

Issue 15 – December 2005

Issue 15 is here, just in time for the holidays! I hope you have a joyful one. As always, I welcome your feedback. — Steve

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“All Greek to Me”: God at the Center



One of the first things journalism students learn is "the inverted pyramid": they learn to cram all of the most important points of their article into the opening paragraph. In normal English usage, the most important person or thing should go at the head of almost any list.

Biblical Greek employs similar usage: the most important item usually comes first in a list. And because, unlike English, Greek does not need word order to determine how a word is used in a sentence--it has word endings for that--it can leverage word order to indicate emphasis. The beginning and then the end of a sentence, a clause, or a list is the place where the emphasis falls in Greek. Unfortunately, we lose much of this emphasis in English translations, because the translators feel forced to rearrange the words back into normal English order.

Consider 1 Corinthians 3:9, which the NIV renders, "For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building." A more literal rendering would be: "God's fellow workers we are; God's field you are, God's building." Paul is making a triple emphasis that we almost completely lose in English: *God is the important One, not what we are or what you are.* [\[TOP\]](#)

The context bears out this emphasis. The Corinthian Christians are wrangling about whose group is the best, the one that claims Paul, or that one that names Apollos, or Cephas (Peter), or Christ (see 1:10-12). Apparently, the Corinthians are in danger of splitting into competing factions or sects, each thinking of themselves as superior to the others. Perhaps their fellowship is deteriorating so much that they are discounting their rival factions and even writing them off as no longer members of God's kingdom. Whether that has happened yet, they certainly seem to be moving in that direction.

Paul's antidote to this sectarian poison is pointing all of them to God. He notes that he and Apollos are not in competition or leading rival factions. Instead, he says, "God's servants we are." Similarly, the Corinthians' organic

growth as Christians is because "God's field you are." Their organizational growth is because they are "God's building."

Here is a lesson for all of us. Let's get our eyes off of ourselves--our status, our achievements, our position relative to someone else--and return to focusing on Him, the one who has "rescued us out of the dominion of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in Whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).

Left to ourselves, we would be a barren field, a collapsed building. But God makes His chosen ones into a verdant paradisaical garden, a gloriously splendid temple. Let's give the credit to Whom it belongs.

Want to go deeper?

If you want to explore other places where "of God" (*tou theou*) occurs in an emphatic, first position, look up these verses. You will see how in these instances also, the emphatic word order of the original does not survive the translation process. Click on the verse for the NIV rendering (except 2 Cor. 11:2, which has Young's Literal Translation):

[Acts 12:22](#)
[Romans 13:4 \(twice\)](#)
[1 Corinthians 1:24 \(twice\)](#)
[1 Corinthians 2:7](#)
[1 Corinthians 6:9](#)

[2 Corinthians 6:4](#)
[2 Corinthians 11:2](#)
[2 Corinthians 11:7](#)
[Ephesians 2:8](#)
[Hebrews 6:5](#)
[James 1:1](#)

[1 Peter 2:16](#)
[1 Peter 4:14](#)
[1 Peter 4:17 \(2nd time\)](#)
[2 Peter 3:5](#)
[2 Peter 3:12](#)
[Jude 4](#)

Here are two more instances, using "Jesus our Lord" ([1 Corinthians 9:1](#)) and "of the Lord" ([1 Corinthians 10:26](#)), quoting Psalm 24:1. (The Hebrew has the same emphatic word order.) [\[TOP\]](#)

Three Views of the Atonement

What was God doing on the cross? The question is more than a good book title (authored by evangelical Alister E. McGrath). It constitutes a search for understanding of one of the crucial events of human history, perhaps *the* crucial event. The entire New Testament focuses on the death, burial, and resurrection, events leading up to and flowing from it, its theological significance and ethical implications. This essay will focus on the deep significance of the atonement, as explained from three perspectives: the dynamic, subjective, and objective views.

Dynamic view

The dynamic view sees Christ's death and resurrection as the climax of a cosmic conflict with Satan and the demonic forces of evil. Christ came as the Second Adam (Romans 5:18-19), winning the contest that Adam failed. He also came as the new Israel, faithfully keeping submitting to God instead of to Satan as the first Israel had done (Matthew 2:15; 4:4; etc.). Immediately after His baptism, the Spirit "drove" (Greek: *ekballei*) Him into the wilderness so that He might confront Satan (Mark 1:12). His victory there was only one of what must have been many battles, for Luke records that Satan left Him until "an opportune time" (Luke 4:13).

During His ministry Jesus offered His ability to cast out demons as a demonstration that He was stronger than Satan. Although He described Satan as a "strong man," He claimed the ability to "bind" the strong man and despoil his possessions (i.e., those who were demon-possessed). His ability to cast out demons "by the finger of God" He presented as proof of the arrival of God's kingdom on earth (Luke 12:20-22). Jesus got His disciples involved in the warfare; their successful preaching, healing, and exorcism mission He afterward described as the fall of Satan from heaven (Luke 10:18).

