

# He Suffered Death and Was Buried: Reflections on a Constitutive Doctrine of Atonement

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In what many New Testament scholars believe is an echo of one of the earliest Church creeds, the apostle Paul states in 1 Cor 15:3, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures . . .” We express the same notion when we recite the lines in the Nicene Creed: “For *our* sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.” The *for our sake* complements the assertion that it was “for us and for our salvation” that “he came down from heaven.” Soteriology is the area of theology that attempts to answer the question: What does it mean that “Jesus saves”? Specifically, how does the incarnation, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ “save” sinful humanity? The doctrine of atonement has traditionally provided the answer to this question.

It must be acknowledged from the outset that the traditional language of atonement theology is highly symbolic and metaphorical. Traditional discussions of atonement focus on such images as the cross, the sacrificial lamb, the great high priest, judgment, ransom, deliverance, redemption, conquest of evil, and so on. As such, atonement theology typically centers about what has been called the "Christ of faith"—the Christ known in symbol, narrative, liturgy, and religious art.

However, we cannot be content to restrict atonement language to the symbolic level because this language is inherently referential. Although atonement language speaks of what God in Christ has done for us (*propter nos*), its primary referent is not us, but Jesus Christ in whom salvation has been effected. It is Jesus to whom the symbols refer. Consequently, if atonement language is not to be dismissed as pious mythology, ideology or projection, it needs to be related meaningfully to the earthly Jesus of Nazareth; if there is no correlation between the Jesus who saves me now and the Jesus who lived in Palestine—the Jesus whose life is witnessed to in the gospel narratives—then the claim that it is Jesus who saves me is a vacuous one.

Unfortunately, it is not unreasonable to make the claim that traditional atonement theology often has tended to divorce in just this manner the Jesus who saves from the earthly Jesus of the first century. Symbolic narratives about divine judgment on sin, priestly sacrifice, or victorious conquest over sin and death often have not been meaningfully related to the Jesus whom we know from the gospel narratives—a Jesus who never held judicial or military office, who certainly was neither a levitical priest or a wool-bearing four-legged animal.

Finally, atonement language speaks not only about ourselves and our salvation, and about Jesus who saves, but about the God who has saved us in Jesus Christ. The metaphorical and symbolic language about God's salvation in Christ raises

questions about God and his relation to the world and to ourselves, about God's relation to Jesus, about God's intentions in bringing salvation, and raises questions as well about how the life, death and resurrection of a first-century Jew can have universal significance—for all human beings, for all times.

It becomes clear then that attempts to answer the question about the meaning of salvation inevitably will address three dimensions that correspond to three different ways of considering God's saving work in Jesus Christ—the symbolic/narrative, the historical, and the ontological. Light can be shed on these three dimensions by asking the further question: is the atonement constitutive of human salvation or merely demonstrative of it? That is, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has God done something unique that not only makes human salvation possible but actually effects it, or, on the other hand, is God's action in Jesus merely an example or illustration (perhaps an especially astute one) of what God has done elsewhere or perhaps even everywhere to bring about human salvation?

## Symbol/Narrative



The doctrine of atonement is a good candidate for a discussion of the relation between the three aspects of symbol/narrative, history and ontology because one discovers in theology a correlation between these three aspects that is parallel to the distinction between constituency and exemplarism that has characterized traditional discussions of the atonement. Not simply in atonement theology but in other areas of theology as

well, one discovers a basic decision, beginning with one's hermeneutic stance toward the New Testament canon, as to whether one understands Christianity to be constitutive of human salvation or rather illustrative of it. Those who opt for either hermeneutic stance tend to follow their logic through consistently. If the symbolic and narrative dimensions of the biblical text are construed as normative, not merely as illustrative of elements in our prior human understanding, then one interprets the text not as an illustration of general principles which one discovers elsewhere as well, but by entering into its own internal logic. Or conversely, the symbols and narratives of the biblical text are construed as illustrative of some previously known general truth or truths, and as subject to revision in the light of those truths. Similarly, how one approaches the symbolic and narrative aspects of the texts of the gospel influences how one reads the historical narrative of who Jesus was and what he accomplished by his mission. Finally, who we believe Jesus was and what he accomplished affects our understanding of God and of God's intentions in Jesus. Who we believe Jesus was for us determines what we believe about who God is in himself.

It might seem from the outset that there should be a presumptive confidence in an understanding of the atonement as constitutive of salvation. The writings of the New Testament seem to take it for granted that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus effect salvation. For most of the history of the Christian Church, one or the other of the constitutive atonement models has been taken for granted, so much so that the theologically uneducated are often surprised to discover that Anselm's satisfaction model has never been endorsed officially as dogma. Jesus has not been understood as merely the best example of God's general purposes for the human race.

Nevertheless, the understanding of Jesus' death as illustrative rather than constitutive of salvation has become

the dominant one in recent years in numerous circles, especially among academic theologians. How do we explain this shift?

First, to the extent that the constitutive models have been taken to be literal descriptions or explanations rather than models or metaphors, it is claimed that they are wanting in logical coherence. Just as Anselm took to task the patristic metaphor of ransom for not answering satisfactorily the question of to whom the ransom was paid—God or the devil?—so, since the time of the Reformation and then the Enlightenment, the logical credibility of Anselm's forensic account has been consistently questioned.

