into hell," we again find the "Faith" message teaching to be biblically unsupported.

It is significant to note, as has been pointed out previously, that in the Scripture passages discussing the steps Christ went through to redeem man, the "Faith" message concepts are conspicuously missing. In I Corinthians 15: 3,4, Paul gives us what he clearly feels is the essence of the Gospel saying, ". . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" No mention is made of the Lord's alleged descent and torment in hell, such teaching is without biblical warrant.

Before leaving this second question, it may be profitable to look, once more, at the events of the crucifixion and Christ's words from the cross.

In reference to the Savior's words, "It is finished" (John 19:30), the "Faith" teachers have a view quite different than that which is generally held. For example:

Now here's the part I want you to get. When He said, "It is finished," on that cross he was not speaking of the plan of redemption -- the plan of redemption had just begun. There were still three days and three nights to be gone through before He went to the throne."⁴²

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When Jesus cried, "It is finished," He was not speaking of the plan of redemption . . . Jesus' death on the cross was only the beginning of the complete work of redemption.⁴³

For those holding this view, Jesus still had to suffer three days and nights in hell and then be born again to complete the atoning work He came from heaven to do. And yet, one can't help wondering whether they have truly given honest thought to those last words of Christ from the cross.

It could rightly be said that the Lord Jesus came into the world pre-eminently in order to die; He came specifically to give His life up in death on the cross (Mark 10:45; John 10:14-18). With this in mind, John's testimony about Christ's last moments on the cross are significant.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled, said, "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop, and brought it up to His mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head, and gave up His spirit. -- John 19:28-30

I have found no comment on these verses more profound than that of Alfred Edersheim in his *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. He observes:

It can scarcely have been a minute or two from the time that the cry from the twenty-second Psalm marked the high-point of His agony, when the words 'I Thirst' seem to indicate, by the prevalence of the merely human aspect of the suffering, that the other more terrible aspect of sin-bearing and God-forsakenness was past. To us, therefore, this seems the beginning, if not of Victory, yet of Rest, of the End.⁴⁴

What Edersheim is pointing out is that moment after the Lord's cry of desolation, He says, simply, "I thirst." This turning of attention from the spiritual agony to mere physical needs is a strong indicator that the real suffering was indeed over.

St. John alone records this utterance ["I thirst"], prefacing it with this distinctive statement, that Jesus so surrendered Himself to the human feeling, seeking the bodily relief by expressing his thirst: 'knowing that all things were now finished, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.' In other words, the climax of Theanthropic⁴⁵ suffering in His feeling of God-forsakenness, which had led to the utterance of Psalm 22:1, was now, to His consciousness, the end of all which in accordance with Scripture-prediction He had to bear. He now could and did yield Himself to the mere physical wants of His body.⁴⁶

Jesus appears to be conscious of the end of His redemptive suffering. Furthermore, it seems evident that His conscious fellowship with God the Father was restored because of His subsequent self-committal: "Father, into thy hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Therefore, it seems clear that His proclamation, as recorded in John 19:30, is not merely an announcement of the end of "the Abrahamic covenant" as the "Faith" teachers say (which, by the way, has not been done away with), but truly the end of His redemptive sacrificial work. Noted New Testament scholar Donald Guthrie writes:

In line with this approach to death is the cry from the cross which John records in 19:30, 'It is finished!' This is certainly not a cry of despair, but of accomplishment. It marked the completion of the mission which Jesus came to do. That mission included the uplifting on the cross.⁴⁷

John Gill's words, from his work *A Body of Divinity* offers a succinct recap of the evidence against the idea that Jesus went to hell to suffer, and a brief summary answer to our second question.

But it is certain, that the soul of Christ upon separation of his body, went not to hell, but to heaven, being committed by him into the hands of his Father: nor need he go thither to complete his sufferings, which ended on the cross, when he said, 'It is finished.'⁴⁸

So, in answer to our second question as to whether Jesus, as mortal man, descended to hell to suffer at the hands of the devil, we have clearly seen that there is no sound biblical base for such a teaching and that the redemptive work of the Lord was indeed finished at the cross.

Our last question -- whether, subsequent to His death, Jesus became a born again resurrected immortal man -- should now be relatively easy to deal with.

To reach the conclusion that the "Faith" teachers have, one must accept the premise that Jesus died a "spiritual death" that resulted in His becoming simply a mortal man who was in need of being born again. As we have seen, it is clear that there was no need for such a radical change in nature, nor did such a change occur. Therefore, since Jesus' "new birth" is predicated on His "spiritual death" and, we have found that He did not die such a "spiritual death," the idea that He was born again is biblically unwarranted.

Biblically, being "born again" is the result of putting personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ, relying on His atoning work for one's redemption from sin (Galatians 3:26; John 1:12,13). With this in mind, perhaps one of the most challenging questions that the "Faith" teachers need to answer is on what basis did Jesus, who they say was a mortal man having our sin nature (and thus Satan's nature -- spiritual death) as His own, receive the new birth? How was Jesus born again?

Obviously, from Scripture, such a question is unwarranted because there was no need for the Lord to be born again. We therefore have found answers to our three questions.

- 1) The scriptures do not teach that Jesus suffered a "spiritual death" on the cross that severed Him from union with God resulting in His becoming a mere mortal man.
- 2) The scriptures do not teach that Jesus descended into hell to there suffer at the hands of Satan for three days and nights.
- 3) The scriptures do not teach that Jesus was, subsequent to His death on the cross, born a gain, and is now an exalted, resurrected man.

In discussing his ministry, the Apostle Paul wrote the Corinthians that he "determined to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2). He made it abundantly clear that the heart of the Gospel was the truth about Christ "and Him crucified" (I Corinthians 1:23; 15:3,4; Galatians 6:14; I Timothy 1:15).

