

Jesus' Sacrifice: a Dialogue

between
Ra McLaughlin
and
Various Members at Infidels.org

Introduction

In order to fulfill the requirement for an email apologetic discussion, [for John Frame's Apologetics class at RTS] I logged onto the forums at infidels.org and jumped into a few conversations. This is an excerpt from one such conversation that began as a challenge to the significance of the crucifixion. Most of the objections are evident from my first post, but more were raised as the thread continued. I know this is a bit long, but I thought it was worth including a significant chunk in order to demonstrate some of the progress that was made on some of the issues. Some extraneous issues have been omitted from the following material.

Ra (a.k.a. Xman):

The objections raised here can be answered by simply elucidating various Christian doctrines, such as that of the hypostatic union: Jesus was both fully man and fully God, not a hybrid of the two.

First, the hypostatic union is not a logical contradiction: Jesus was both "A" and "B." The contradiction suggested above ("A and not A") would only pertain if Christians argued that Jesus was both God and not God, or man and not man.

Second, the hypostatic union assigns all of Jesus' human attributes to his human nature and all of his divine attributes to his divine nature. In his divine nature he was omniscient; in his human nature he was not. Thus, in his human nature, he didn't know what kind of pain to expect. This (having two natures) is beyond the scope of our experience, so what it would feel like to be in that situation cannot be intuited.

Regarding the "sacrifice," a better word might be "offering." In any event, Jesus did experience permanent loss, however minor you might consider it to have been. He lost, among other things, the temporary enjoyment of perfect fellowship with his Father, the time spent under the power of death, and various other things you might consider trivial. The important thing for Christians is that Jesus' death paid a penalty, a penal debt. Standard Christian doctrine is that the penal debt was exacted in infinite degree, not in infinite time. As we can all figure

out by simple math, as long as any element of the sacrifice was infinite, then the whole thing becomes of infinite measure. By analogy, a box that is only 1 inch wide and 1 inch high can still hold an infinite content if it is infinitely long. Eternal suffering is not required to achieve an infinite payment; an infinite degree of punishment suffered for a finite time also satisfies the debt.

A proper understanding of the doctrine of the trinity might also help you see the Christian perspective. The trinity has traditionally been defined as God's existence in three persons and one essence. A "person," among other things, is a center of consciousness. In the crucifixion, the second person paid a debt to the first person. It is somewhat sloppy to reduce this to a statement that God repaid a debt to God; rather, within the godhead, the Son paid a debt to the Father.

Further, even if one were to argue that "God repaid a debt to God," there is nothing "illogical" about this. However counterintuitive one might find it, it does not violate any rules of logic. In fact, this kind of thing is done all the time through personal corporations. For example, an attorney may form a personal corporation from which he draws a paycheck (paying himself). He may also take out an officer's loan from the corporation to avoid paying taxes on the money before the end of the year (loaning to himself). He then repays this loan through a bonus at the end of the year (repaying the debt to himself). If the books are not done this way, the taxman can get might angry. Illogical? No. Unprecedented? No. Unfamiliar or strange to you? Perhaps.

The relationship between sinners and Jesus is established by imputation, a legal transference of one's credit, whether positive or negative, to another. Perhaps a legal analogy will clarify a bit: In some states in America, when a man and woman marry, they become liable for each other's preexisting debts. So, if a man marries a woman who owes money to creditors, the man becomes legally responsible for those debts and can be sued by the creditors. In a similar way, when sinners are "married" to Jesus through faith, Jesus assumes liability for their "sin debts" (penalties due them for crimes against God's law). He pays these debts by subjecting himself to these penalties (God's wrath expressed). The blessings Christians receive come to them in a similar way to the aforementioned marriage: once the believer is united to Jesus by faith, Jesus shares the blessings he earned by his righteous life and death, including eternal life, forgiveness, etc., just as a man who owns a house might voluntarily put his new wife's name on the deed.

Regarding the pain of the crucifixion, the greatest torment was not the physical torture, but the unfathomable pain of suffering God's intense wrath.