Second, the metaphors of the traditional constitutive accounts are thought to be outmoded; it is said that they belong to an earlier age and no longer speak to contemporary people. Language about the defeat of Satan is taken to be mythological. Imagery of sacrifice, kings, and shepherds are at home in ancient rural cultures. They do not speak to sophisticated modern urban-dwellers.

Third, there has been a shift in modern consciousness. Where ancient and Medieval people approached God with a sense of their own guilt, all too aware that they did not live up to the divine justice, modern people are more likely to place themselves in the role of judge—to question a God who would create a world in which so much evil and suffering could exist.<sup>(1)</sup> To the extent that the judgment metaphors still hold sway over some people, they are considered to be oppressive remnants of a hierarchical thinking that must be overcome.

Finally, the realization that the metaphors are just that—metaphors and not literal descriptions of reality, has led to the conclusion that they cannot be constitutive for our own understanding of God or reality. Just as ancient people picked metaphors that were dominant in their own culture to express their own understanding of God and salvation, so, it

is said, we are not only free to pick our own metaphors, but it is necessary that we do so if we are going to overcome the oppressive and hierarchical limitations of the biblical narratives. Because all language about God is metaphorical, none of it is adequate, and we need to express our own understanding of an inclusive and relational vision of salvation using metaphors drawn from our own experience—metaphors that resonate with the values and concerns of contemporary culture.<sup>(2)</sup>

To the contrary, in what follows I intend to endorse an understanding of the symbolism of atonement theology that recognizes that the language is not literal, but is nonetheless constitutive for our understanding of what it means to say that Jesus saves. I would suggest that the position that understands the symbols as illustrative rather than constitutive has too easily made the jump from a “non-literal” reading of the symbols to the assumption that the biblical symbols are dispensable “non-cognitive” projections of human pre-understanding.

Such an understanding of the constitutive value of the symbolism of atonement language would be similar to the notion of revelation as “symbolic mediation” advocated by the Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles. Dulles suggests that revelation is neither a purely interior experience nor an unmediated encounter with God. Rather, revelation “is always mediated through symbol—that it to say, through an externally perceived sign that works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define.”<sup>(3)</sup> Symbol is thus understood to be a third alternative to either a literalist propositionalism or the non-cognitive “experientialism” of much liberal Protestant theology. Symbols are a special kind of sign to be distinguished from simple indicators (stop signs) or conventional ciphers (words or diagrams). They carry a plenitude of meaning that is invoked rather than explicitly

stated. The knowledge created by symbol is not merely speculative, but is participatory and self-involving. The symbol invites us to situate ourselves within a universe of meaning and value, which it opens up, and insofar as it is self-involving, symbol has a transformative effect on the person.

Although symbol introduces the knower into a realm not accessible to discursive thought, and the meanings of symbols cannot simply be restated without remainder in categorical language, one should not conclude that symbols are without cognitive content. Although God is beyond description and definition, God's reality is truly communicated through symbol. Symbols can distort and they do appeal to and provoke the imagination, yet they are not simply projections of imagination. Nothing in the nature of symbol prevents it from conveying truth, and if reality is ultimately mysterious, then symbol may in fact be a better means of conveying truth than propositional content alone. Nonetheless, propositional explication has its value and symbols often require explication in order to clear up ambiguity and prevent distortion. Doctrine can set limits and provide content to the significance of Christian symbols. The influence between symbol and doctrine is reciprocal. Symbols like the cross and the resurrection give rise to doctrine; doctrine enriches the content of symbols.

Similarly, in his classic work *Symbolism and Belief*, Edwyn Bevan distinguished between symbols that have no resemblance to the thing they signify (for example, a stop sign or the Union Jack or the American flag) and symbols that claim to give some kind of information about something previously unknown, and in which some kind of resemblance between the symbol and the unknown reality is essential. Bevan argues, for example, that the notion of "height" when applied to God ("Our Father Who Art In Heaven"), far from representing a kind of pre-scientific literacy (Bultmann's "three-decker universe")

seems an inherently necessary component in those religions that have maintained a radical distinction between God's reality and the created universe, as opposed, for example, to pantheistic or panentheist religions, which tend, on the contrary to use symbols that identify the universe with God's body.<sup>(4)</sup>

At the same time, Bevan distinguishes between those kinds of symbols "behind which we can see" and those symbols "behind which we cannot see." Symbols "behind which we can see" are essentially metaphors. The symbol "behind which we can see" refers to another more abstract generalizable idea that we can use to express the symbolic language more literally. So, for example, Christians do not understand the "hand of God" to mean literally, since God does not have a body. When we say that we see the "hand of God" in an event, we mean that an event has taken place that expresses a particular value, for example, justice, that we believe that God cares about, and that we believe that the event in some way has been brought about by God's will, either directly or through events in the natural order.<sup>(5)</sup>

Those symbols "behind which we cannot see" are those symbols that point to something unimaginable, and yet we cannot find any idea or reality that is better than the symbol itself. We cannot get behind the symbol: "The symbol is the nearest we can get to the Reality."<sup>(6)</sup>

Controversy arises in cases of disagreement over whether various symbols are symbols behind which we can see or are symbols behind which we cannot see. So, for example, historic Christianity has affirmed that the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a symbol behind which we cannot see. "Resurrection" language is the use of metaphor or symbol (the imagery of rising from sleep) to refer to an event that is, strictly speaking, unimaginable. Nonetheless, the Church has affirmed that the resurrection is a real event that happened in space



and time. The tomb really was empty. Jesus really did appear to his disciples in bodily form.

