

THE ATONEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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The word atonement literally means "at-one-ment" by which is signified the process of making God and man one after they had been separated or estranged by sin (Is. 59:2), and had become enemies (Col. 1:21). It is therefore one of the most fundamental concepts in Christian teaching without which Christianity itself cannot survive. For in Christianity everything hangs on the claim that the vicarious suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross has effected the restoration of a broken relationship between God and man. It goes without saying that if any Christian theology is to be worth the name then it must ground itself christologically, that is, on what has happened to and with Jesus Christ through whom God's redemptive activity has been revealed to the world.

Liberation theology is one of those Christian theologies that is self-consciously christocentric because of the central role that is given to Jesus Christ who is portrayed as the Liberator of the oppressed and the underdogs. In the light of this christological anchorage, one is led to believe that liberation theology would be a keen

exponent of a doctrine of atonement. However, on closer observation, I was greatly shocked to discover that the concept of atonement has not only failed to gain much currency in liberation theology, but it is simply not a part of the vocabulary of liberation theology. Even James Cone, who lately takes up the concept of atonement for analysis, devotes no more than two pages to it.¹

There seems to be a general feeling among liberation theologians that, without rejecting the realities to which the concept of atonement refers, the notion of atonement and the role it has played in the history of the church is no longer servicable for theology in our time. That is, the concept of atonement as traditionally understood cannot adequately express the significance of the life and death of Christ on the cross with particular reference to the oppressed and the down-trodden. Therefore liberation theology has found it necessary to coin a new vocabulary with which to adequately express the significance of the life and death of Christ for the oppressed, something which the classical term "atonement" was unable to do. Before we proceed to unpack the particular contribution that liberation theology has made

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1. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Seabury Press, 1975, pp.131-132.

toward a broader understanding of the significance of the life and death of Jesus for the oppressed peoples, it is necessary at this point to spell out what understandings of atonement there are which tradition has transmitted to us.

1. THREE THEORIES

According to Gustaf Aulen² there are at least three main types of atonement theory that have been developed in the history of Christian thought. The first type is the so-called ransom theory which presents Christ's death in dramatic terms of signifying a victory over the powers of the devil. According to this view, man, the sinner, is regarded as justly belonging to Satan because of sin. Christ dies on the cross as a ransom or price that has to be paid to the devil in order for the devil to release man from his bondage. Once the deal between God and the devil was made, Satan accepted Jesus' death in the place of man, but in permitting himself to become a victim or ransom, Jesus destroyed the power of the devil not only by paying the price that was demanded for man's head but also by proving his supremacy over Satan because the latter failed to hold Jesus in his bondage. Aulen suggests that attention should not be given to the mythological account of the theory but to

Christ's conflict with and victory over the evil powers of this world that hold man in bondage. What is more, this cosmic drama of victory over hostile powers constitutes atonement because it brings about a totally new relation of reconciliation between God and man. In other words, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, according to this theory, a new situation of complete change obtains, a change in the relationship between God and man, and a change in the attitude of God himself on account of Christ's work that reconciled God to the world. Ireneaus, who represents this view, holds that atonement is a victory over objective powers such as sin, death and the devil, and Christ's victory over these enslaving powers creates a new situation in which man is freed from bondage. Put differently, salvation is understood then as a bestowal of a life of fellowship with God on account of the fact that God himself delivers man from sin, death and the devil. Because sin in this view is regarded as organic rather than as moralistic, individual acts, atonement is understood as an overcoming of the state of alienation from God by reconciling the world, that is, the whole situation of man to God.

The second type is the so-called satisfaction theory of atonement, which was developed by Anselm of Canterbury in his *Cur Deus Homo*. This theory of atonement, unlike the first type, is rather legalistic in its structure. It posits a divine retributive law which must be obeyed and whose justice must be satisfied by men in their relationships with God. In other words, human relationship with God is understood to be based on some divine law. But

2. Gustaf Aulen, in his classic *Christus Victor*, Macmillan, 1974, presents a much more educated and comprehensive discussion of these three major types of atonement theory, to which the reader who is interested in further details is referred. What is presented here is but a simplified characterisation of those theories in order to provide the reader with enough background material against which liberation theology reacts. Our presentation will therefore not pretend to be a full picture of what these three types of atonement are about.

now since men in their disobedience have transgressed this law they stand guiltily before God, and as a result there can be no atonement unless men have fulfilled the demands of God's law. Since men on their own cannot fulfil the demands of this law, Christ who is God-Man not only died on the cross to pay for the penalty which God's justice required for man's transgression of the divine law, but also Christ by his obedient suffering fulfilled God's law to the uttermost. In short, the satisfaction theory understands atonement as a reparation or satisfaction made to the divine justice on account of injury to the divine justice which sin has caused.