Regarding eternal/infinite punishment in hell, it is true that finite sin does not merit infinite punishment. Let's leave aside the question of whether or not human sin is an infinite offense. The doctrine of eternal punishment in hell does

not state that an infinite time is experienced all at once. Rather, it speaks of a perpetual temporal existence. All that is required for a person to suffer for an infinite time under such conditions is that the person be sinful enough to get there in the first place, and remain sinful enough to remain there for the duration. In other words, those cast into hell compound their sin while they are there, never repenting, always cursing God for their fate, etc. Much as a convict adds years to his sentence for committing crimes in prison, the condemned in hell add time and punishment to their sentences for their continued sins in hell. Since they lack the ability to cease sinning and to repent, and since no sacrifice remains for them, they necessarily suffer hell for eternity.

Well, enough for this post. I don't have the energy to answer all the objections above right now (and it would get too long to read if I did). Perhaps I'll do more later.

Winstonjen:

Sacrifice or offering, whatever you call it, you don't 'sacrifice' or 'offer' something with the expectation or knowledge that you're going to get it back. If you do, then it is not a sacrifice or an offering, more like a loan.

How can something be both permanent and temporary? No matter HOW painful it was, IT ENDED. And Jesus got his life back along with everything else. With a death penalty, the one who pays it is supposed to stay dead forever.

The illustration of repaying a debt to oneself is] illogical to me, because he could just take the money and draw up a false receipt, which would also save on bank fees.

Ra:

Regarding sacrifice, you seem to have missed the points I was trying to make. (1) You cannot get back lost time -- it is gone permanently, even if you are later restored to the relationship from which you were restricted. For example, if I am imprisoned for 20 years, I cannot relive those years with my loved ones in happier conditions, nor can I regain my lost youth. (2) Sacrifice is a legitimate word to apply to situations in which one experiences something unpleasant. For example, if my children are sick I may willingly "sacrifice" my health by tending to them, knowing full well that I will then catch the same disease. If I later recover my health, that does not make my actions any less sacrificial. Following the same reasoning, it is also a legitimate word to apply to temporary losses.

Regarding the debt, I think you mean something other than "illogical." There is no logical fallacy, no break of reasoning in the example I provided. Your willingness to violate the law in that circumstance does not somehow prove that it is a breach of sound reasoning to obey the law.

You seem to have in mind something more like "not expedient" or "foolish." But a lack of expedience does not establish grounds for a charge of falsity. Many things are true and logical that are not expedient. A charge of foolishness similarly does not impugn the veracity or the logical coherence of the idea.

Wordling:

Christians *do* argue [that Jesus was both mortal and immortal]. To deny it is mere sophistry. For Jesus to be "A", he must be "not B", because "not B" is a corollary of "A" (to be "mortal", one has to be "not immortal").

"Hypostatic union" is a fancy term which tries to give a logical contradiction an air of intellectual respectability. In much the same way that "mystery" is used as a euphemism for "nonsense."

Ra:

Not in this case. The law of non-contradiction is that a thing cannot be both A and not A at the same time and in the same sense/relationship. Jesus was not mortal in the same sense/relationship that he was immortal. Rather, Christians believe in the immortality of the human soul and the mortality of the human body. This is not a contradiction because we are not mortal in the same sense that we are immortal. Jesus was more complex because he added an immortal divine nature to the picture, but there is still no contradiction -- only his human body was mortal.

Now, depending on whom you are reading, you may find different definitions of death being used. In such cases, clear-thinking Christian authors might apply the terms "mortal" and "immortal" differently than I have here. But again, no contradiction exists unless they assert that Jesus was both A and not A at the same time and in the same sense/relationship. I would not affirm the conclusions of those who committed such an error, but I have not committed that error here, and you have not provided an example of a sense in which Jesus was both A and not A at the same time and in the same sense.

You may feel free to try to find a sense in which the doctrine of the hypostatic union is contradictory, and I will be happy to respond if you make the attempt.

Wordling:

Semantic shennanigans.

"Hypostatic union" is a euphemism for "violation of the law of non-contradiction". You even come close to admitting as such when you say that for something to have "two natures" is "beyond the scope of our experience" (another euphemism, this time for "logically impossible").

The term's Greek etymology gives it a veneer of respectability, but you (or rather, the apologist who coined it) might have well have coined a whole new word from scratch - like "spanglethrap".

In my pocket I have a spherical cube. Impossible you say? A violation of the law of non-contradiction? Not at all - it's a spanglethrap. It's beyond our normal scope of experience, but it's true nonetheless.

Butters:

"A" God is not man
"B" Man is not God
therefore Jesus could only be God or Man.

Please define "Hypostatic union" and how it works.

Ra:

Butters & Wordling,

quote:

"A" God is not man
"B" Man is not God
therefore Jesus could only be God or Man.

