

Appendix 3

Christ Intercedes for Us. What Does This Mean?

(25) "Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. (26) In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. (27) No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. (28) I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." (John 16:25-28)

Jesus is our Intercessor in heaven. So what does He mean by saying that He will not ask the Father on our behalf (see John 16:26b)? Do His words imply that He has no mediatorial role? And if they do not, what could it mean that Christ mediates in a way that does not involve asking the Father on our behalf?

Below I argue that in John 16:26 Jesus is not asserting that He will occupy no priestly role or that He will not intercede for us. But He does clarify the nature of the task. Interceding does not mean making the Father agree to things He does not want to do in order to bless us. If it did, what would that fact say about the Father? No, the good news is better than that. The Father Himself loves us. But if He does, then why do we need a Mediator at all? Part of the problem could be that we have preconceptions about what it means to mediate and that what Christ says does not agree with them. But this would not automatically imply that He does not perform that function.

Compounding the problem, earlier in the same verse Jesus says, "In that day you will ask in my name" (vs. 26a). He will not ask for us. We will make our own requests but when we do that we will ask in His name. What is the significance of this fact?

Before attempting to answer any of these questions let me pose some further ones. How can we enjoy the benefits of Christ's sacrifice on the cross if we never claim them, i.e., if we come to the Father without asking in Jesus' name? Or, pressing the point further, how could we claim the benefits of Christ's sacrifice if He had never offered it? Would we still be able to approach the Father?

It is a fair question. Christ's statement that the Father Himself loves us was made prior to the cross. His love does not follow from the cross but the cross follows from His love. Does God's love for mankind render Christ's later sacrifice unnecessary? Just the opposite. God's love for mankind made Christ's sacrifice unavoidable. But does it render His living presence before the Father unnecessary?

No part of the plan of salvation is optional. To remove any of it (e.g., Jesus' high priestly intercession) is to remove not only that part alone but the whole plan in its entirety. In all its varied aspects, what Christ did for mankind rises or falls as an organic whole. We cannot choose which parts we wish to accept and reject the others. We must accept all of it or benefit

from none of it. The issue before us cannot be artificially limited to the question of whether Christ's high priestly intercession is necessary. To raise that question is to ask whether His death on the cross--or the incarnation itself--is necessary. It is. We cannot be saved without His ministry as Victim on the antitypical altar. But we cannot be saved without His ministry as High Priest in the antitypical sanctuary either.

Could Jesus' death already be His intercession, such that the Intercessor is not so much One who goes between as One who has already gone between? This is an attractive hypothesis but what implications does it have for other areas of doctrine such as the resurrection? If the cross is the sum of Christ's intercessory work, there is no place in that work for His resurrection --by which I mean no necessary place. If there is room only for His death, how do we make room for His life? In this case the fact that Jesus now lives is largely irrelevant.

But this is not the gospel Paul preached. For Paul the resurrection of Christ was fully as important to our salvation as His death on the cross (see 1 Cor 15:13-14). Why is this? I submit that just as Christ came to this earth to accomplish a task (He came to die), He ascended to heaven in order to accomplish a further task. If He had not been raised, He would not be able to perform it. His death makes His living ministry possible. If we remove one or the other, it does not matter which.

I submit that Christ's intercession therefore consists of all those elements without which we could not come boldly to the Father (see Heb 4:16). His ministry consists of more than speaking with the Father on our behalf. The Spirit presents our requests with groans that cannot be uttered (see Rom 8:26). But neither this fact nor the fact that Christ does not have to urge God to love us is an argument that He need not intercede with the Father on our behalf or that in doing so He must remain silent.

In His role as Mediator Christ is fully one with the Father. So He does not have to beg God to love us, as though the Father and the Son were at cross purposes to each other. This is the claim being made in John 16:26. It addresses His relationship to the Father rather than ours. He is also fully one with mankind. And so He does not need to use any sanctified imagination in order to enter into our feelings or understand our nature, because it is also His nature. In His person He bridges the gulf between the two estranged parties and brings about the needed reconciliation between them. It is precisely on the basis of His uniting them that we can approach the Father with full assurance that all barriers have been removed and that nothing remains which can separate us from Him.