The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement
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Archbishop Michael Ramsey’s study of Anglican theology from 1889 to 1939 is a marvelous book, but the original title, *From Gore to Temple*, is a bit naughty. A friend of mine claims to have found the book in a library in a foreign country in the section on ancient worship! We can have some sympathy for this perhaps apocryphal librarian, for if we were to travel back in time to ancient Israel, including Israel in the time of Jesus, I think one of our most powerful impressions would indeed be of the amount of blood that flowed.

I am not referring to the bloodshed of warfare. That is common enough in our own day. In part the blood that would catch our attention would be that of the marketplace, at least for those of us who buy our meat very neatly packaged in supermarkets. But most arresting, perhaps, would be the blood of worship. Every day blood was spilt in the Temple and on major feast days many thousands of animals would be sacrificed and their blood variously sprinkled, splashed, smeared, and poured. (1) This flow of blood in Israelite worship would convince us that sacrifice was indeed a major part of Israel’s religion.

Biblical theology

Before we get to our specific subject I want to begin by sharing my general approach to topics of biblical theology. We are all aware that the Bible is not a handbook of systematic theology. It is a collection of writings from various times and places, characterized, as a whole, by great diversity. Yet it is not a chaotic jumble. Indeed, the Bible has a coherence that justifies the Christian belief that there is one divine Author inspiring these diverse human authors. The noted literary critic Northrop Frye has described the unifying web of allusions within the Bible as its "typological organization," and says that "no other book in the world, to my knowledge, has a structure even remotely like that of the Christian Bible." Frye’s study of the Bible is significantly entitled, *The Great Code*. (2)

So as we "decode" a given theme we must do justice to both the unity and the diversity. Let us consider two general models for understanding the shape of the unity of Scripture.

The first is to find a particular theme that runs through all of the material. For example, Walther Eichrodt organized his *Theology of the Old Testament* around the theme of covenant. (3) The difficulty with this approach is that even such a general theme as covenant is not explicitly developed in each document, and where it is referred to it is found to be itself very complex, incorporating much diversity. (4) Something of the same would need to be said about James Dunn’s suggestion that the key unifying factor in the New Testament is “the unity between Jesus the man and Jesus the exalted one.” (5) This is helpful for identifying a central theme but even this theme, as with “covenant” in the Old Testament, is not the organizing factor in each of the documents in which it occurs. To identify such general frameworks is very valuable but I suggest that this approach needs to be complemented with a second one.

The second model of understanding the unity of Scripture is not of a single line that runs through all documents but the shape of the line surrounding all of the documents. In this model, the canon itself, with all of its diversity, is the unity. This approach is able to recognize the particular themes isolated through the first approach, but gives due place also to those themes that may only show up in a single document. It also suggests that even the minority views within Scripture, and those things that are eclipsed by later material, such as the levitical laws, nevertheless play a part in the overall shape and are not dispensable. This second model would recognize the need to distinguish primary from secondary material in the Bible, but would be against finding a "canon within the canon" on the basis of which one can dispense with unwanted material in the Bible.

With these two models in mind I suggest that now as we come to our topic of atonement and sacrifice we should not expect to find the biblical teaching on either subject, if by that we mean a single line of thought or a developed systematic analysis. What we will find is a variety of images used to convey a very
complex reality. We will need to be on our guard against collapsing what is said about (and by) one image into another. We may indeed find some themes that run through the material, but they are likely to be very general and themselves rather complex.

Sacrifice in the Bible

Sacrifice appears in the opening pages of the Bible, in the story of Cain and Abel, as a practice already in place with no account given of its institution (Gn. 4.1-7). In the patriarchal period it was a common practice, though usually it is simply said that an altar was constructed and the Name of the Lord called upon. Few details are given, but from the context the most common themes seem to have been gratitude and tribute.(7) The covenant with Abraham was ratified by a ceremony which included the cutting of animals in two, though explicitly sacrificial language is not used in Genesis 15 nor an explanation of the ceremony given. A very common explanation is that the split animals represent what will happen to the covenant partner if he breaks the covenant.

When we come to the Mosaic period we find sacrifice playing a major part in both the Exodus and the covenant at Sinai. When the Lord killed the first-born of Egypt He passed over the Israelite homes which had the blood of the slain lambs or kids on the lintel and doorposts. It was this blood that shielded the Israelites from God's judgment (Ex. 12.12-13). While the Passover service is referred to as a sacrifice (Ex. 12.27) the key theme is not so much forgiveness of their sins as deliverance from God's judgment against the sins of Egypt, which in turn was a crucial part in His deliverance of them from Egypt itself.