The premises (lines 1 & 2) define God and man by pointing out true attributes: God is not man, and man is not God, but they are actually false as stated. By using the word "is," Butters has effectively equated "God" with "not man" and "man" with "not God." In short, Butters has defined everything that is not man as "God," and everything that is not God as "man." That implies that only God and man exist, and that everything in the universe is either God or man.

I suspect what Butters really meant, though, is something more like:
"A" If it is God then it is not man. (If C then not D.)
"B" If it is man then it is not God. (If D then not C.)
"C" It is God.
"D" It is Man.

From which the argument could proceed:
If C then not D.
D, therefore not C. (By modus tollens, if you like academic terms for syllogisms.)

Unfortunately for this interpretation of Butters' argument, premises A and B are unproven, and I am not about to stipulate to them. They are conveniently invented to prove the conclusion, but they are untrue. Unless you can prove these premises, the argument is not convincing.

Let me offer a couple illustrations that point out the way this argument would look in other settings:
"A" The president is not the vice-president.
"B" The vice-president is not the president.
Therefore the vice-president is not the president.

But consider this argument in the case of a corporation in which the same person holds both offices. Both offices are still distinct, being president is not an attribute of being vice-president, and being vice-president is not an attribute of being president. But it is possible for one person to have both the set of attributes that go with being president and the set of attributes that go with being vice-president, and it is possible for one person to hold both offices (as is often the case in personal corporations).

Here's another example:
"A" Awake is not hungry.
"B" hungry is not awake.
Therefore one cannot be both hungry and awake.

The error of this argument is rather self-evident, I think.

The illustration of the spherical-cubical spanglethrap, while interesting, also does not disprove the hypostatic union. The illustration would only apply if Christians argued that Jesus' divinity was his humanity, and that his humanity was his divinity. But this is not the Christian argument. Rather, in the Christian argument Jesus' divinity and humanity remain distinct. The argument is not "God is man, and man is God." Rather, it is "Jesus is God and Jesus is man." These are two very different arguments. Consider how easy it is to tell these types of arguments apart if we substitute "tall" for "God" and "strong" for "man." It might well be true that "Jesus is tall and Jesus is strong," but that in no way implies that "tall is strong, and strong is tall."

As far as defining the hypostatic union, goes, there are many good descriptions in theology books, if you are interested. If not, here is a summary: The doctrine of the hypostatic union is that Jesus is one person with two natures. As such, he possesses both the full attributes of God and the full attributes of man, with each set of attributes residing in its appropriate nature.

Perhaps I can illustrate the hypostatic union by the metaphor of a peanut butter sandwich. The peanut butter is not the bread, and the bread is not the peanut butter, but the peanut butter sandwich contains both the bread with its full set of breadly attributes and the peanut butter with its full set of peanut-buttery attributes.

Lastly, for clarification, when I said "beyond our experience," what I meant was "None of us has both a human and a divine nature, so it is a difficult concept of which to conceive." But difficult is not impossible, and beyond our experience does not imply any logical failure.

Winstonjen:

Xman, a person can be both awake and hungry because the two qualities are not mutually exclusive. However, something cannot be both immortal and not - you are either one or the other. Likewise, Jesus' suffering for our sins cannot be both permanent and temporary. If it was permanent, he would have to suffer from the instant A & E ate the forbidden fruit.

Ra:

Christian teaching is that all persons are immortal (via the immortality of the soul), unless you means something else by "mortality." Mortality pertains to the body. Thus, a person can have both a mortal body and an immortal soul. What about this strikes you as contradictory?

Diana:

If Jesus is capable of simultaneously being fully man and fully God (not a hybrid of the two), then I have an amazing computer desk to sell you at a price you can't refuse. It's 100% solid walnut and 100% stainless steel.

Perhaps it would help matters if you defined what you mean, specifically, by "man" and "God." I mean, not just the denotation, but the connotations, as well. This way we can decide easily enough if the two terms are mutually exclusive or not. If mutually exclusive, they cannot simultaneously both be. If not, then they *can* simultaneously both be. Easy enough, no?

Ra:

Winstonjen, his suffering was temporary because it ended. It was permanent because he lost some things that could not be recovered, such as time. This is not contradictory but is rather commonsensical, I think, so I don't understand why you would deny that it could be permanent in one sense and temporary in another sense.