The third type is the so-called *moralistic (subjective) theory* of atonement represented by Abelard and the liberal theology of the 19th century. This theory of atonement holds that the death of Christ on the cross reveals God's sacrificial love for the world, and as believers contemplate his sacrificial love on the cross they are moved to repentance and amendment of their lives, that is, they undergo a moral self-transformation. As men repent and amend their lives through the influence of the cross, God in turn responds to them by rewarding them with an increase of happiness. The dominant idea in this view is moralism, the uplifting of man toward God. Salvation or atonement affects primarily a change in the spiritual life of man rather than a change in the conditions in which men live.

2. AN EVALUATION

These are the three types of atone-

ment theory that have come down to us in the history of the Christian church, which liberation theology finds unattractive and inadequate. The serious objection of liberation theology, for instance, to the third type, the so-called moralistic theory of atonement, is the fact that it makes the work of Christ on the cross a private affair, a subjective matter thereby undermining the objective reality of divine reconciliation. By doing this, it seems incapable of grasping the radical quality of concrete evil and oppression. It is a theology which, from the point of liberation theology, serves oppressors well because it reflects the bourgeois social conditions which never expose the oppressors to the actual tyrannical and demonic power of exploitation and oppression which subjects the oppressed and the down-trodden to the life of slavery. Because the bourgeois life does not experience concrete suffering it posits suffering in abstract terms, it imagines what suffering could be like. Hence Jesus enters the human arena merely as a stimulator of this imaginative, contemplative suffering. It is obvious that a theory of salvation or atonement which fails to focus attention on what is objectively and concretely wrong with this world cannot be relevant to the victims of evil structures who do not need a private, individualistic mystical communion with God but rather a change in their earthly oppressive conditions of life. Liberation theology believes that if atonement is to be real it must lead to the transformation of objective realities in human life and not be restricted merely to the private moral upliftment of individuals. For man "cannot shut himself in his closet

door, pray, and make everything right with God, and then in his daily life hate, exploit, tear apart"³ his fellow humans.

Similarly, liberation theology takes issue with the Anselmian theory of atonement. Beside the fact that this theory can be criticised for its arbitrary overemphasis on the death of Christ on the cross at the expense of the soteriological significance of the whole life and person of Jesus Christ, liberation theology finds the understanding of the death of Christ as a payment, reparation or satisfaction of some kind of divine justice rather unpersuasive. It argues that this theory, by positing an eternal law which must be satisfied, fails to deal adequately with the complexity of human suffering as well as what the divine involvement in these sufferings entails for human oppression in the situation of injustice. By positing some law which does not lead to life for the human community here and now, the satisfaction theory of atonement fails to comprehend the extent of divine involvement in human suffering on behalf of the oppressed; it fails to see the depth of God's suffering on behalf of and for man the creature; it fails to grasp the reality of God's active struggle against human suffering and oppression on behalf of and for the downtrodden and the weak; it fails to recognize that God is not the enemy of man but the Creator who is totally for man in his suffering, agony and pain which God himself took upon himself on the cross in order to vanquish these enemies which oppress the weak and the defenceless. The satisfac-

tion theory of atonement which posits a legal order which stands between God and man not only makes God a remote Being who is indifferent to pain and suffering, but also fails to appreciate that on the cross of Jesus Christ God declared decisively that despite man's sinfulness he is still totally for man and not merely a spectator who is merely sympathetic. In the death of Christ God declared war on all those powers that oppress, humiliate and deny man his full humanity, freedom and joy.⁴ Liberation theology is also troubled by the picture of God that is portrayed by the satisfaction theory of atonement, a view suggesting that God demands the death of the innocent person in order to uphold his honour and justice. This may very well be true, but such a picture of God which reflects a feudal system lends itself readily to oppressors who in their zeal to uphold some law and order may be ready to sacrifice the defenceless and oppressed peoples. It is a theory that says the taking of human lives can be justified theologically, and carried to its logical conclusion this theory can also justify the taking of human life by those who lord themselves over the oppressed people: Obviously a view such as this is oblivious to the fact that God is for the oppressed and defenceless whose lives are dear to him as the Creator. It ignores the fact that God is totally for the cause of man, and that he risked his divinity through the Incarnation in order to fight for and on behalf of man. It fails to see that God's suffering was not in vain