To the contrary, as Bevens points out, there are those who say that the resurrection is a symbol and they mean by this that the reality is something wholly imaginable, and something quite different from the narrative texts. Jesus' body was buried in an unknown grave and decayed; there followed his remembered influence on his disciples, and this memory led to the interpretation that Jesus was still alive, although in actuality he was quite dead. Resurrection refers not to something that happened to the dead Jesus, but to the way that his memory has lived on in the Church. As Bevens points out, if this understanding of the symbol of resurrection is the correct one, then the resurrection of Jesus is a pious fiction.<sup>(7)</sup>

A similar question needs to be asked of the New Testament's and the Church's use of atonement language to describe meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Are these symbols that we can not see behind, in which case the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are constitutive of salvation? Or, are they rather, symbols that we can see behind? Are the atonement symbols really illustrations of some other general truth, and thus illustrative of a salvation or self-understanding or political liberation that is attainable apart from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

## **The Symbols of the Atonement and the Earthly Jesus**



How then to relate the traditional symbols associated with the doctrine of atonement to the actual life, death and resurrection of the earthly Jesus?

An example of an attempt to interpret the saving life and deeds of Jesus in terms of a non-constitutive exemplarist model can be found in the work of the feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson.<sup>(8)</sup> Johnson accepts many of the criticisms of constitutive models of atonement that we have already noticed. She rejects the traditional symbols associated with the work of Christ because they have been interpreted within a patriarchal framework, a framework that leads to a distortion of the good news of the gospel so that it becomes the bad news of masculine privilege. The images usually attached to Christ are those of male privilege and power—he is the Pantocrator, the absolute king of glory.

Johnson rejects the imagery associated with the two traditional constitutive models of atonement for the same reasons. The view of the death of Jesus as a repayment for sin is untenable. It is associated with underlying images of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent and sadistic father. Similarly, Johnson also rejects the military imagery of the *Christus Victor* model. Victory is not won by the sword of a warrior god but by the power of love in solidarity with those who suffer.

The primary metaphor embraced by Johnson to interpret the work

of Christ is that of *Sophia*—the personified female Wisdom figure of the Old Testament literature of Proverbs and the deuterocanonical literature of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, through whom God creates, is present to, and administers the world. The use of such a model suggests that Johnson is embracing an exemplarist or illustrative notion of the work of Jesus, and a closer examination of her discussion seems to confirm this.

Johnson uses the figure of *Sophia*/Wisdom to re-tell the story of Jesus—to provide a soteriology in narrative form. Through the figure of *Sophia*, she hopes to transform the New Testament figure of Jesus so that it can be palatable for contemporary Christians, especially women. According to Johnson, Jesus is the envoy of *Sophia*. He is a prophet sent to announce that God is all-inclusive love. He wills the wholeness and humanity of everyone, especially the oppressed and outcasts, and demonstrates this inclusiveness by table fellowship. Opposition to Jesus' message of inclusive love leads to his crucifixion, which Johnson insists, was not a passive victimization divinely decreed as a penalty for sin. Rather, the crucifixion was against God's will, a sinful act of violence brought about by sinful men (*sic*), but also an act of powerful human love by which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with the lost and suffering.

Precisely how does Jesus' crucifixion demonstrate this solidarity? Is it constitutive of salvation, or illustrative of it? The latter seems to be the case. Johnson says that "the cross in all its dimensions, violence, suffering, love, is the parable that enacts *Sophia*-God's participation in the suffering of the world."<sup>(9)</sup> Jesus' suffering is "linked" to the ways in which *Sophia* forges justice and peace in a conflict-filled world. Significantly, rather than viewing Jesus' life and death as the once-for-all event that effects a constitutive change in the reality of sin and suffering, Johnson says that the cross is part of a "larger mystery"—the

mystery of bringing pain to life that is familiar to women from the process of pregnancy and child birth.

It seems then that the figure of Jesus is seen to be illustrative or demonstrative of a process of suffering and creative transformation in the midst of struggle and opposition that is going on throughout all creation. In this respect, I would suggest, there is a significant departure from the logic of the New Testament Wisdom Christology on which Johnson draws. For the authors of Colossians and Hebrews, the Wisdom figure of the Old Testament is subordinated to and incorporated into the personal identity of Jesus. Jesus is not a wisdom-filled human being or an envoy of Wisdom, but is himself identified with Wisdom. Jesus is perceived to be the pre-existent figure through whom God creates the universe and through whom the universe is redeemed. Biblical scholars note that the New Testament writers identified Jesus with the fullness (*pleroma*) of deity (Col. 2:19) precisely to exclude him from being construed as one figure among others in whom God's Wisdom had appeared, but rather as the One who is in his personal identity constitutive of the divine Wisdom.

If however the biblical texts themselves speak of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as being in some way constitutive of salvation rather than merely illustrative of it, how might we be able to read the biblical symbols and metaphors associated with Jesus' saving work in a manner that shows them to be integrally related to the task of the earthly Jesus and yet preserves their symbolic character in such a way as not to reduce metaphor to clumsy literalism?

