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### Arminianism and Adventism: Atonement as a Narrative

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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October 16, 2010

## Arminianism and Adventism: Atonement as a Narrative

For the sermon of our divine worship service, Dr. Angel Rodriguez preached a sermon entitled, "Incarnation, Death, Resurrection: Atonement as a Narrative." Before beginning his sermon, he thanked that theologians from outside the Adventist faith for coming and sharing with us about matters important to the Christian faith. He emphasized that it is important for Adventist theologians to listen to other Christian theologians and recounted his appreciation for dialogues with Christian theologians from other traditions. He also wanted us to know that in response to what he had heard at the conference he had modified some points of his sermon.

Dr. Rodriguez wants to tell a story that begins with creation and ends with recreation, and in the middle is the cross. It is not a story about us, but it involves us. This story is different than a screen narrative because it is interactive. You can decide how it will finish for you. You can choose (Is that ok, Armenian friends?) how it will end for you.

The plot is common to most Christian communities, but varies on significant details. The story begins "in the beginning." Before that, Dr. Rodriguez says he doesn't know much. The story was conceived and then in the divine word it was objectified. And *this* is what we see: intelligent creatures, free creatures, who can enjoy the creation

One law ruled the cosmos. The law of love. And creatures found their joy in serving God and serving others.

Then there is the third element in the story. Without any risk, the astonishing happened. One of God's creatures questioned the divine order, the law of love of God. His real aspiration was to evolve from the level of the creature to the level of the divine.

In the story, Dr. Rodriguez imagines that every effort was made to abort the rebellion. But eventually that rebellion reached a point where it was impossible for the rebellious to coexist peacefully with God's order. The cosmos became the arena of a conflict.

Dr. Rodriguez doesn't know when it happened. In this story he doesn't have dates. But at some point this conflict reached our planet. A creature on our planet decided God's will was too restrictive, and joined the rebellion. We became an endangered species in the universe. Would this be the end of our story?

But long before the beginning, in Trinitarian deliberations, a solution had been planned. And God met our parents in the garden of Eden. By placing enmity between humanity and the serpent, limits were placed on the power of human sin in the heart. In an act of divine grace God preserved human freedom in order to respond to salvation, but that freedom was tainted and unable to respond to God. So God sent the Son, and that promise of the Son would control the plot from the garden to the Cross, and the Cross would control the plot until the resolution of the story. And this story is not a tragedy.

This promise was for all humanity, and it was kept alive by the typology of the exodus and the sacrifices in the sanctuary. It continued to develop in the Davidic kingship. The prophets portrayed the people in a conflict besieged by deceptions, and Isaiah told of the promised suffering servant who would give his life for sins and restore us to life. Daniel told an apocalyptic story of God's resolution of the conflict through history, and as the OT closes Dr. Rodriguez can see the prophets on tiptoes looking forward, immersed in hope.

And then it happened. The word became flesh. The message of the angel to Mary announces the fulfillment of the promise and gives a preview of what is to come. It reassures that the plot of the story is still under divine control.

Through Jesus, God revealed his character which had been maligned by others. Through his incarnation, Jesus showed the

universe that God would preserve the human race. Even if all had rejected God, Jesus would have still stood as the representative of humanity.

Jesus death was not required by God, but was voluntarily accepted by the Godhead in order to make atonement and reveal the true love of God. According to the story, Satan came against Jesus attempting to take the life of the Son, but Satan had no right to take the life of the Son. The Son was without sin, and therefore Satan had now power over him. And yet he died.

He had no sin, and yet he chose to experience in our place eternal death and separation from God. Dr. Rodriguez invited us to take a peek into the trinity and make the trinity a part of the story. As a result of the incarnation, Jesus human and divine natures were united. Thus when Jesus was separated from God and the trinity was separate, and the other two members felt the pain of the atonement. Yet when Jesus expressed this separation with his statment on the cross, it is not punctuated by a period or an exclamation point but a question mark, indicating that an answer is coming.

The cross was a cosmic singularity. Jesus atoning death, does not need to be suplimented in order to have more saving power. It is finished! is a shout of victory. Yet in our story his death is followed by his resurrection, ascention, mediation, and second coming.

This mediation should not be understood as an addition from the cross. It is so intertwined in the cross, that its meaning is an expression of it. Everything else that happens in the story is an unfolding of the meaning of the cross.

Allow me an illustration from science, without attempting to legitimize a scientific theory. The cross was like the big bang. All atonement was packed into the cross and then exploded out through the ministry of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is not an addition to the cross but is dependant on and inseperable from the cross. Exalted to the right hand of God, Jesus has received from the right hand of God the promised Holy Spirit, and has poured out what we see here.

And God has provided through the prophets an outline or sketch of the rest of the story. Through the prophets, he fortold the wrong turn where the church would cloud the gospel with human traditions, and how he would work to overturn these corruptions and then come to restore all things.

The atonement is a process, a story. The expanding universe of the cross is overtaking the old world of sin and death. The cross is a revelation of God's judgment against evil powers, their eventual extinction from the universe was made certain there. On the other hand, the cross also made certain the destiny of those who receive Christ.

This divine decision is not an arbitrary one, but is based on the love of God, because he grants to all people what they choose. Soon he will appear a second time to bring salvation to all who are waiting him. Then we will be free from sin and a sinful human nature.

But the story does not end there. It is through the cross that the conflict will be resolved. The cosmic Day of Atonement that reconciles us to God will also end with an unfolding of the love of God to sinners in the final judgment. And they will bow down and acknowledge that God is indeed a God of love and justice. Then all will be harmonius, as Paul summarized the story in Phil 2:5-11.

Now, Dr. Rodriguez sees himself in the story. He sees himself on his knees. Proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. And as he looks, he sees you there; bowing as well.

But that is not the end of the story. Then John saw the earth made new, and it will go on forever. All made possible by the cross of Christ. The rest of the story is in his loving hands. The adventure, just about to begin.

Posted by David Hamstra on October 16, 2010 in Arminianism and Adventism Symposium | Permalink

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His sermon was a basic retelling of the plan of salvation ... but one part I found a bit jarring. It was when he spoke of the death of Jesus.

*"Since the unity of the two natures was permanent, it was not possible to suspend it on the cross. Therefore, on the cross the human and the divine natures in one person, experienced separation from God. The disjointing of the Son of God from the other members of the Godhead resulted in indescribable suffering not only to Jesus but also to the Godhead. Jesus' cry of dereliction points to a voluntary breach within the Godhead, to a sundering of the Trinity ...."*

This seems quite a stretch beyond anything the Bible says. Sure, Jesus said on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"--making the prayer of Psalm 22 his own. But how can we understand this literally?

Rodriguez is correct to say there was no division between Christ's humanity and divinity, united in the incarnation. But if that union could not be severed, how could Christ's union with his Father and their Spirit be severed? How could the divine nature itself be split? How could the eternal relationship between Father and Son and Spirit be rendered of none effect?

What explicit Biblical evidence is there for such an idea?


Posted by: Bill Cork | [October 17, 2010 at 04:43 PM](#)

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