3. Benjamin Mays, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations*, Friendship Press, 1964, p.35.

4. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, pp.17ff, 220f.

but that God became the Suffering Servant on the cross in order to uphold and authorise full life for man and not to justify the taking of life, any human life, especially the life of the innocent and defenceless. Cone eloquently summarises the objection of liberation theology to the satisfaction theory of atonement when he writes:

The political status of the post-Constantinian church, involving both alliance and competition with the state, led to definitions of atonement that favoured the powerful and excluded the interest of the poor.⁵

There is yet another problem with the Anselmian view of atonement, namely: it gives us a narrow view of man in which man the creature is overshadowed by man the sinner. This leads to over-emphasis on sin and grace and the separation of the spiritual life of man from his daily concrete conditions. As a consequence there is a tendency to reduce the entire life and the person of Jesus Christ to one denominator: atonement of sins on account of which individuals can experience relief from their sin and guilt. Salvation becomes a sort of translation of individuals out of this unredeemed and oppressive situation into some mystic communion with God. In itself this emphasis may very well be correct, but the problem lies in its anthropological limitation: it sees the problem of man largely in spiritual terms, and proposes to offer us a theory of atonement which hardly affects the situation of oppression in which man concretely lives. The consequence is that it overlooks the broader view of the work of Christ,

5. *Ibid.*, p.231.

which aims at the transformation of man not only in his spiritual aspect but also in his total physical context. Indeed, to reduce the entire work of Christ on the cross to the forgiveness of sins and guilt is to overlook the liberating and transforming power of Christ's work in sociopolitical conditions, a power which is at work to free men and women from the tyranny of racism, class, sex, poverty and ignorance.⁶ Simply stated, liberation theology contends that the work of atonement does far more than the satisfaction theory suggests: it aims both to overcome sin and to recreate the totality of human interrelationships and our world in order to make man more human and the world more just and liveable. For an atonement which exhausts itself only in forgiveness of sins without a transformation of the human situation might suggest that God has failed to conquer the concrete and objective power of evil which holds men in bondage, and that Christ's death on the cross is a mere theory which is incapable of healing and renewing the perverted human conditions. Cone puts this aptly when he writes:

There can be no reconciliation with God unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and justice is given to the poor. The justified sinner is at once the sanctified person, one who knows that his freedom is inseparable from the liberation of the weak and the helpless.⁷

Finally, liberation theology takes issue with the satisfaction theory of

6. W.J.M. Janson, "The Guidance of the Spirit" in *The Spirit in biblical perspectives*, W.S. Vorster (ed.), University of South Africa, 1980, p.94.

7. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p.234.

atonement largely because of its abstraction of God's redemptive work, with the result that God's liberating activity in Christ from sin and oppression is de-historicized. In its rationalistic concern for calculating merits that have to be earned by Christ in order to buy off God's favour, it fails to see that God's liberating activity is the drama that is not acted out somewhere in the skies but on earth where God is actively involved on the side of man in order to destroy evil powers that deny him freedom and dignity. Liberation theology is persuaded that atonement to be real and effective must be grounded in history and be related to God's struggle against powers of enslavement. For it was in history and on this earth that God became man, lived among men, thereby entering history and affirming the conditions of the oppressed people as his own so as to make it clear that poverty and sickness contradict the divine intentions.⁸

Liberation theology is much more attracted to the ransom theory (also known as the classical or dramatic view of atonement) because of its emphasis that evil is an objective power that holds people in bondage. Cone notes that the principalities and powers of evil that are mythically expressed in the figure of Satan represent not merely metaphysical realities, but also earthly powers or realities, powers that cause slavery, poverty, ignorance, disease, injustice and oppression. These powers are embodied in social structures that oppress and humiliate the weak.⁹ The only qualms that liberation

theology has with this ransom theory of atonement is that it fails to focus attention on the concrete political structures that make for human suffering, and fails to say anything about God's empowerment of the oppressed people who must continue God's fight against injustice. In other words, while this theory rightly understands Christ's work as primarily one of victory over the powers of sin, death and Satan, it fails to historicize this divine struggle against earthly oppression and injustice. It fails to acknowledge that the war against evil was just begun by Christ's resurrection and must continue until all evil forces are vanquished and until freedom and self-realization have become the common property of humankind.

