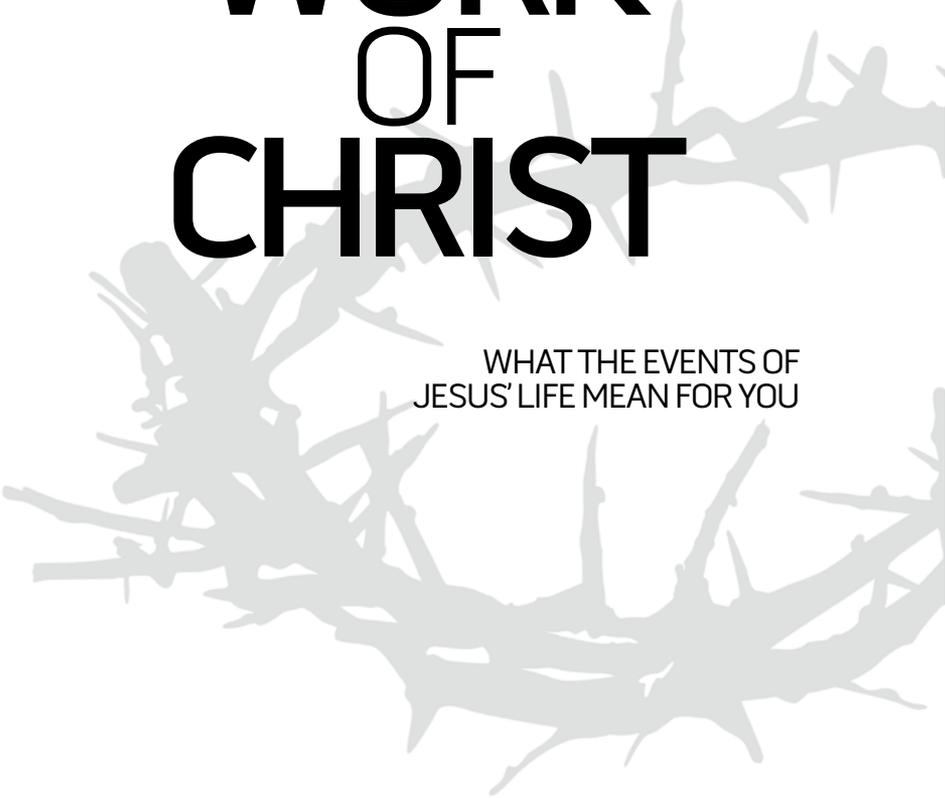


R.C. SPROUL

THE WORK OF CHRIST



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PREFACE

ANY SIX-YEAR-OLD CHILD WHO has spent a few Lord's Day mornings in Sunday school is able to give an accurate answer to the question, "What did Jesus do for you?" Usually that child will say, "Jesus died on the cross for my sins." That's a true and profound statement, but it is only half of the matter.

If Jesus merely needed to die on the cross to save His people, He could have descended from heaven as a man on the morning of Good Friday, gone straight to Golgotha, died on the cross, risen, and left again. Our sin problem would be fixed. He would not have needed to be born to Mary in a stable, go through all the trials and tribulations of growing up in this fallen world, or endure the animosity of the Jewish leaders during His ministry.

However, Jesus did not live those thirty-three years for nothing.

In order for Him to qualify as our Redeemer, it was not enough for Him simply to go to the cross and be crucified. If Jesus had only paid for our sins, He would have succeeded only in taking us back to square one. We would no longer be guilty, but we still would have absolutely no righteousness to bring before God. So, our Redeemer needed not only to die, He had to live a life of perfect obedience. The righteousness that He manifested could then be transferred to all who put their trust in Him. Just as my sin is transferred to Him on the cross when I trust in Him, His righteousness is transferred to my account in the sight of God. So, when I stand before God on the judgment day, God is going to see Jesus and His righteousness, which will be my cover.

By His obedience, He redeemed His people for eternity.

It is important, then, that we not minimize the work of Christ throughout His life by focusing too narrowly on the work of Christ in His death. Thus, my purpose in this book is to give a brief overview of Christ's sojourn in this world, looking at the major events of both His life and His death to show that He fulfilled a lifelong mission. It is my prayer that this book will help you see that by His whole life our Lord wrought a complete salvation for His beloved people.