First, it is essential to recognize that it is not possible to postulate a non-theological account of the earthly Jesus. Some interpretive scheme is necessary. Even the exemplarist Christologies adopt a standpoint from which to interpret the meaning of Jesus' life and death. From such a standpoint, the mission of the earthly Jesus is no longer understood in terms

of the traditional constitutive models. In the most popular current version, Jesus' mission is not to save sinners from their sin, but to deliver the oppressed from oppression. Jesus is not our judge; rather his message is one of inclusion, liberation and enlightenment. His primary cause is that of solidarity with the oppressed.

The question then is not whether the gospels are to be read from a given standpoint, but which standpoint one adopts, one taken from general principles or ideals found outside the text (such as the principles of liberation or inclusion) or one taken from the subject matter of the text itself. Since the subject matter of the text centers on Jesus' identity as God's Son, and the constitutive significance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection for our salvation, it is no distortion to read the gospels in light of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. Rather, this is to read them in accord with their intention.

Second, the symbols and metaphors themselves must be understood in the light of Jesus' mission and identity, and not vice versa. It is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that provide the normative context for the interpretation of the symbols, not the symbols which impose a normative significance for deciding who Jesus is and what he does. It is in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that we see the models and types as fulfilled in Jesus.

Third, it is the narrative structure of the gospel texts that tell the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection that provide the context for understanding the relation between the earthly Jesus and the doctrine of the atonement. It is by listening to the referential, testimonial and narrative content of the canonical gospel texts that we discover the constitutive significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. At the level of symbol, the biblical atonement metaphors are not merely projectionist, but can be understood

to be constitutive of salvation. At the same time, these symbols must be controlled by the narrative elements and the identity of the chief protagonists in the canonical story. We learn what it means for God to judge our sins in Jesus or to deliver us from sin not by a pre-conceived notion of law or omnipotence (whether such a notion be an uncritically endorsed patriarchal one or whether we uncritically reject such a notion) but by listening to the canonical story of Jesus.

In what follows, we will glance quickly at three themes in the gospel narratives in order to show an interpretive correlation between traditional constitutive models of atonement and the life of the earthly Jesus—the themes of mission, judgment, and conflict.

## **Mission**

In his own analysis of the dramatic narrative structure of the doctrines of Christology and atonement, the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar traces the theme of mission that is present throughout the gospels.<sup>(10)</sup> In the synoptics, Jesus says that those who receive him, receive the one who sent him; those who reject Jesus, reject the one who sent him (Mt. 10:40, Lk 9:48, Lk 10:16, Mk. 9:37). Jesus was sent for the purpose of preaching the good news of the Kingdom (Lk 4:43). He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel (Mt 15:24). In the parable of the vineyard, a distinction is made between the sending of servants and the final sending of the son (Mk 12:6, Mt 21:37, Lk 20:13). Parallel to the language of “sending” are expressions associated with the purpose of Jesus having “come.” Jesus has come to call sinners, not the righteous (Mt 9:13); he has come to fulfill the law, not to abolish it (Mt 5:13); he has come to bring a sword (Mt 10:34), to cast fire on the earth (Lk 12:49). He has come to serve, to give his life as a ransom (Mt 20:28), to seek and to save the lost (Lk 19:10). (This mission language is pervasive not only in the synoptics, but is central to John’s gospel as well.)

The notion of mission implies a distinction between the one who is sent and the one who sends, but also indicates something about the unique identity of the one who is sent. If the God who sends is the one Jesus calls "Father," then Jesus himself understands his identity as Son as being given along with his mission (Mk 1:11, Lk 3:22, Mt 3:17). Although there are elements of "prophet Christology" in the New Testament, Jesus does not see himself merely as a fore-runner (as does John the Baptist), or one whose mission can be distinguished from his identity. He identifies himself with the mission given him by his Father.

Finally, the mission has a goal. Jesus' mission consists in obedience to the Father, but the thrust of that mission is oriented toward the "hour" of his suffering (Lk 22:53, Mt 26:45). He recognizes that the result of his mission will be suffering (Lk 17:25); he is aware that his life is moving toward a baptism of suffering, a "cup" that he will have to drink (Lk 12:50, Mk 10:38-39, Mk 14:34, 36). His mission will finish its course, and he will perish at Jerusalem (Lk 13:31-33) where the Son will be delivered into the hands of sinners (Mt 26:45, Mk 9:31, Lk 9:44, Mk 14:41, Lk 24:7).

There is a paradox that lies at the heart of the connection between Jesus' mission and his passion. On the one hand, although his mission is inconceivable apart from those whom he has called to accompany him (Mk 3:13), and they are initiated into the secret of his passion (Mk 8:31), nonetheless Jesus' suffering is uniquely his alone and they cannot follow him (Mt 26:33-34). Jesus does not present himself as the supreme example of a universally intelligible principle which the disciples might also emulate. At the same time, he understands his suffering to be on their behalf, to have universal significance (Mk 10:45, Mk 14:24, Mt 26:28, Lk 22:19,20).

# Judgment

A second theme to be heard in the gospel narratives is that of judgment. The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth provided the classic modern discussion of this notion in his essay "The Judge Judged in Our Place."<sup>(11)</sup> Barth notes that although there is relatively little explicit mention of the significance of the Christ event in the synoptic gospels, nonetheless as we look at the gospel history, we find that it clearly divides itself into three distinct parts. In the first part of the narrative, Jesus is represented as our Judge. He stands over against the disciples and in contrast to other human beings as well. His proclamation of the Kingdom of God and his deeds are antithetical to the thinking and being of all other people.