It would seem clear that to err in teaching in such a crucial area as the nature of our Lord Jesus and His work on the cross is a grave and serious matter. If one bases the gospel he preaches on speculation and the teachings of men rather than the sure word of God in the Scriptures, then he is likely moving away from the biblical teaching and into error. To move in such a direction is to risk being found guilty of preaching "another gospel" -- the ultimate heresy (II Corinthians 11:4).

In this day of doctrinal "winds," Paul's words to Timothy prove to be sound advice: "Pay close attention to yourself and your teaching . . . Retain the standard of sound words which you have hear from me . . ." (I Timothy 4:16; II Timothy 1:13). We need to be extremely careful about what is being preached and taught; we need to examine everything, holding fast only to that which is good (I Thessalonians 5:21).

In his brief letter to the saints, Jude exhorts believers everywhere to contend for the faith because "certain persons have crept in unnoticed," teaching things other than the truth about our Lord and His gospel. It would appear as though the church today faces a similar situation and, therefore, Jude's words are ones we urgently need to hear.

The church must no longer tolerate teaching that simply sounds good or tickles ears. We need sound doctrine and instruction in the truth (II Timothy 4:1-5). The leaders in the church must take a stand, "holding fast the faithful word," and refute those who are teaching error. False teachers "must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach" (Titus 1:7-11).

There are many brothers and sisters in Christ who are deeply involved in the "Faith" movement, people who truly love the Lord and want to serve Him. And yet, the evidence is clear that the message herein described and being taught by leaders of the movement is unbiblical. A choice needs to be made. It is spiritually dangerous to sit under the teaching of anyone who so distorts the basic gospel message. This is especially true when we consider the progressive, evolving nature of these teachings. The ultimate extent of error that the "Faith" teachers will reach has likely not yet been revealed. Next issue, we will look at some additional problems in the more recent "Faith" teachings, and we will consider the lethal problems to which these teachings could easily lead.

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¹ CRI has some materials already prepared on some of these subjects. Please consult our Resource List. Also, *Forward* (vol. 5, No. 1) carried an article on the "Misunderstanding of Faith." — *Editor*

² Archibald A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Guardian Press, n.d.), p. 13.

³ Paul E. Little, *Know What You Believe* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1970), p. 64.

⁴ H.D. McDonald, *Jesus: Human and Divine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1968), p. 114.

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- ⁸ Kenneth Copeland, *Our Covenant With God* (Fort Worth, Texas: Kenneth Copeland, 1976), p. 9.
- ⁹ Gloria Copeland, *God's Will For You* (Fort Worth, Texas: Kenneth Copeland, 1972), p. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Kenneth E. Hagin, "Made Alive," *The Word of Faith* (April 1982), p. 3.
- ¹² Kenneth Copeland, "*What Happened From the Cross to the Throne?*" (Fort Worth, Texas: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, n.d.) side two (tape).
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Hagin, *The Name of Jesus*, op. cit., p. 32.
- ¹⁵ Hagin, "Made Alive." op. cit., p.3.
- ¹⁶ K. Copeland, "*What Happened . . .*" side two.
- ¹⁷ G. Copeland, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ Hagin, "Made Alive," p. 3.
- ¹⁹ K. Copeland, "*What Happened . . .*," side two.
- ²⁰ Kenneth Copeland, "Jesus: Our Lord of Glory," *Believer's Voice of Victory* (April 1982), p. 3.
- ²¹ An attempt to translate one of several Greek words translated as "life" in the New Testament. Here the reference seems to indicate that "zoe" life is "absolute life" or "the very life of God."
- ²² Kenneth Copeland, "Absolute Life," *Believer's Voice of Victory* (September 1980), p. 6.
- ²³ K. Copeland, "*What Happened . . .*," side two.
- ²⁴ Thomas J. Crawford, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture Respecting the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book house, 1954), p. V.
- ²⁵ Theological term for the union of Christ's two natures, the human and the divine, in one Person.
- ²⁶ Kenosis — "emptying"; theological term based on the Greek word in Philippians 2:7 used by Paul in stating that Christ "emptied Himself."
- ²⁷ Tapeinosis — "humbling"; theological term based on the Greek word in Philippians 2:8 used by Paul in stating that Christ "humbled Himself."
- ²⁸ Alexander Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 22.
- ²⁹ Historic Christian theology does hold that Jesus was incarnated as a mortal man, but in the process of His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. He never ceased to be eternal God. His assumption of a human nature and His death on the cross did not annul His continuing participation in the divine nature.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 344, 345.
- ³¹ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: C. & C. Merriam Co., 1980), p. 718.
- ³² Crawford, op. cit. pp. 42, 43.
- ³³ Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIC) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 214.
- ³⁴ Bruce, p. 342.
- ³⁵ Francis Turretin, translated by James Wilson, *The Atonement of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 54.
- ³⁶ Crawford, op. cit., p. 137.
- ³⁷ Theological term referring to that which is essentially existent.
- ³⁸ Docetism was a second-century heresy which denied the reality of Christ's physical body; it was considered to be a phantom which only appeared to live, die, and rise from the dead.
- ³⁹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament III* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 31.
- ⁴⁰ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg, 1961), pp. 652, 653.
- ⁴¹ A valuable, detailed explanation of the various problems and possibilities of interpretation of this passage in I Peter can be found in E. G. Selwyn's *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (MacMillan).
- ⁴² K. Copeland, "*What Happened . . .*," side two.
- ⁴³ K. Copeland, "Jesus: Our Lord of Glory," op. cit., p. 3.
- ⁴⁴ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 607.
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- ⁴⁷ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 455.
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