—R. C. Sproul
Sanford, Florida
October 2011

INCARNATION

IN THEOLOGY, WE MAKE a distinction between the person of Christ and the work of Christ for various reasons. But even though that distinction is important, we must never let it become a separation, because the person of Christ is intimately connected to His work. We understand His work largely from the perspective of the One who did the work. Conversely, the work of Jesus reveals a great deal about who He is. So His person and His work may be distinguished but never separated.

In discussions of the work of Christ, many people believe that the natural place to begin is with His birth. However, the work of Christ began long before His birth. In fact, it began in eternity past, in what theologians call “the covenant of redemption.” We encounter the word *covenant* frequently in the Bible. A covenant is

a pact or agreement between two parties. There is the covenant of creation, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. As we read through the Scriptures, we see God making covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David, and later making the new covenant. However, many people are not familiar with the very first covenant, the covenant of redemption. That was not a covenant God made with human beings. Rather, the covenant of redemption was a pact forged in eternity among the three persons of the Godhead.

We distinguish the persons of the Godhead as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we examine the Old Testament record of creation, we see that the entire Trinity, the whole Godhead, was actively involved in bringing the universe into being. But not only creation was a Trinitarian work; so is redemption. In eternity before creation, the Father initiated the concept of redeeming the creation He knew would fall. He designed the plan of redemption. The Son was given the assignment to accomplish that redemption. The Holy Spirit was tasked with applying Christ's work of redemption to God's chosen people. It is vitally important that we understand that this division of responsibilities did not involve any imposition by the Father or a struggle within the Godhead itself. Rather, the Father, Son, and Spirit made an eternal agreement that is known as the covenant of redemption. Under this covenant, the Father sent the Son, and the Son was absolutely delighted to carry out the mission the Father gave Him.

The Apostle Paul sketched out the scope of Jesus' incarnation when he wrote: "Therefore He says: '*When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.*'" (Now this,

‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things)” (Eph. 4:8–10). So the ministry of Jesus, which was crowned by His ascension to glory for His coronation as Lord of creation, began with His descent. He left His home in glory with the Father and the Spirit, and He came to this world by way of incarnation.

Likewise, at the opening of his epistle to the Romans, Paul identified himself as an Apostle called of God and set apart for the gospel of God, which, he said, was “promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh” (1:2–3). Thus, Paul began his great exposition of the gospel and the work of Christ with a reference to Jesus being born as a descendant of David. This reference to Jesus’ birth brings us immediately to the concept of incarnation.

THE BIRTH OF THE INCARNATE ONE

That which is significant about the birth of Christ, that which we celebrate at Christmas, is not so much the birth as the incarnation of God Himself. An incarnation is a coming in the flesh. In the prologue of his gospel, John first distinguished between the Word and God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (1:1a). Then, in the very next breath, he said that they are

the same: “the Word was God” (v. 1b). Finally, at the end of the prologue, he wrote, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (v. 14a). In this “incarnation,” God did not suddenly undergo a metamorphosis into a man, so that the divine nature essentially passed out of existence or took on a new form. The incarnation was not so much a subtraction as it was an addition; the eternal second person of the Trinity took on Himself a human nature and joined His divine nature to that human nature for the purpose of redemption.

Paul had some very important things to say about the incarnation in his letter to the Philippians:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:5–11)

This passage, which is a celebration of the incarnation of Christ, is known as the Kenotic Hymn. It is probable that the Apostle did not compose this passage while he was writing the letter to the Philippians, but that he made use of a hymn Christians were singing at the time. It is called the Kenotic Hymn because of a prominent Greek word that is found within this passage, *kenosis*, which literally means “an emptying.” The image of emptying gives us an idea of the transition Jesus underwent by leaving His exalted state in heaven and becoming incarnate as a man in this world.