Expanding on Barth's discussion, we note that in his teaching, Jesus proclaims an impossible standard to live by, a standard that tells us to love our enemies, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Mt 5:43, 7:12). Jesus says that motives are as important as actions, that we are to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Mk 7:15,21, Mt 5:48). At the same time, Jesus tells us that this perfect God embraces in love those who fail to meet these impossible standards. In his parables, Jesus tells us of a God who seeks out the lost sheep, of a Father who waits longingly for the prodigal son (Lk 15). And the impossible standard Jesus proclaims is the standard by which he lives. As the Son of his Father, Jesus is the good shepherd who has come to find the lost sheep, the physician who has come to heal the sick, not those who are already healthy (Jn 10:11, Mt: 12-13). Jesus had proclaimed himself to be the representative of God's coming kingdom. When he healed the sick and told sinners that they were forgiven, he pronounced God's peculiar judgment on them. "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (Jn. 8:11) was that judgment.

At first, Jesus is followed willingly by his disciples, the crowds, a handful of women. At the end of the day, however,



Jesus' followers abandoned him, and he stands alone as the Judge whose character and holiness stands in judgment on all others.

In the second part of the narrative, there is a radical shift. Jesus is no longer the subject, but the object of what takes place. Those who were judged by Jesus in the first part of the story, now act as his judges. Jesus' claim to be the representative of God's strange judgment was rejected by the religious and political leaders of his time. "Who can forgive sins but God alone?," they demanded to know (Mk 2:7). In the second part of the narrative, Jesus is crucified as a blasphemer and political subversive. The Judge is judged and crucified and a murderer is released in his place. Jesus dies abandoned by his followers, and even by his God. When Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?," (Mk. 15:34) the divine verdict was clear to all. In judging Jesus, those who crucified him declared him to be in the wrong and to be condemned by God.

The third part of the history is the Easter story itself. In this part of the story, God acknowledges the Judge who has allowed himself to be judged by raising him from the dead.

In so doing, God vindicated his Son's role as Judge and reversed the guilty verdict by which he had been crucified. In vindicating Jesus, his Father demonstrated that Jesus alone was the one who had the right to pronounce the divine verdict, the verdict of the good shepherd who seeks for the lost sheep, the verdict of "not guilty."

## **Conflict and Victory**

In a kind of sequel to his classic *Christus Victor*, Lutheran theologian Gustaf Aulén suggests a third way of reading the narrative texts of the gospels in terms of conflict and victory.<sup>(12)</sup> What we find in the gospels is the story of a man who is battling under difficult conditions to perform the task

to which he has been called by his heavenly Father. Jesus' way of obedience contrasts to the way of the demonic powers, with which he is in conflict. His mighty works consist in a battle with the powers of evil: Satan, Beelzebub, evil spirits. He casts out demons and forgives sin. He links the coming of the Kingdom of God with his own person, and associates his battle against evil with the presence of the Kingdom (Lk 11:20). In his own work, he sees Satan falling from heaven (Lk 10:18). His constant prayer is itself part of this battle (Mt. 26:38).

Jesus' conflict is also with the religious leaders of his day. His violation of the Sabbath, and the forgiveness which he grants to sinners as God's representative, is viewed by them as blasphemy. As do the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus sometimes preaches his message with anger and severity. His is not a message of gentle mildness. Opposition to this message leads to crucifixion.

The cross itself must be perceived to be part of Jesus' struggle against evil. If the cross is interpreted only within the categories of martyrdom, it is misunderstood. Rather, cross and resurrection belong inseparably together. On the cross, the power of God is displayed, but is displayed in the weakness of the crucified Christ. In the resurrection of Jesus, God demonstrates that he has power over death and sin. The resurrection is the assurance that Jesus' death is in actually a victory, not a defeat.

## **Three Atonement Models**

A quick overview of these three themes of mission, judgment and conflict in the career of the earthly Jesus reveals that they correspond to three classic atonement models or metaphors: exemplarist, satisfaction, *Christus Victor*. At the same time, it becomes clear that the metaphors associated with these three models cannot simply be imposed on or read off the gospel narratives of the life of Jesus in a kind of flat-footed literalness. Rather, through a kind of christological

subversion, the narrative accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection provide a context that gives meaning to the symbols and metaphors and in the light of which their meaning is re-defined.

This is most obviously true of the third model, the model of conflict and victory, for even a cursory reading makes it clear that Jesus' struggle with the powers of evil flies in the face of any kind of straightforward notion of military conquest. Jesus' victory is won through the tools of non-violence rather than coercion, and it is precisely through Jesus' death and suffering that God accomplishes his purposes. That such a victory could only be understood as paradox was one of the delights of the Church Fathers, who loved to speak of how the humanity of Jesus was the bait so quickly snapped up by Satan, only to lead to the devil's choking on the hook of Jesus' divinity, and of such theologians as Martin Luther, who contrasted the *theologia crucis*—God's power hidden in the weakness of the cross—with the *theologia gloriae*, which, Luther suspected, was preferred by most theologians.