While the story of the Passover does not speak in terms of atonement for the sins of God's people, later Jewish teaching did include this aspect. Josephus, for example, says that in the first Passover the animals were sacrificed and the people "purified the houses with the blood" (Jewish Antiquities 2.312). How much of this theme of purification is included in the original story is unclear.

Death and blood and sacrifice were thus associated with the formative experience of the Exodus. Such was the case also at Mount Sinai where the covenant was sealed in blood. At Sinai Moses told the people the words of the Lord and then the young men sacrificed burnt offerings and peace offerings. Moses took half of the blood and threw it against the altar and then read the book of the covenant. The people again promised to obey, so Moses took the other half of the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex. 24.8).

Again there is no explanation of the meaning of these events in the text, apart from the obvious entering into covenant. In the light of the fact, which we will soon consider, that blood splashed on the altar elsewhere signifies cleansing from sin, that is most likely what it means here.

The other use of the blood, putting it on the people, only occurs two other places in the Old Testament, namely the consecration of a priest (Lv. 8.23-24) and the cleansing of a leper (Lv. 14.14). In both cases it seems we have the idea of "dedication to a new life among the people of God."(8) As Leon Morris says, "All this seems to form an important clue to our understanding of Exodus 24. The whole people was being cleansed from the sin and defilement of its tainted past and at the same time was being consecrated for its new role as the people of God."(9) Such an interpretation certainly captures something of the epoch changing significance of what happened at Sinai. Calls for renewal of both the cleansing and the consecration will be heard in Israel from here on.(10)

The levitical sacrifices

The sacrificial cleansing at Mount Sinai is then repeated through the levitical sacrifices. In the first seven chapters of Leviticus five different sacrifices are described: the burnt offering, cereal offering, peace offering, guilt offering, and sin offering. This material is very difficult to interpret in detail because so much
is vague or left out. As Gordon J. Wenham has put it, we have here a set of rubrics but none of the prayers to go with them.(11) We do not find a neat, simple, clear concept of sacrifice.

Each of these sacrifices has as its purpose to establish good relations between God and man and thus each is connected with fellowship and atonement in at least a general sense.

The first sacrifice dealt with in Leviticus (Lv. 1), the burnt offering, was the main sacrifice morning and evening and was offered more frequently on holy days. The worshipper himself killed the animal and the priest caught the blood in a basin. The blood was then offered to God and splashed against the sides of the altar. The worshipper next chopped up the rest of the animal, cleaned the pieces, and gave them to the priest to burn on the altar until completely consumed. While there is some debate, it seems that the whole burnt offering should be understood as the principle sin offering.(12) As we examine this text more carefully we will find reference to several of the key aspects of our topic.

The purpose of this offering is “that he may be accepted before the Lord” (Lv. 1.3), that is, presumably, that the worshipper may have his sins dealt with and have peace with God. This is accomplished, as the next verse says, by making atonement: “he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him” (Lv. 1.4). The laying of his hand, or, more literally, leaning or pressing of his hand (samak yado), is emphasized but not explained. Several explanations have been suggested.

At the least this action signifies ownership; an oblation is taking place, the offering of a gift to be totally consumed before God. Some scholars would say this is all there is to it: “it was a victim pleasing to God, and he, in consideration of this offering, took away the sin.”(13)

Other scholars would go further and say the laying of the hand on the head signifies that the animal is representative of the person himself and that his sin has been transferred to the animal. This would be analogous to what takes place of the Day of Atonement when the high priest places his hands on the scapegoat and transfers to it all the sins of the nation (Lv. 16.20-22). Yet a further interpretation is that the animal becomes a vicarious substitute, i.e. it is dying in the worshipper's place, since the penalty for sin is death.(14) This interpretation would find an analogy here with the laying on of hands elsewhere signifying substitution (Nm. 8.10; 27.18,23; Dt. 34.9) and in stories such as the sacrifice of Isaac (Gn. 22).

A similar variety of theories exist for how the blood effects an atonement for sin; again the Scriptures offer no explicit explanation. The clearest text is Lv. 17.11 in which God says, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life." The Hebrew word here for atonement (kipper) can mean either "to wipe clean" or "to pay a ransom,"(15) and two of the principle theories are based on these ideas.