Satan was behind the betrayal of Jesus by Judas (John 13:2, 27), his abandonment by the other apostles (Luke 22:31-32), as well as his trial and murder (John 8:40-41, 44). Jesus recognized Satan as His principal enemy, and even before His death, He was so confident of victory that He spoke of it as a *fait accompli* (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11, 32). The moment before His death Christ Himself uttered the triumphant words, "It is finished" (John 19:30; compare Luke 12:50). The glorious resurrection is proof that His death was a victory and not a defeat (Revelation 3:21).

In his confrontation with false teaching at Colossae, Paul presents the cross and resurrection as a triumph over spiritual enemies. The Colossians were in danger of being deceived by a syncretistic blend of Judaistic legalism, Hellenistic philosophy, and Eastern mysticism. Apparently the heretical teachers were not advocating a rejection of Jesus, but they denied Him the primacy in favor of intermediary beings. "Go beyond Jesus Christ to greater realities," they might have taught. Paul replies that there is nothing beyond Jesus Christ, in whom God's fullness dwells. He it is Who "disarmed the powers and authorities, [making] a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15).

Not only did Christ conquer Satan, demons, principalities, and powers. He also conquered death (Acts 2:24; Revelation 5:5-6)- Paul uses militaristic terms to discuss the resurrection, e.g., “destroyed” and “victory” (1 Corinthians 15:24-26, 54-56).

Because Christ has triumphed as our representative, we share in His triumph (hence the super-conquerors of Romans 8:37). In Ephesians 4:8 Paul applies Psalm 68:19 to Christ’s triumph, picturing Christ as a conquering general returning to Rome for a victory parade: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” The ensuing passage explains that the gifts He gave are the offices for building up the church. The captives are bypassed, but Colossians 2:15 seems a fitting commentary. In 2 Corinthians 2:14, Paul says that “God . . . always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” In this case the apostles (see 1 Corinthians 4:9), and perhaps all Christians, are probably among those following along behind—themselves conquered, and yet joyously sharing in the victory celebration. Our struggle against Satan and demonic forces continues (Ephesians 6:12). Because He is victorious, we also can be victorious (Rev. 3:21; 1 John 2:14-15; 4:4; 5:4-5). [\[TOP\]](#)

Subjective view

It is true that we are the subjects of His daring rescue (Colossians 1:13-14), but we also participate. This is the subjective nature of the atonement: it transforms us. When we are united with Christ through faith-repentance-baptism, God’s Spirit begins the process of transforming us from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Spirit, Himself the guarantee that this beginning will reach its intended end (Ephesians 1:13-14), begins to produce His fruit in our hearts (Galatians 5:22-23) as we cooperate by “walking in the Spirit” and being “led by the Spirit” (Romans 8:4, 14; Galatians 5:16). The metamorphosis is not automatic; it takes constant mental concentration as we count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God (Romans 6:11). It also requires continual moral striving, as we refuse to let sin dominate us, yielding the members of our bodies to righteousness instead of to sin (Romans 6:12-13).

It is a battle we fight, yet Paul assures us, “[S]in will have no dominion over you” (Romans 6:14). The struggle leads to holiness and the end is eternal life (Romans 6:22). When Christ returns, at the eschaton, the Spirit will have performed His work in us: “[W]e shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2). Though this is work that changes us from within and in which we ourselves participate, the credit still belongs to God, because it is His work being done in us and through us. He is the one that will bring it to completion on that day (Philippians 1:6). Meanwhile, we image Christ in this world. He was our representative in the cosmic conflict; we are His representatives in the existential struggle against the world, the flesh, and the Devil. [\[TOP\]](#)

Objective view

Yet Christ’s death is more than what he did for (*hyper*) us (see Mark 14:24; Luke 22:19-20) and what he does in (*en*) us (see Colossians 1:27). It also involves what He did instead of (*anti*) us (see Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45)—the objective view of the atonement. In fact, many believe that the substitutionary nature of the atonement is the most important aspect of all.

Several types of the substitutionary atonement come from Genesis. The word used in 1 John 3:12 to describe Cain’s murder of his brother is the word for “slaughter” (Greek: *ephaxen*), as in the offering of a sacrifice. This has led some to view the world’s first murder, recorded in Genesis 4:8, as the offering of a substitute sacrifice. In effect, Cain may have said, “So, You didn’t like my vegetables as an offering? Let’s see how You like THIS! (slash).” The murder certainly involved the shedding of his brother’s blood, for it cried out from the ground against the perpetrator (Genesis 4:10).