The narrative subversion and re-interpretation of the symbols is also evident however in the way in which the texts tease new understandings out of the themes of mission and judgment, metaphors which often have been taken more literally by advocates of the exemplarist or satisfaction models of atonement. Thus, one might well be tempted to read the account of Jesus' mission as that of a prophet, a reading that fits well into exemplarist (and non-constitutive) readings of the atonement. However, a more careful reading forces the conclusion that Jesus so identified himself with his mission that one can no longer distinguish between who Jesus is and what he does. His obedience to his Father is so oriented toward the "hour" of his death that one cannot view the crucifixion as an unfortunate incident that is merely illustrative of how evil always reacts to the presence of goodness. Rather, the self-identification of Jesus with his

mission pushes an exemplarist model in the direction of incarnation. In light of the structure of the narrative, it will not do simply to say that Jesus is the supreme instance of God's love for humanity, for that was not Jesus' own understanding of his mission. Rather it becomes necessary to speak of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as providing the very means that makes our salvation possible. If Jesus' mission is understood in terms of exemplarism, it must be an incarnational exemplarism of solidarity, in which sinners are incorporated into the Christ event. Jesus is exemplar as the archetype of our salvation, not as its prototype.

Similarly, the gospel narratives both fulfill and subvert the forensic imagery that is associated with Anselm's model of the atonement as satisfaction, both by its defenders and by those who reject the model outright as oppressive legalism. As Karl Barth has pointed out, if we wish to know the meaning of God's judgment, we must first listen to the story of Jesus. In so doing, we may discover that God's notions of judgment do not necessarily correspond to ours. Jesus' message of judgment subverts conventional wisdoms. By his example, he pronounces judgment on those who consider themselves righteous, and at the same time, he pronounces acquittal on those we often presume to be guilty. Nonetheless, it is a too simple reading simply to align Jesus with the oppressed and oppose him to the oppressors, as is often done these days. Although the Jesus of the gospel narratives throws in his lot with the "sinners," his message is not one of simple inclusiveness. The good news is precisely for those who recognize their need of a Savior, the sick who have need of the physician. Although Jesus dies on behalf of others, he is alone in bearing the judgment for sin. He is crucified, and not the sinners.

In the narrative structure of the canonical texts, it is the life and teachings of this Jewish rabbi by which his contemporaries are judged, and by which the reader is invited to judge him- or herself. And, of course, the contemporary

reader fails to live up to this standard, even as did Jesus' contemporaries. We do not love our enemies. We judge others, even though we would rather they not judge us. Jesus exposes the root sin by which we judge others by himself becoming willing to be the victim of that judgment. Nonetheless the cross and resurrection of Jesus do not mean that now we must be judged as those who have crucified God. By a strange paradox of the divine logic, what the cross means (in the evocative expression of Karl Barth) is that our Judge has now been judged in our place.

## Salvation and Ontology



A basic principle of the contemporary revival in trinitarian theology inaugurated with Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 is that God is in himself who he is in his revelation. The same principle is reflected in Karl Rahner's dictum that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa.<sup>(13)</sup> Although there have been quarrels with particular details of Barth's or Rahner's formulations, the principle has been recognized as a sound one. The point of the doctrine of the Trinity is not (merely) to engage in abstruse speculation about the inner dynamics of God's being, but to reiterate that God's revelation in Christ is a revelation of who God truly is. God is Trinity in himself because God's revelation of himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the history of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Church is a true revelation

of his being and character.

The same principle holds true in soteriology. If the symbols, metaphors and narratives that speak of God's salvation in Christ are normative for our understanding of God's purposes, and if God has truly acted in a constitutive manner to bring about salvation in the life, crucifixion and resurrection of the earthly Jesus, then God's revelation in Christ is a true revelation of his being and character, and theology cannot refuse to ask who God and Christ must be in themselves if God has acted in this constitutive manner. In other words, symbolic metaphors and history lead irrevocably to ontology.

Conversely, if the metaphors that speak of God's action in Christ are merely instrumentalist and projectionist, and we can accordingly choose other metaphors and symbols more to our tastes, and if God's revelation in Jesus is illustrative rather than constitutive of our salvation, then it follows just as irrevocably that God's action in Christ (whatever we might construe that to be) cannot provide a true or definitive revelation of God's being and character.

Lest such a criticism of the exemplarist stance seem too severe, it needs to be emphasized that this conclusion is one that its advocates have themselves willingly embraced. Sallie McFague, one of the chief advocates of the position has claimed: "I see no way that assumptions concerning the inner nature of God are possible." The agnostic refusal to consider that divine revelation says anything about God's inner being is characteristic not only of McFague but of such theologians as Catherine LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson as well.<sup>(14)</sup> Johnson, already discussed, is more ambiguous than McFague or LaCugna. Although she embraces a radical understanding of the *via negativa* and an instrumentalist notion of symbol that should lead to a complete agnosticism about God's inner nature, Johnson nonetheless also wants to suggest some validity to the notion of an immanent Trinity. (Oddly, Johnson seems to think

that her agnostic approach is traditional Thomist theology, but does not carefully enough distinguish between Thomas Aquinas's assertion that God is incomprehensible—shared by the tradition in general—and her own assertion that God's nature is completely unknowable.) On such an instrumentalist understanding of the biblical symbols, it is not clear whether the symbols refer to God, or rather to our ideas or experiences of God.<sup>(15)</sup>

Johnson's discussion of how salvation is mediated after the time of the earthly Jesus is similarly ambiguous. Fearing a "naive physicalism that would collapse the totality of Christ into the human man Jesus," Johnson confusingly blurs the distinction between Jesus and the Church. She reinterprets Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ to mean that the symbol of Christ cannot be restricted to the historical Jesus, but signifies all those who are part of the community of disciples.<sup>(16)</sup> Given such an understanding of the mediation of salvation, it is not necessary to speculate about God in himself, or such theological curiosities as how the risen Christ communicates his life to the Christian community. Once again, however, God's revelation in Christ is not construed as uniquely constitutive of salvation, but seems to be symbolic of that which is really happening elsewhere as well. Ironically, the end result is that a theology that starts out with an exemplarist model of God's revelation in Jesus ends up with an understanding of revelation that is not particularly revealing of God. The "Christ symbol" becomes an instrument to illustrate that which should in principle be known and experienced elsewhere as well. If the modern trinitarian revival has insisted that God must be in himself who he is in his revelation, the agnostic conclusion of the instrumentalist understanding of biblical symbols is that God is not *in se* who he is in his revelation.