According to the first notion the life that is in the blood gives a cleansing power to the blood. One significant development along this line is B. F. Westcott's view that "the atoning virtue [of the blood] lies not in its material substance but in the life of which it is the 'vehicle.'"(16) This does not mean that the death of the victim was not significant, for he says that in a sacrifice, "death and life were both exhibited, death as the consequence of sin, and life made by the divine appointment a source of life."(17) Thus the death is both a consequence of sin and the means of releasing the blood which is itself a vehicle of powerful life energy that defeats the deadly, destructive power of sin, though exactly how it does so is not made clear.(18)

To understand the second suggestion, that a ransom is in view, we must understand that the concept of ransom here is not something like a payment to terrorists. A ransom was the provision of paying a lesser penalty than one's crime deserved. For example, if a person owned an ox that killed someone the owner would be liable to the death penalty. But the court could decide to spare his life if he paid a ransom (Ex. 21.30). According to this view the burnt offering would be such a payment for one's sins. That is, there is a death penalty for sin but God is allowing this ransom of an animal's life to be paid instead of the
appropriate death of the sinner. The principle is blood for blood, life for life. Accordingly, the "life" referred to in Leviticus 17.11 is not, as in the first theory, an ongoing life energy existing in the blood after death, but life poured out in death, that is, the death itself.(19)

One final issue raised by our passage concerns the effect of the sacrifice. It is said that the sacrifice is "a pleasing odor to the Lord" (Lv. 1.9). This seems to signify that the sacrifice has appeased God's anger, that is, that God has been propitiated. But many scholars do not think God needs to be propitiated since He loves us and is Himself the gracious provider of sacrifices as the means of restoration of relationship between Himself and us. What is needed, accordingly, is for the sin to be expiated, that is, for that which separates us from God to be removed.

So the lack of explicit explanation in the text has suggested a variety of interpretations, each based on material found elsewhere in Scripture. These theories include notions of cleansing and ransoming, representation and substitution, propitiation and expiation. We will return to each of these topics as our study proceeds.

**The other four sacrifices**

I have spent much time on the burnt offering because, as I mentioned, it may well be the form of sacrifice most directly concerned with atonement. The other four sacrifices in Leviticus are also significant but we may cover them more briefly.

The cereal offering (Lv. 2) was usually offered in connection with one of the other animal sacrifices, most commonly following a burnt offering. In general it seems often to be similar to a tribute offered to a king. So, for example, following a burnt offering it would express thanksgiving and dedication.(20)

The peace offering (Lv. 3) was done in the same way as the burnt offering except only parts of the animal were burned and the rest was eaten by the worshipper and his friends and family at a special meal. There were several specific types of peace offering, namely those connected with confession in the midst of adversity or upon deliverance, those connected with vows, and those which were free-will offerings, that is, spontaneous acts of generosity.(21) The text again does not offer explanations but it seems from the contexts in which it occurs the peace offering focused on the joy of God's salvation in the worshipper's life, whether in the sense of deliverance from enemies or adversity or the general well-being which is shalom.

The last two offerings, the sin offering (Lv. 4.1 - 5.13) and the guilt offering (Lv. 5.14-26), are the most difficult to understand because little explanation is given and what is given is confusing. The titles for these two suggest they, and not the burnt offering, are the main sacrifices of atonement. Yet we saw the burnt offering very much involved with atonement. What then is the focus of the sin and guilt offerings? Wenham may well capture the essential feature of each when he calls them purification offerings and reparation offerings, respectively.

On this view, the sin offering is basically concerned with removing sin, or more particularly, that which sin produces, namely pollution or defilement.(22) The reparation offering concerns offenses against God and fellow Israelites that require restitution. These are sins against sacred property on the one hand and matters of deception against a neighbor on the other. Some would see the animal as a substitute for the worshipper, dying instead of the sinner. It could also be seen as a payment to compensate for the sin. On this latter view sin would here be viewed in the category of debt and the sacrifice is that which renders compensation or satisfaction for the release of that debt. For our purposes it is particularly significant to note that in Is. 53.10 when it is said, "he makes himself an offering for sin" it is this reparation offering that is referred to. "The death of the suffering servant compensates for the sins of the people and makes many to be accounted righteous."(23)

**The Day of Atonement**
One last section of the Old Testament that must be included is the material on the Day of Atonement (Lv. 16). This day included two dramatic features. The High Priest entered the Holy of Holies and sprinkled the blood of the sin offering of a bull and a goat on the mercy seat to purify that place that represents the center of the nation. He then purified the holy place and the altar. Once the defilement had been removed by this purification offering (to use Wenham's term) another goat was brought forward, "and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go in the wilderness" (Lv. 16.21-22).

Thus, the Day of Atonement speaks powerfully of access to the presence of God and removal of sins. These are the two general foci of the Old Testament teaching on sacrifice that lie behind the variety of expressions and rites we have surveyed. If we are looking for the unifying threads that run through this material on sacrifice I suggest we consider these somewhat general notions of removal of sin (and its defilement) and fellowship with God.(24)

**Sacrifice in the New Testament**

Given the number of references to sacrifice in the Old Testament and the complexity of the material it is striking that there are so few specific references in the New Testament.