3. A LIBERATION PERSPECTIVE

From the above remarks it is obvious that liberation theology has tremendous problems with the traditional concepts of atonement which have been transmitted to us. This should in no way imply that liberation theology is merely interested in liberation struggles and therefore has no place for a central teaching of the church such as the atonement. Rather, as I have indicated in my opening remarks, liberation theology finds these conceptions of atonement grossly inadequate to express the full and comprehensive dimension of what the life and death of Christ on the cross entail. Therefore, instead of using these inadequate conceptions of atonement, liberation theology has opted for other ways of expressing the significance of Christ's work, the work which need not be

8. *Ibid.*, p.230.

9. *Ibid.*, p.232.

understood in a narrow individualistic fashion but must be understood as a comprehensive divine activity whose goal is to free men and women from all sociopolitical, cultural and spiritual (psychological) powers that enslave them.¹⁰

It is important to note that the disagreement over the construal of atonement which liberation theology voices against traditional theology is not merely a semantic one, but goes to the heart of what separates liberation theology from other theologies of the past and present. The disagreement is on what is the right understanding of what is wrong with humans and their earthly situation (traditionally expressed by the term SIN) and how this human situation or problem can be solved. For the understanding of atonement, and therefore of salvation, is ultimately determined by what theologians conceive to be problematic (sinful) about human situation. Naturally because theologians will differ in their portrayal of the human problem, they are bound to differ also in spelling out what the necessary remedy is which can correct the human situation. In short, the battle here is not merely on what correct terms to use but also about what the correct Christian understanding of sin is and what the correction of that sin is understood to be.

As we have seen, with the exception of the ransom theory of atonement which regards sin as the fundamental state of alienation from God, the other two theories of

atonement tend to portray sin largely as a personal or individual problem between the individual concerned and his/her God. Salvation which is procured as a consequence of Christ's atoning work is understood as an unburdening of individual sins, or as a moral upliftment of the individual who now has found peace with God. Sin is construed as a hindrance to one's attainment of the life hereafter. Atonement, according to these two theories, becomes a means of removing this hindrance and of setting one right with God. Here the possibility of an individual's salvation apart from this world and apart from one's social conditions is contemplated. For salvation is construed, as it were, as a release from this world of tears and struggles: to be saved is to flee from this world. Over against this view of salvation, liberation theology argues that sin is neither a personal problem only (although this is not excluded), nor is salvation merely an abstract idea which must be discussed theoretically with reference to an obedience to some divine laws, laws that are alien to the life of the people in the community. Rather sin, from liberation theology's perspective, is understood to be a collective, a community concept which manifests itself through a refusal to love one's neighbour, a refusal to have fellowship with one's fellows, and therefore a refusal to have fellowship with God. To sin is to deny that which makes for life of the community here and now. This fundamental breach of fellowship with our neighbours and therefore a breach of fellowship with God is the cause of concrete sins which we meet in actual interhuman rela-

10. S. Dwane, "Christology and the Third World" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, December 1977, Number 21, p.10.

tions: sins such as poverty, injustice, oppression, hatred, racism, denial of freedom, and other forms of sociopolitical structures which put a person at odds with his fellows. These oppressive and destructive objective forces in which humans find themselves are regarded by liberation theology as consequences of sin. In other words, sin is not merely an idea in an individual's mind, nor is sin merely a private, interior reality that can be eliminated by a verbal declaration by a priest in order to quieten a troubled conscience (although this is not totally excluded), but in reality sin is a social, historical, fact, a state of absence of brotherhood and love in interpersonal relations. Only because sin is real in this concrete social and historical sense, is it possible for sin to become secondarily an interior, personal or subjective fracture in one's life. Put differently, sin is a fundamental state of alienation which is the root cause of the situation of injustice and oppression as well as the root cause of self-centredness, isolation and denial of fellowship.¹¹