If, however, God's revelation in Christ is indeed a true revelation of his being and character, and if God's saving

work in Christ is truly constitutive of our salvation, then we rightly must address the questions of who God and Christ must be in themselves if they are to effect the salvation of sinful humanity. The following seem to be implications of an understanding of the atonement as constitutive of salvation.

First, we must speak of the identity of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity in hypostatic union with deity and humanity. It is because the personal identity of Jesus Christ is that of God that he is able to save. Accordingly, the revelation of God in Christ is the self-revelation of *God*. Relation with the incarnate Lord draws us into relation with God himself. The word of grace and forgiveness that Jesus brings to us is God's word of forgiveness. The life and regeneration that Christ communicates to us is the life of God, not merely that of a God-like or God-filled creature.<sup>(17)</sup>

Furthermore, the cross reveals the trinitarian dimensions of God's revelation in Christ as the Father, in love, gives his Son to the world. Although experiencing the forsakenness of the divine presence in the agony of the passion, Jesus is still united to his Father by the Spirit that eternally proceeds from Father and Son as their mutual love.<sup>(18)</sup> In light of the cross, the question of theodicy becomes muted, for now we find ourselves asking not how God can allow evil in a world that he has created good, but rather how God can allow himself to be humiliated as he is betrayed by his own creation. As Barth has said so well, it is "in this humiliation [that] God is supremely God, . . . in this death [that] He is supremely alive, [and that] He has maintained and revealed His deity in the passion of this man as His eternal Son."<sup>(19)</sup> A constitutive understanding of the atonement thus promises to be truly revelatory of God's character and being in a way that merely exemplarist models cannot be.

The danger here, of course, is either to associate salvation



with the divine nature as such or with Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity irrespective of the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the continuing significance of his risen humanity. Then, what is seen as important about Jesus is that he is God, and his humanity ceases to have significance for our salvation, especially after the resurrection. This is a tendency particularly in Western views of the atonement that sometimes have focused on Jesus' death apart from his resurrection, in extreme Protestant views which interpret justification as "merely forensic," and in liberal Protestant (and Catholic) views which suggest a "spiritual" (understood as non-material) rather than, or in contrast to a "bodily" resurrection of Jesus. The personal identity of Jesus Christ as the second person of the triune deity needs to be correlated with the continuing humanity of Jesus Christ even (or especially) in his resurrection and ascension.

Second, then, if redemption is truly to address the situation of fallen humanity, it is not sufficient that God's address to humanity be merely a word of enlightenment or a forensic declaration of pardon from guilt. The fallen human situation is such that it needs to be transformed from within. We do not need merely to be inspired to be, or declared to be righteous, but actually to become so. What is needed is not enlightenment and pardon alone, but re-creation and transformation, an undoing of evil itself.

Accordingly, the humanity of Jesus is as central to the doctrine of redemption as is his deity. If Christ is going to overcome the effects of sin on human nature, he must be able to do so from within, taking on himself the consequences of our human sinfulness and transforming evil to good. At the same time, if God's revelation in Jesus is to be a true communication of his life (and not only a divine Word) to human beings, then that life must be communicated in a manner in which human beings can share. Salvation and redemption consist in a participation in the crucified and risen humanity

of Christ.

The model of redemption posited here is incarnational, and shares emphases and themes found in much patristic and Anglican theology.<sup>(20)</sup> However, it would be mistaken to separate the incarnation from the crucifixion and resurrection, as if the incarnation were sufficient in and of itself to re-create and restore sinful humanity. The writings of theologians like Barth and Balthasar are particularly helpful here. Both emphasize the themes of judgment and substitution usually associated with forensic atonement models. Nonetheless, this language is interpreted through the lens of motifs from patristic incarnational theology. The crucifixion of Jesus is not primarily the punishment of, but the removal of sin. Sin is removed not by sheer divine power alone, but by its being allowed to work itself out to its logical conclusion.<sup>(21)</sup>

Similarly, the resurrection and ascension and thus the enduring humanity of Jesus are essential to atonement because it is God's intention in Christ not only to experience the effects of sin, but to undo them and to transform and re-create our fallen human nature through allowing us to participate in the resurrection life of his Son. Resurrection is necessary to re-create human nature and communicate to us the divine life. That is, what Jesus Christ has done for us in incarnation and resurrection has affected humanity as such. Our salvation, mediated by the risen Christ, involves a real change in our innermost being. Human nature can be restored in the divine image because it is enabled to participate in the renewed divine image that has been re-created in the humanity of the incarnate and risen Jesus Christ.

