The Judgment of God in Christ:
A Proposal for an Apocalyptic Account of Godforsakenness

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I would like to begin by thanking the Explorations in Theology and Apocalyptic Working Group for having me here tonight. I don't see my own work as belonging to an apocalyptic approach to the theological task, although I am interested in these conversations. There is a good deal that I happily affirm in the current revival of apocalyptic modes of theological reflection. Where I disagree with what I have read about apocalyptic theology, I have also found these disagreements important. I am an interested and well-wishing outsider, that is.

My presentation today follows up on a paper I wrote on the topic of godforsakenness, particularly in relation to Friedrich Schleiermacher. In "Godforsakenness as the End of Prophecy",[1] I attempted to take some of Schleiermacher's best insights in the *Glaubenslehre* to propose an understanding of the godforsakenness of the crucified Jesus - a godforsakenness that Schleiermacher himself explicitly rejected for various reasons - in terms of Jesus's prophetic office. Today I hope to retrace some similar steps in a more generalized fashion, and in particular as a response to concerns that might lead apocalyptic theologians to reject the idea of Christ's godforsakenness... I hope that you will be understanding if my articulation reveals some lack of familiarity with the relevant literature on apocalyptic, and I look forward to any suggestions or criticisms you might have.

There are numerous proposals available already for understanding whether and how Jesus is forsaken by God on the cross. I simply wish to offer one more, with some concerns of apocalyptic theology in mind. This is not a doctrinal position on the atonement to which I am strongly committed. Think of it as a potentially edifying way to read the gospel accounts of the crucifixion. Jesus's quotation of Psalm 22 is a relatively isolated textual incident, and those who gloss over it cannot be judged too harshly for doing so. Any theological account of Christ's forsakenness is hopelessly underdetermined by the gospel witnesses themselves, and should only be stated tentatively. And yet we are left with these witnesses, challenged by them.

Usually, the problem that theologians wrestle with when attempting to explain the cry of dereliction is that of an ***ontological rupture*** in the Godhead. Does God judge the Son on the cross, such that the bonds of love between them are broken? Is there a break in the Father's relationship with the Son, that is? John Yocum has written against what he calls a "recent theological commonplace," saying, "Such suffering does not [...] extend to the relationship of the Son to the Father, and the Father's willing it cannot be taken to mean that the sinful human condemnation of the Son is ratified

[1] "Godforsakenness as the End of Prophecy: a proposal from Schleiermacher's Glaubenslehre", Harvard Theological Review 107.3 (2014), pp.290-313.

by the Father: on the contrary, the judgment is overturned in the resurrection, which is not a divine volte-face, but the revelation of the triumph of the divine redemption over human sin."[2] Yocum goes on to say, "the hypostatic union is not simply a creative [...] evasion of the quandries of confessing the full manhood, full divinity, and single subjectivity of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It also expresses the limits of human sin in the face of sovereign divine love. It binds this man to the life of the Trinity in an unshakeable bond."[3] Not mentioned here, but also worth considering, are the potential pneumatological implications of a break between God and Jesus on the cross. If the bonds of love are broken, then where has the Spirit gone? Jesus, who once had proclaimed through the words of the prophet Isaiah that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me," now seems to utter an implied and desperate "Come, Holy Spirit". Yet the Spirit appears, by all accounts, to be absent.

Another way of looking at this ontological rupture is from the side of christology and psychology: is there a break in Jesus's perfect god-consciousness? When he perceives God as forsaking him, what does it mean for Jesus to lose sight of God? For Schleiermacher, an unobstructed god-consciousness stands at the very center of Christ's divinity, and thus amounts to something just as problematic as a division within the Godhead. In his *Life of Jesus* lectures Schleiermacher writes,

> "I believe that it is improbable that Christ fell back into a state of mental distress. Christ's word on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" has a bearing on this. I cannot think of this saying as an expression of Christ's self-consciousness. I can think of no movement when the relationship between God and Christ could have changed. It must always have been the same. Christ's oneness with the Father can never have been ended, but that seems to be what such a saying indicates."[4]

When theologians do affirm that Jesus was forsaken by God, the event is thus usually explained as some sort of paradox that allows us to retain both the unity of divine being and purpose and the moment of rupture that seems to be implied by the cross. - a "Speculative Good Friday" that introduces a moment of negativity in the godhead, or a "death of god", or a presence-in-absence of God.

The question I want to ask here in an apocalyptic mode is a bit different insofar as it avoids speculative ontological concerns, although I don't wish to deny that an account of divine self-differentiation might be a good basis for understanding the identification of God with the death

[2] John Yocum, "A Cry of Dereliction? Reconsidering a Recent Theological Commonplace" *IJST* 7.1 (2005), pp. 72-80, 79.
[3] Yocum, 79.
[4] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*. trans. Jack C. Verheyden, (Fortress Press, 1975) 423.

of Jesus. In fact what I'm proposing here could easily be understood as a version of just such an account, or at least compatible with certain versions of it.