Diana, as I have tried (painstakingly!) to explain, "fully" does not mean "100%." If the desk has 100% stainless steel legs and a 100% wood top, then maybe I'll buy it.

Wordling:

Actually, I think Xman is right. The hypostatic union, as he defines it, does not violate the law of non-contradiction. It was the peanut butter sandwich metaphor that did it for me.

We can view Jesus as a man, sandwiched between two slices of god. The crucifixion effectively opened up the sandwich, and scraped the man out. So all we are left with is the god.

Provided Xman doesn't claim that the peanut butter is still there, and that the entity he worships is, metaphorically speaking, dry bread, then I don't see anything illogical in this claim. Improbable, yes. But not illogical.

Diana:

First, my apologies for oversimplifying your position. I'm afraid it was precisely the "painstaking" part of your posts that I skimmed over, due to sheer exhaustion. I have now had a full night's sleep, and have taken the time to read your posts. BTW, I appreciate your patience.

I understand your basic position to be that Jesus was both "fully" a god and "fully" a man, in the sense of a peanut butter sandwich being comprised of both "fully" bread and "fully" PB. (Nice illustration, by the way.) According to Xn doctrine, man is also both mortal and immortal; it's just that we don't usually say he is "fully" both. But I think the same basic concept applies, and we don't normally argue that, provided the soul does exist, man cannot be both mortal and immortal at the same time. We understand that there are different parts involved.

The place I run into a snag with your explanation, then, is with the "divine nature" part. In its simplest form, my primary objection here is that this cannot coexist in the same being if that being also has a "human nature." If that being *doesn't* have a human nature, he is not, IMO, "fully" human.

But Xns generally don't argue that Jesus didn't have a human nature. They argue that it was his human nature that allowed him to be tempted (after all, how does one tempt a divine being?), so he had to have had both.

Is this not defining something as both A and not A at the same time and in the same sense/relationship?

quote:

Further, even if one were to argue that "God repaid a debt to God," there is nothing "illogical" about this. However counterintuitive one might find it, it does not violate any rules of logic....In some states in America, when a man and woman marry, they become liable for each other's preexisting debts.

But they don't, I'll warrant, become liable for one another's preexisting *crimes*.

The very analogy between "taking punishment that is owed others so they won't have to pay" and "paying a monetary debt so others don't have to pay" is faulty. And regarding Jesus' "losing" anything in his sacrifice (or offering, if you prefer), I'd put forth for your consideration that, considering what he had, being a divine being with eternal life, his losing his mortal life (along with the pain and trial of

this world) would be roughly analogous to my misplacing my bunny slippers for a couple of days.

Edited to ask: how can a being who is "from everlasting to everlasting" *lose time*? The concept of "lost" time is only meaningful within the context of *mortality*.

Ra:

Wordling, I think we're tracking pretty well on the pre-crucifixion bit. You might still find the traditional Christian view problematic insofar as it maintains that Jesus retained both his human and divine natures in the crucifixion and resurrection (it was his human body that was resurrected, after all).

Diana, yes, the Christian doctrine of the hypostatic union is that from his conception Jesus had, and continues to have, both a complete human nature and a complete divine nature, leaving you with your standing objection that this is impossible. I'll try to offer some further explanation if you'll help me out by specifying why it is that you find it difficult to believe that a divine nature can coexist with a human nature in one person.

Your point about debts and crimes is well taken, though perhaps if I used a woman with unpaid civil judgments against her for a wrongful death finding pursuant to a conviction on a first-degree murder charge, it might have been a little closer. Ultimately, though, we have to admit that God's economy of justice is not precisely parallel to ours. I offer the illustrations simply as means to gain insight into the biblical economy.

We probably differ in this, but substitution in criminal matters does not strike me as inherently wrong. Even from a secular perspective, I would find it potentially quite merciful. For example, if my daughter were convicted of a crime she had truly committed and were sentenced accordingly, I would not protest a law that permitted me to receive her sentence so that she might go free. It seems to me that as long as the aggrieved party is agreeable to the exchange, it ought to pose no moral problem. In the case of Jesus' sacrifice, God was the aggrieved party and he agreed to the substitution.

I would also grant that the "time" factor is not a huge one, in the grand scheme of things. The far more important aspect of Jesus' suffering was the intensity of the suffering he underwent during that limited time period. I had only raised that point in response to the idea that he had actually lost something "permanently," however "minor" it might appear to have been.