In the life of Jesus, we see a very distinct pattern of humiliation and exaltation. He began in exaltation in the glory of heaven, but He condescended to join us in our earthly existence in order to redeem us. By entering into human flesh, He underwent a profound humiliation. Throughout His lifetime, the humiliation became deeper and darker, finally reaching its nadir in the cross. After His crucifixion and death, the pattern changed and He began to be exalted once more, beginning with His burial in the tomb of a wealthy man and culminating with His ascension to glory.

The pattern is not always consistent. Several years ago, I wrote a book titled *The Glory of Christ* because I was fascinated at the way in which, during certain moments of Jesus’ earthly life, when His eternal identity was shrouded during His incarnation, bursts of glory occasionally broke through, as if the incarnation was incapable of totally submerging His glory. We see it, for example, in Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. Luke tells us of the arduous journey that Mary and Joseph took in order to be registered in Bethlehem. When they got there, there was no room in the inn,

so Jesus was born in the utter humiliation of a stable, wrapped in swaddling cloths, and laid in a manger. But even while we have this picture of humiliation, in the fields outside Bethlehem, the glory of God burst through, and the angelic chorus began to sing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14). That is just one example showing that Jesus’ humiliation was not linear. Nevertheless, the basic pattern is one of humiliation to exaltation.

AN EXAMPLE TO EMULATE

I think it is important for us to note that Paul’s purpose in the Kenotic Hymn was to show us how Jesus humbled Himself so that we might emulate Him. That is why Paul began by saying, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Elsewhere, the Apostle told us we must be willing to identify with the humiliation of Jesus if we hope to experience His exaltation (Rom. 8:17). Even our baptism displays humiliation and exaltation; in baptism, we are marked with the death of Jesus, but we also are marked with His resurrection.

Paul asserted that Christ, “being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God” (Phil. 2:6). That’s strange language. Other translators say that Jesus did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. In other words, Jesus did not regard the glory that He enjoyed with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity as something to be guarded jealously and held

tenaciously. Rather, He was willing to lay it aside. He was willing to empty Himself and make Himself “of no reputation” (v. 7a).

In the nineteenth century, liberal scholars propounded the kenotic theory of the incarnation, which declared that when Jesus came to this earth, He laid aside His divine attributes. Thus, the God-man no longer had the divine attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and all the rest. Of course, this theory was a denial of the very nature of God, who is immutable. Even in the incarnation, the divine nature did not lose its divine attributes. Jesus did not communicate His divine attributes to His human side. He did not deify His human nature. The union between the divine and the human natures of Jesus is mysterious, but His human nature is truly human. That means it is not omniscient. It is not omnipotent. It is none of those things. At the same time, His divine nature remains fully and completely divine. A. E. Biedermann said that “only one who has himself suffered a kenosis of his understanding can possibly accord [kenotic theories] welcome.”¹ In other words, these theologians had emptied themselves of their common sense.

In truth, Jesus emptied Himself of His glory, privilege, and exaltation. In the incarnation, He made Himself of no reputation. He allowed His divine, exalted standing to be subjected to human hostility, criticism, and even denial. He took the form of a bondservant and came in the likeness of a man (v. 7b). It is amazing enough that Jesus came as a man, but He also came as a slave. He came in a station that carried no exaltation or dignity at all, only indignity. In that state, “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (v. 8).

FROM HUMILIATION TO EXALTATION

The words that follow this brief summary of the humiliation of Jesus in the incarnation are vitally important to us. Paul wrote, “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (v. 9). In the upper room on the night before His execution, when Jesus prayed His High Priestly Prayer, one of His requests was that the Father would restore to Him the glory that they had together from the beginning. He said: “I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:4–5). The Father did exactly as Jesus asked at the completion of His work. There came an end to His indignity, to the humiliation that started so starkly with His birth.

The New Testament’s names and titles for Jesus make for a rich and inspiring study. But what is the name that God has given Jesus, the name that is above every name? It often happens that Christians who read this passage assume that the name that is above every name is the name Jesus. But Paul had a different name in mind. He went on to say that God has exalted Christ and given Him the name above every name, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2 10–11). The name that is above every name is the title that belongs only to God, *Adonai* (“Lord”), which refers to God as the sovereign

one. Because of His perfect obedience in the role of a slave, God moved heaven and earth to exalt His Son, and He gave Him the name that is above every name, so that when we hear the name of Jesus, our impulse should be to fall on our knees and confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father. When we do so, when we exalt Christ in this way, we also exalt the Father.