When I read the gospel accounts of Jesus's death, though, the abandonment of Jesus always comes as a fresh shock. Theologies of a crucified god are formulated afterward, but an initial reading always poses a question: how could this happen to the Son of God? The onlookers cannot even conceive that Jesus is directing such a cry to God: they can only make sense of it as a cry for the prophet. A bible story that always shocks us should always generate fresh questions from us, then, even if in the end we know that we can confess with Eberhard Jungel that "Jesus Christ as man is simultaneously the person in whom God himself bears the God-forsakenness of the human race."[5] We need to sit, for a moment, with the crucified Nazarene in whose death reports it does *not* seem clear that God is present, much less bearing the god-forsakenness of the human race.

A plain-sense reading of the gospels shows us rupture.

On the other hand, I also think we should pause with the gospels and consider other statements of divine unity before we posit a dialectic of negation or self-distinction within the Godhead. Jesus says that he and the Father are one (John 10:30), and it is this assertion of unity that instigates an attempted stoning of him for blasphemy. *Now*, at the moment of his actual execution, we should assume that Jesus somehow continues to act in his Father's name as a testimony to his unity with the Father. Whatever the self-negating qualities of Jesus's death story, ultimately it should be a work that witnesses to the identity of God with God's Son.

Simply by attempting to read the text with our theological schema bracketed, then, we are struck by the rupture and the unity presented to us in the person of Jesus. I propose that there are at least two criteria for an adequately apocalyptic account of godforsakenness, and they can be mapped on to these dual affirmations of the crucifixion as an event of rupture and an event of unity, respectively:

1) An apocalyptic account of the godforsakenness of Jesus should involve a negation of the present evil age.
2) It should involve a revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

My question, then, is this: Given a divine kingdom-ushering world-negation that denies not simply the principalities and powers or this sinful generation, but also abandons the one who claims to be the very Son of God, how can God be "apocalypsed" in the person of Jesus?

Judgment of the powers may, of course, be both world-negating and at the same time reveal God. Here negation and revelation as two aspects of apocalyptic theology are both available. John the

[5] Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, (Eerdmans 1983), p. 367 n.54.

Baptist presents a good example of this: he warns the people that "His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather his wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matt 4:12) Immediately following this statement, John then recognizes Jesus and baptizes Him, at which point the heavens open to publicly witness His Sonship.

It is one thing, that is, to say that God saves through an invasion of this present evil cosmos, unveiling both Godself and the coming kingdom. Even to say that this saving act which reveals and negates happens on the cross in particular, in the torture and lynching death of Jesus of Nazareth, can be perfectly understandable: the suffering Son reveals God to us in his presence amidst those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and he denies the power of his persecutors in his faithfulness unto death, his harrowing of hell, and ultimately, most fundamentally, in his bodily resurrection. This is all the apocalyptic witness of a martyr, where world-negation and the revelation of God go hand in hand.

More than this occurs on the cross, however. In the ninth hour Jesus says "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" What exactly "forsakenness" means here is precisely what is difficult to say, primarily because theologians have a difficult time understanding how the Son of God could be forsaken in this manner. Taken at face value, though, forsakenness seems to mean a denial, or forgetting, or abandonment. In accounts of the cross following a model of penal substitution the idea of forsakenness may actually be rendered more strongly, as wrath or punishment. But even without such an idea of Christ becoming sin and thereby receiving the wages of sin in his person, forsakenness clearly points to a relationship of negation between God and Jesus.

If the object of negation is the Christ, then, "the image of the invisible god," (Col. 1:15) how can the cross be understood as an apocalyptic moment? If God is faithful even when we are unfaithful, because he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:13) … that is, if even God's forsaking of the *unfaithful* would be an unacceptable sort of self-denial for God, then what if the one faithful unto death were denied and forsaken? If our christology is apocalyptic - negating the powers of this world in its establishment of God's kingdom - how can the denial of God in Godself in the person of Jesus Christ upon the cross also reveal God in faithfulness to the New Creation that is being ushered in?

There seem to be good apocalyptic reasons to reject the idea of Jesus's godforsakenness, then. It is not obvious why the apocalyptic mission of God should, or even could, turn on the Messiah in this way.

We will begin with the second criterion for an apocalyptic account of godforsakenness, that the event must involve a revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Here apocalyptic theology shares some

commitments with Schleiermacher, namely, the idea that in Christ's mission he perfectly actualizes the purposes of God. The crucifixion narrative itself seems to reveal God as one who abandons. What does Christ reveal to us in the text as Gospel witness? What is Christ doing, and how do these doings stand as an actualization of the divine will?