Here then is the truth in the symbolic metaphors of forensic judgment and victory. In the crucifixion, Jesus thoroughly undergoes the consequences of sin. In the resurrection and ascension, he is victorious over sin and evil by transforming human nature from within.

Third, "grace" is simply a short-hand word to describe our own participation in God's saving action in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If it is a misunderstanding to imagine grace as some kind of "stuff" intermediary between God and humanity that is pumped into people through a celestial pipeline, it is equally confused to interpret grace as another word for God's general presence in the world. Rather, the problem of grace is that of the relation between the risen Christ and the Church. The primary understanding of salvation and grace in the New Testament is that of incorporation into the risen Christ, rather than God's general presence to human beings.<sup>(22)</sup> Grace is God's communication of his own life to redeemed human beings through union with the risen humanity of the incarnate Lord.

This, of course, brings us to the problem of the mechanism for the relation between sinful and redeemed human beings and the risen Christ. How exactly is God's saving life and love communicated to us? The solution reflected in those patristic theologies that postulate some sort of corporate universal humanity for the incarnate Christ in which human beings participate is likely an unnecessary vestige of Platonism.<sup>(23)</sup> It seems sufficient to suggest that we are personally or relationally united to the risen Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The modern Western rediscovery of Eastern Orthodox eucharistic theologies has led to an emphasis on an epicletic understanding of eucharistic presence, and by implication, of the communication of grace in general. A "real mission" of the Holy Spirit (rather than a mere "appropriation") seems to be demanded, which would bring us into relation with the humanity of the risen Christ. Without a real mission of the Spirit, grace seems once again to be understood as simply the presence of the divine nature as such in the world. But again, a real mission of the Holy Spirit brings us into contact with the risen Christ not simply as the second person of the Trinity, but in his risen humanity. Grace

is mediated to redeemed human beings in a trinitarian manner, from God the Father, through the mediation of the risen Christ, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who makes the humanity of the risen Christ present to us to remake our humanity in the divine image.

## Conclusion



Our discussion of the doctrine of atonement has led us to conclusions that have implications for our general approach to scripture and for other areas of theology as well. Specifically, the symbolic and narrative character of the canonical Scriptures point beyond themselves in the direction of both history and ontology. The symbols and narratives refer first to the earthly Jesus “who died for our sins,” but also to the God who was reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:19). Whether we understand God’s saving work in Christ to be constitutive or illustrative of salvation has implications not only for what we understand about the earthly Jesus, but also for how we read the canonical texts, and what we understand to be true of God’s very nature. The currently popular approach that seeks to re-interpret the symbols and narratives of the canonical scriptures in a manner that resonates more with the concerns of contemporary culture ultimately must arrive at an agnosticism about God’s character and his intentions for the world, for its primary view of the biblical symbols and narratives is that they are projectionist; they tell us not so much about what God has done in Christ, but about our own concerns and aspirations. At the same time, to allow a normative value to the metaphors and

symbols of scripture that refer to God's atoning work in Jesus Christ does not provide license to decide that we know ahead of time what those symbols mean. Rather, it is by entering into the narrative logic of the canonical Scriptures that we discover the meaning of the symbols, a narrative logic that subverts simplistic literalism. Theologically, the narratives themselves must be read in light of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and of the revelation of the triune God witnessed to in both canon and creed, for the symbols do not terminate either in themselves or in our own religious imagination, but point beyond themselves to the God we confess as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who has truly come near to us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1. C. S. Lewis, "God in the Dock," *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 240-244.

2. For an extended development of the above arguments, see Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

3. Avery Dulles, S.J., *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 131. For what follows, see *Models*, 131-173 as well as Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 17-39.

4. Edwyn Bean, *Symbolism and Belief* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 11-14, 28-81.

5. Bevan, 256-259.

6. Bevan, 257.

7. Bevan, 261.

8. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (NY: Crossroad Publishing Co.,

1992), 150-169. The same material is slightly revised in Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ: Christology," *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 115-137.

9. *She Who Is*, 159.

10. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama: Theological Dramatic Theory, III. Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 149-173; *Theodrama: Theological Dramatic Theory, IV: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 231-240. Also see Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).

11. Karl Barth, "The Judged Judged in our Place," *Church Dogmatics 4/1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956, 1985), 211-282.

12. Gustaf Aulén, *The Drama and the Symbols*, trans. Sydney Litton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 144-177. The original was *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969).

13. Karl Barth, "The Triune God," *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God 1/1*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975); Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

14. McFague, 224; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). LaCugna identified the Trinity only with the economic Trinity of salvation-history and rejected any notion of intra-divine Trinitarian relations (the traditional "immanent" Trinity) or that the economy would imply real distinctions in

God. She thought it necessary to abandon discussion of God *in se*. In her own words: "the notion of God's 'inner life' cannot stand up to scrutiny." (209-233). Johnson's views are found throughout her book, *She Who Is*.

15. Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 221-264.

16. *She Who Is*, 161-164.

17. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 57-82.

18. Balthasar, *Theodrama IV*, 317-328.

19. Barth, *C.D.* 4/1: 246-247.

20. Incarnational interpretations of the atonement can be found in Eric L. Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church: A Study of the Incarnation and its Consequences* (London: Longmans & Green, 1946); Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*; Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation: An Essay in Universalism and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

21. So Barth, *CD* 4/1, 272; Balthasar, *Theodrama IV*, 332 ff.; Torrance, 70 ff.

22. A central theme in C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

23. As in Mascall, 71 ff.