So it comes full circle: first exaltation, then humiliation, and finally back to exaltation. Christ was not simply given the task of coming to die on Good Friday. He was called to live a lifetime of humiliation. That was the mission that He agreed to perform with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity.

CHAPTER 1

STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

So often, we think of the work of Christ as something that began when He was baptized in the Jordan River around the age of thirty. In reality, however, the work of Christ began in eternity past in the covenant of redemption. In this chapter, Dr. Sproul explains how the humiliation of Christ in His incarnation and crucifixion and the exaltation of Christ in His resurrection and ascension are both grounded in the eternal covenant among the persons of the Trinity.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to state the relation of each of the persons of the Trinity to the covenant of redemption.
2. To be able to summarize the pattern of humiliation and exaltation in the work of Christ.

QUOTATIONS

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond-servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

—Philippians 2:5–11

The pact of salvation makes known to us the relationships and life of the three persons in the Divine Being as a covenantal life, a life of consummate self-consciousness and freedom. Here, within the Divine Being, the covenant flourishes to the full... The greatest freedom and the most perfect agreement coincide. The work of salvation is an undertaking of three persons in which all cooperate and each performs a special task.

—Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. In theology, we make a distinction between the person of Christ and the work of Christ.
- B. Although the distinction is important, we must never let it become a separation.
- C. We understand the work in light of the person doing the work, and the work itself reveals a great deal about the person.

II. The Covenant of Redemption

- A. The work of Christ began in eternity past in the “covenant of redemption.”
- B. Although most Christians are familiar with the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and so on, not as many are familiar with the covenant of redemption.
- C. The covenant of redemption refers to a pact or an agreement that takes place in eternity within the Godhead.
- D. Not only is creation a Trinitarian work, redemption is a Trinitarian work.
- E. The Father designed the plan of redemption.
- F. The Son was assigned to accomplish that redemption.
- G. The Holy Spirit is tasked with applying that redemption to us.

III. The Incarnation

- A. During His earthly ministry, Jesus said, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven” (John 3:13).
- B. Jesus’ ministry in this world began with His descent.
- C. Jesus was born of the seed of David according to the flesh.
- D. In His birth we have the incarnation of God Himself.
- E. John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

- F. In this “incarnation,” God did not undergo metamorphosis into a man.
- G. The incarnation was not so much a subtraction as an addition.
- H. The eternal second person of the Trinity took upon Himself a human nature for the purpose of redemption.

IV. The Pattern of Humiliation and Exaltation

- A. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, wrote: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:5–11).
- B. In scholarly circles, this passage is known as the Kenotic Hymn.
- C. The Greek word *kenosis*, which is found in this passage, means “an emptying.”

- D. The emphasis of the passage is the transition that Jesus underwent by leaving His exalted state and becoming incarnate.
- E. The pattern found in this passage is the pattern of humiliation and exaltation.
- F. Jesus began exalted in heaven, but He condescended to join us in our predicament in order to redeem us.
- G. By entering into human flesh, He underwent profound humiliation.
- H. Throughout His life, the humiliation became worse and worse until it reached its nadir in the cross.
- I. After the crucifixion, He was resurrected and exalted to glory once again.

V. The Kenosis

- A. In Romans 8, Paul told Christians that unless we are willing to identify with the humiliation of Jesus, we will never share in His exaltation.
- B. The Son was willing to empty Himself and make Himself of no reputation.
- C. In the nineteenth century, liberal scholars proposed the kenotic theory of the incarnation, saying that the Son's incarnation resulted in the laying aside of His divine attributes, such as omniscience and omnipotence.
- D. But the divine nature did not lose its attributes in the incarnation.

- E. The human nature was truly human, and the divine nature remained fully and completely divine.
- F. What He emptied were glory, privilege, and exaltation.