Christ is doing very little in terms of positive activity. This is not to say that he is being passive, but the most striking thing about him is his silence. In contrast to the beginning of Christ's public ministry where the Spirit descended upon him and the Father spoke a word of approval concerning the beloved Son, the end of Christ's public ministry is marked by exactly the opposite. When Christ was interrogated by his accusers, he was silent. When he was exhorted to prove his Sonship by coming down from the cross, he remained obedient unto death. This silence means that the work of the Redeemer toward which all further spoken witness had pointed was now fulfilled, and anything that might be said further to move beyond this work of redemption and liberation would not be appropriate to Christ's apocalyptic mission, or recognizable as Christian truth.

This is not the only implication of Christ's silence, however. Because Christ's activity perfectly represented the being of God in his person to humanity, we can say that the silence of Christ is also inseparable from an original silence in God. The Spirit of the fellowship departed as his disciples were scattered during the arrest, and, most importantly for our present consideration, Christ felt the abandonment of God on the cross. The godforsakenness of the Redeemer corresponds to the silence that comes in the completion of the work of Christ in his suffering and death. God's silence is as determined and active as God's words spoken at Christ's baptism, but insofar as it marks an end to the mission of Jesus, it leaves a communicative void in the event of the cross where there had earlier been a public proclamation.

At the very least, then, we can think of godforsakenness as divine silence in correspondence with Christ's own. It is a judgment of the power structures that killed Jesus, a refusal to acknowledge or respond to them. In Christ such a refusal is both revealed, and personally received.

How is it received, though? And why? Upon what basis would God abandon his own?

We must not forget that as the Redeemer, Liberator, and Apocalypse of God, Jesus Christ is also a mediator. Christ "became sin" even though he knew no sin, and if God forsakes him, it is on account and to the extent of the sin that he has taken on as a mediator, and in spite of his divinity. God cannot deny himself. Yet God judges the sin of this world in Christ by denying him. There must be some sort of substitutionary logic in play in order for us to make sense of Christ as both the object of divine negation and as the true subject of divine negation of this world.

I will borrow again from Schleiermacher. it is helpful to consider Schleiermacher's term *Verneinung*, denial or negation. Recall Schleiermacher's doctrine of sin: the inefficacy of the god-consciousness is wrought in us by God in order to establish sin, ultimately with an aim to our redemption. From the Glaubenslehre:

> A mere negation [die bloße Verneinung] of power [of the god consciousness] does not amount to sin, and, in fact, the mind is never satisfied to have sin explained as simply a defect. The defect becomes sin for us only in virtue of the fact that the God-consciousness, [...] disavows [verneint] as consciousness of the divine will that state of defect, whether simultaneously or before or after; for, without such disavowal [Verneinung], which is simply the recognition of a commanding or prohibiting divine will, there is no sin. We shall accordingly be able to say that, as the recognition of a commanding will is wrought [bewirkt] in us by God, the fact that the inefficacy of the God-consciousness becomes sin in us is likewise wrought [bewirkt] by Him, and indeed wrought [bewirkt] with a view to redemption.[6]

Sin is never a "mere negation," that is, it is never just a human failure to be in line with god; rather it must include a recognition and denial by the God-consciousness of our own non-responsiveness to the divine will. When the divine will is fully instantiated in the life of a human, however - that is, when we are talking about Jesus - such denial exhibits itself as more acute. Those who reject Jesus of Nazareth actually reject the divine will perfectly revealed and imparted in the work of the Redeemer. Following Schleiermacher's schema, then, the God-consciousness "denies" (verneint) such rejection: or, God is silent before humanity, and this is received as a feeling of godforsakenness.

Christ is the site of this godforsakenness despite his being "without sin" because, in some sense, he "became sin." There is a vicariousness of some sort in play here; not necessarily vicarious wrath and punishment, although as far as I can tell a penal substitution model of the atonement would be perfectly compatible with everything that I have said so far, were one to hold such a view. But some sort of substitution of sin is going on here. Schleiermacher uses the term "sympathy with sin" to describe the connection whereby Christ acts as our representative, which in its most developed form is a "sympathy" with our "unblessedness." Our unblessedness is "carried" by Christ and even "posited" in Christ as a sort of overflow of his own god-consciousness in sympathy with the sin of the world.[7] Just as Christ judges the sins of the world in his refusal to acknowledge the condemnations of the world before his accusers, He also receives and acknowledges God's judgment of the sin that He carries in God's own refusal to acknowledge Him. The Redeemer experienced this as godforsakenness.

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[6] *CG* [2] §81.3

[7] Schleiermacher, *Selections from Christian Ethics*, trans. James Brandt, (WJK, 2010), 40.

This way of reading a judgment of God in Christ into the cry of dereliction may appear to sneak substitutionary atonement in the back door of a theological approach that otherwise privileges liberative models of God's redemptive work. And perhaps it is. One virtue of doing so, however, is that a logic of substitution keeps the apocalypse of God in conversation with God's negation of sin, and does so in a Christocentric way rather than through some monotheistic framework that is not so clearly anchored to the particular mission of Christ as it is described in the passion narratives.