By defining sin in this all-embracing sense liberation theology is placed in a situation in which it is able to offer a dynamic and comprehensive notion of salvation, for it sees more clearly the broader horizons of the desired transformations that have to be brought about if the broken human relationships are to be healed. Consequently, liberation theology does not understand the atoning work of Christ merely as a "spiritual" affair or

merely as the salvation of individual souls in the life hereafter, but rather as a transformation of the entire human situation in all its aspects, a situation in which both sin (as a state of fundamental alienation or absence of brotherhood) and its consequences (such as injustice, oppression, poverty and misery) are overcome. In other words, the atoning work of Christ ushers in a totally new state of existence in which all forms of human deprivation, degradation and misery are abolished. According to liberation theology, God became man in Christ in order that:

He might come to liberate all men from all slavery to which sin has subjected them: hunger, misery, oppression, and ignorance.¹²

At stake in this all-embracing and radical view of salvation which liberation theology advocates, a view which is also shared by the prophet Isaiah (Is. 11:1-9) and the Apostle John (Rev. 7:9-17), is the claim that the work and person of Jesus Christ have procured a remedy for sin and its destructive consequences not only beyond this life but also in this life. Put differently, the fundamental message of liberation theology is that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were aimed at the total liberation (salvation) of humanity from all kinds of limitations both spiritual and physical, and that this liberation is a dynamic historical process in which man is given the promise, the possibility and the power to overcome all the perverted human conditions on this side of the grave. It is a triumphant mee-

11. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. Orbis, 1973, pp.35, 175; Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. J.B. Lippincott Co., 1970; pp.187-191.

12. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p.176.

sage that springs from liberation theology's conviction that the Christian God is not merely capable of defeating "spiritual" sin and death but is also powerful enough to conquer all evil forces that hold humans in physical bondage.

The greatest contribution of liberation theology to our understanding of a broader significance of the atonement for human life in all its physical and spiritual aspects lies in its insistence that God's reconciliation in Christ, to be real and genuine, must be able to affect human conditions of brokenness. In order to drive this point home, namely: that an atonement or salvation worthy of the name must necessarily lead to the transformation of human life, liberation theology argues that Christian theology must correlate God's reconciling work in Christ with the Creator's concrete involvement in the sociopolitical affairs of this world. Liberation theology points to the life of Christ in the flesh to make this point: he was born a poor man in order to confront poverty; he lived and ate with sinners in order to forge a link between the broken and wretched human existence and the divine involvement and identification with the oppressive existence in order to destroy oppression and to give the down-trodden dignity and worth. In short, liberation theology sees the incarnation as the historical event in which God experienced the depth of human suffering and degradation thus committing the divine self to the giving of abundant life to the sinful, oppressed and poor people. By correlating the atoning work of Christ so closely with God's liberating involvement in human struggles to be free, liberation theology

is able to speak about atonement in concrete, historical terms. Consequently, God's atoning work in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is for liberation theology not a timeless, theoretical and a-political idea, an idea to be thought about and believed in, but rather what has happened to and with Christ constitutes a fundamental breakthrough for human life in the history of the world. For it now means that God has succeeded in breaking the power of sin and its consequences for human life both in this world and the life hereafter: It means that the face of the world has been turned up-side-down because a possibility of fellowship among humans is created, and because humans can create life-nourishing and humanizing structures. In short, because God has succeeded in winning the victory over evil, Christians can start to embody and institutionalize this victory here and now in anticipation of the ultimate victory that comes with Christ's second coming.

In conclusion, one cannot help but be impressed by liberation theology's insistence that a true understanding of God's atoning and therefore reconciling work in Christ, if this work is believed to be authentic and efficacious, must be such that it does not only affect our private, pious attitudes but also affects our sociopolitical environment in its totality. For an atonement (reconciliation) to be anything less than this comprehensive salvation would suggest that God has not quite succeeded in rooting out sin and defeating evil and their consequences for human life. For a God who is incapable of overcoming both the spiritual and the bodily consequences of sin can hardly be

taken seriously when he promises us that he will bring about the miracle of the resurrection of the dead. The upshot of this claim is this: a true believer in God's ability to bring about the miracle of the resurrection of the dead cannot

afford the luxury of doubting that this same God is equally capable of overcoming sin and its consequences on this side of the grave. For a true God, to be true to his divinity, must be capable and willing to achieve both victories.

**“You
get
what
you
prefer”**

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