VI. Exaltation to Former Glory

- A. After His humiliation, Jesus was again highly exalted.
- B. In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus asked the Father to restore to Him the glory that He had from the beginning (John 17:5).
- C. This was exactly what the Father did once Jesus completed His work.
- D. In Philippians 2:9, Paul wrote: “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.”
- E. Many assume that the name referred to here is *Jesus*.
- F. In fact, the name above every name is the title belonging only to God, namely, *Adonai*.
- G. The name *Adonai* is given to Jesus.

BIBLE STUDY

1. Was the plan of redemption included in the eternal decree or counsel of God? What do the following texts indicate?

- a. Ephesians 1:4–11

- b. Ephesians 3:11
- c. 2 Thessalonians 2:13
- d. 2 Timothy 1:9
- e. James 2:5
- f. 1 Peter 1:2

2. Did the plan of salvation have the nature of a covenant? What do the following texts teach us?

- a. John 5:30, 43
- b. John 6:38–40
- c. John 17:4–12

3. How do Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 support the idea that the eternal plan of redemption is a covenant?

4. What do the following texts have in common?

- a. John 6:38–39
- b. John 10:18
- c. John 17:4
- d. Luke 22:29

5. John 1:1–14 is one of the most significant New Testament texts dealing directly with the incarnation. Read these verses and outline the main points that are made in each section.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. What was the role of the Father in the covenant of redemption? The Son? The Holy Spirit?

2. Historically, the idea of the covenant of redemption grew out of a discussion among Reformed covenant theologians about the parties to the covenant of grace. Some argued that the covenant of works was made with Adam as the representative of his people and that the covenant of grace was made with Christ as the representative of His people. Others argued that the covenant of grace was made between God and His people and that this covenant of grace was founded on the covenant of redemption, which was made between God and Christ. Charles Hodge claimed that there is no doctrinal difference between those who hold the one versus those who hold the other. He argues that it is only a difference of clarity of expression.² Robert Dabney, on the other hand, argued that the distinction is essential because Christ cannot be both a party and a surety of the same covenant.³ Who do you think has the strongest case?

3. Regarding whether the parties to the covenant of grace are God and Christ or God and His people, Charles Hodge said, “The Westminster standards seem to adopt sometimes the one and sometimes the other mode of expression.” He argued that in the Confession (7:3), “the implication is that God and his people are the parties.”⁴ The Larger Catechism, however, says that the

covenant of grace “was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.”⁵ Are the two ideas contradictory? Inconsistent? Why or why not?

4. Louis Berkhof argued that it is better to say that the Word became flesh rather than saying that God became man. It is better, he said, because it was the second person of the Trinity who assumed human nature, not the Triune God.⁶ Do you agree? Why or why not?

APPLICATION

1. Reflect on the fact that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit planned your redemption from all eternity. Give praise to God for His amazing grace toward you.

2. The nadir of Christ’s humiliation was the cross on which He cried out as He who knew no sin was made sin, and the wrath of God was poured out on Him. Meditate on the following poem that reminds us that Jesus cried out as one forsaken in order that you and I may never have to.

*Yea, once, Immanuel’s orphaned cry his universe hath
shaken—
It went up single, echoless, “My God, I am forsaken!”
It went up from the Holy’s lips amid his lost creation,*

*That, of the lost, no son should use those words of desolation!*¹⁷

SUGGESTED READING FOR FURTHER STUDY

Athanasius. *On the Incarnation*.

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 212–16, 323–482.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*, pp. 265–71, 331–55.

Dabney, Robert L. *Systematic Theology*, pp. 431–39.

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Macleod, Donald. *The Person of Christ*, pp. 155–80.

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Witsius, Herman. *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, vol. 1, pp. 165–92.

NOTES: CHAPTER 1

1. A. E. Biedermann, quoted in Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 273.

2. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (London: Thomas Nelson, 1872), 358.
3. Ralph Allan Smith, *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2003), 27.
4. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 358.
5. “Q. 31,” *The Larger Catechism* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1860), 140.
6. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 333.
7. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Cowper’s Grave,” *Poems*, vol. 3 (London: Chapman & Hall, 1856), 120.