We will start with the *Epistle to the Hebrews* for this is the document that uses the sacrificial material most extensively. The author affirms the principle that, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (9.22), but he says, in striking contrast to the Old Testament, that "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (10.4). The very repetitive nature of the old sacrifices suggests their ineffectiveness (10.1-3, 11-18). The limitations of the old sacrifices are not surprising since the earthly sanctuary and tabernacle are only a "copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary" (8.5). All of this provision of sacrifice was looking forward to the "time of setting things straight" (*kairos diorthoseos*, 9.10) which has now come in Christ (9.11-12). This thought is expressed through an allusion to the Day of Atonement. "For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy of Holies yearly with blood not his own; for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (9.24-26).

The two themes we saw in connection with the Day of Atonement, forgiveness and access, are clearly expressed here as well, but with the added emphasis on the finality of Christ's sacrifice. In Christ there is a turning of the ages, the new covenant promised in Jeremiah has come and "there is no longer any offering for sin" (10.14-18) for it is already complete.

It is clear that the author sees Christ as having fulfilled the Old Testament sacrifices in general and the Day of Atonement in particular, in that His death has provided the forgiveness and fellowship of which they spoke. The material on the Day of Atonement has raised questions, however, concerning how we are to view Christ's atoning activity. Some would say that the cross is not itself the sacrifice but is just the necessary preliminary activity to the entrance into the heavenly sanctuary where the effective work of sacrifice is performed.(25) Such a view is connected with notions of the perpetual sacrifice of Christ in heaven and associated ideas of eucharistic sacrifice. However, others say, rightly, that the stress in Scripture is on the cross as the place of atoning sacrifice and Christ's work in heaven is intercession on the basis of the completed atonement.(26) This does not mean that the Eucharist is not sacrificial in some sense, but it does warn against so running with one set of imagery in Scripture that it be repugnant to another (cf. *Article of Religion* xx).

Turning to the other writings it may come as a surprise to learn how seldom sacrificial language is used in speaking of Christ's redemption. It is the use of the word "blood" that most often signals a reference to
Christ's death in sacrificial terms. Blood is associated with several images for salvation, covering both the notions of forgiveness and access.

The declaration by John the Baptist that Jesus is "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1.29) has the forgiveness side of sacrificial imagery in view, though the specific background is unclear (cf. also Rv. 5.6).(27)

In Mark 10.45 (cf. Mt. 20.28) Jesus says, "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." We saw earlier that ransom is an aspect of the sacrificial system. This connection is brought out clearly in 1 Peter: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1.18-19, cf. 1 Cor. 6.20; 7.23; Gal. 4.5; Titus 2.14).

In Colossians 1.20 and Ephesians 2.13 blood is associated with reconciliation and thus the theme of access. This access refers to our fellowship with God viewed on a cosmic scale, for it says he reconciled "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." It also refers to our relationships with one another in Christ, who has broken down "the dividing wall of hostility" that "he might create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace."

In Ephesians 1.7 St. Paul refers to "redemption through his blood," which is described in the context as "the forgiveness of our trespasses," thus obviously focusing on that aspect.

Romans 3.25 and 5.9 make use of legal language, referring to our being justified by his blood. This way of looking at it sees sin as a breaking of God's law. From this perspective our problem is that we are guilty and must pay the penalty, which is death. Christ's death paid this penalty so we no longer are obliged to do so in the sight of the law.

This notion has been a source of much controversy, in large measure because to say "righteousness" is "imputed" sounds like pure fiction, a papering over of our real condition and our real need, which is actual healing and wholeness. But St. Paul is not referring here to the growth in holiness that Christ does produce, but rather to the crucial point that we may stand before God now, before we have been sanctified and glorified, because of our "right standing" in Christ.(28)

The text in Romans 3.25 is the only place in Paul that explicitly refers to propitiation: Christ Jesus is He "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." I referred earlier to the difference between propitiation and expiation and we must now look at these concepts in more detail. Many contemporary theologians and exegetes would say that God is totally loving and thus there is no place for the old notions that He is angry. Sacrifice does not change His disposition, which is one of love, but rather removes the sin -- expiates it-- thus allowing God and man to be in fellowship again. God's wrath is not, as it were, an affect but an effect, that is, it refers to "an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe."(29)

This view of things is on the right track in its insistence that God is totally loving and that we do reap what we sow. But as it stands this very popular interpretation can be as seriously distorted as the crass view of God's anger it rightly rejects. J. A. T. Robinson has put his finger on the problem when he says, "a Jew never pictured God working by impersonal, automatic laws like a thermostat . . . . Wrath is essentially the perversion of a personal relationship. . . . This need not . . . mean attributing to God capricious or irrational rage, but a deeply personal abhorrence, such as love must always feel in the presence of injustice or cruelty."(30) It is this personal dimension that is captured in the notion of propitiation.