When the angel stops Abraham from stabbing Isaac to death, Abraham finds a ram caught in a nearby thicket that he can offer in place of (Septuagint: *anti*) his son (Genesis 22:12-13). The passage assumes that some sacrifice must be offered, and the one is replaced by the other. More than a hundred years later, when Joseph’s testing of his brothers created a crisis situation involving the enforced servitude of Benjamin, Judah stepped forward and freely offered himself as a substitute for his brother (Genesis 44:18-34, especially not the Septuagint’s use of *anti* in v. 33). In this case also, some substitute had to be provided. There was no possibility of mere escape from the demands of the master.

Yet all three of these are one-for-one substitutions, just like the “eye-for-eye” provisions of the Law. Christ’s sacrifice (one for many) is more like the sin offering in behalf of all the people or the sacrifice of the goat on the Day

of Atonement (Leviticus 4:13-21; 16:15-19). He is the “atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). He is the “Lamb of God, Who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

One for the world? How can that be just? Its justice depends on the identity of the Sacrifice. A single human deserves infinite punishment because of sins. Adding the punishment of another human adds no more than was there already (for infinity plus infinity equals infinity). The same is true for “the sins of the [whole] world.” The slaughter of the Infinite One for these sins beings one infinity into contact with the other—just payment (see the chart below). [\[TOP\]](#)

The Substitutionary Atonement				
How can Christ's death be the equivalent of eternal destruction?				
Subject of Wrath	Nature of Being	Duration	Result	
One sinner	Finite	X Infinite	= Infinite	
Many sinners	Finite (though many)	X Infinite	= Infinite	
Christ	Infinite	X Finite	= Infinite	

Our sins brought us under the curse of the law, but Christ became a curse for us by hanging on the tree (Galatians 3:10-14). Because of Christ's death, God was able to effect what Luther called a "happy exchange": we were the subjects of God's just condemnation, the objects of His righteous wrath, but the sinless Christ became “sin” for us, so that we might become God's righteousness by Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). God established Him as the propitiation, the appeasement, so that the all-consuming fire of His wrath might be diverted to Him instead of destroying the rest of us humans (Romans 3:25). As Isaiah said, "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). [\[TOP\]](#)

Must we choose?

Dynamic, subjective, and objective—must we choose between them? No! By its very nature the atonement is greater than any one metaphor or perspective can contain. We must always be answering, "Yes, and much more besides." Like astronomers surveying the universe, the more we study it, the more vast it becomes. Our inability to fully comprehend its dimensions does not nullify what we can understand, nor does it rob us of the amazement we sense at what we know was accomplished. [\[TOP\]](#)

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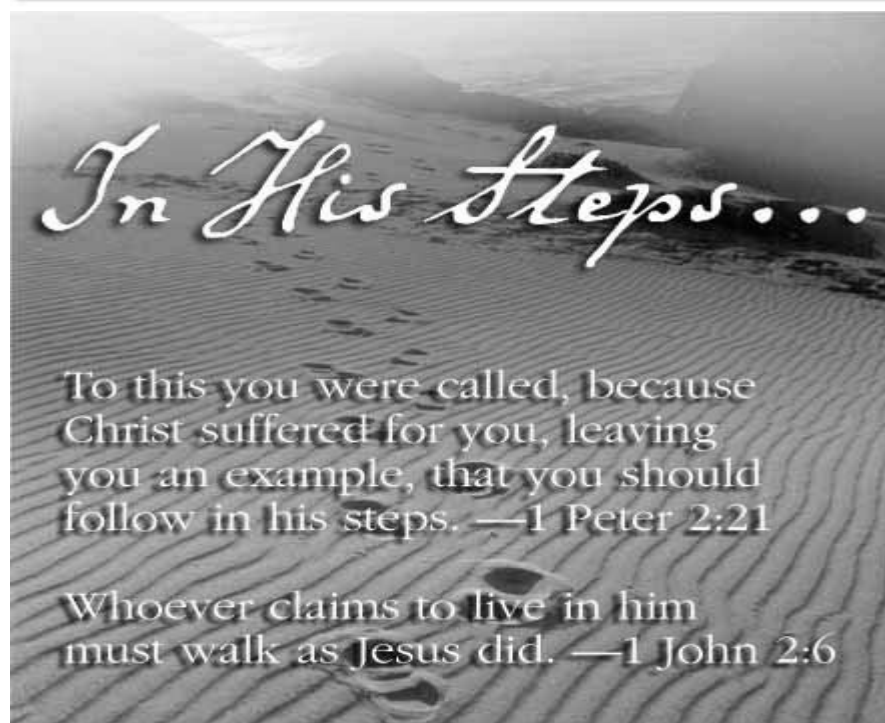
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