John Stott is very sensitive to the legitimate criticisms of crass theories. He insists that propitiation does not take place because an innocent third party, Jesus, comes between an angry God and us sinners. Such a caricature is blasphemous. "Any notion of penal substitution in which three independent actors
play a role -- the guilty party, the punitive judge and the innocent victim -- is to be repudiated with the utmost vehemence . . . . What we see . . . in the drama of the cross is not three actors but two, ourselves on the one hand and God on the other. . . . It is God himself who in holy love undertook to do the propitiating, and God himself who in the person of his Son died for the propitiation of our sins. Thus God took his own loving initiative to appease his own righteous anger by bearing it his own self in his own Son when he took our place and died for us."(31)

I would suggest that both expiation and propitiation are taught in Scripture and both are needed for a balanced view. David Wells has expressed this well: "In Pauline thought, man is alienated from God by sin and God is alienated from man by wrath. It is in the substitutionary death of Christ that sin is overcome and wrath averted, so that God can look on man without displeasure and man can look on God without fear. Sin is expiated and God is propitiated."(32)

Three further passages

Three further passages in Paul -- Romans 8.3; Galatians 3.13 and 2 Corinthians 5.14-15 -- speak of Christ's dealing with sin. Romans speaks of God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, or a sin offering, i.e., a purification offering. Galatians says "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us." In Corinthians it says that Christ "died for all; therefore all have died."

Stott interprets these texts in terms of imputation: "what was transferred to Christ was not moral qualities but legal consequences: he voluntarily accepted liability for our sins. That is what the expressions 'made sin' and 'made a curse' mean. Similarly, 'the righteousness of God' which we become when we are 'in Christ' is not here righteousness of character and conduct (although that grows within us by the working of the Holy Spirit), but rather a righteous standing before God."(33)

Others would interpret these texts not in legal categories but in more incarnational categories. "In some unfathomable way Christ is identified with what is opposed to God, in order that man should be reconciled to him."(34) This approach would interpret these texts in the light of Christ as "the last Adam" (Rm. 5.12-21; 1 Cor. 15.21-23, 45-49) and the familiar pauline idea of being "in Christ." "In Christ there is a new creation, so that men now bear his image, as they have borne the image of Adam. They share his relationship with God by themselves becoming sons of God, and so finding blessing, righteousness, and glory. In other words, they become truly human."(35) Thus these verses are seen as part of the truth later expressed by St. Irenaeus that "our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."(36)

One last major use of sacrificial imagery that must be mentioned concerns that associated with the Passover. St. Paul refers to the feast explicitly in the midst of an appeal for holiness (1 Cor. 5.7-8). This association goes back to Jesus Himself at the Last Supper. This meal is called a Passover meal in the first three Gospels (Mt. 26.17-18; Mk. 14.14-16; Lk. 22.11-15) and St. John's Gospel even places Jesus' death at the very time the Passover sacrifices were being made (Jn. 19.14, 31). Jesus' words, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" echo the words of Moses when he threw the blood on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex. 24.8).

It has become common to doubt that Jesus Himself had such a view of his death. But a recent reassessment by Martin Hengel argues that the atoning significance of Jesus' death was taught by Jesus at the Last Supper and it was "above all the interpretative sayings of Jesus at the Last Supper which showed [His disciples] how to understand his death properly. . . . The words with which Jesus interpreted the Last Supper with his disciples came to occupy a central place, because in it Jesus had dedicated to the disciples, his people -- and beyond them to all men -- the fruits of his violent death. The saving significance of his representative dying was probably expressed primarily at the common meal, in constantly new ways -- on the basis of Jesus' own words."(37)
In the Lord's Supper, then, in keeping with its Passover associations, we have the themes of covenant fellowship with God and redemption from the bondage of sin. St. Paul's interpretation of Holy Communion focuses on two aspects in particular. In his statement, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11.26) he indicates the centrality of the cross. The very eating and drinking at the Lord's SUPPER are themselves a proclamation of the same message he has decided to know among the Corinthians, "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2.2). Our Passover took place at one particular point in time and space and to that event we continue to point and from it we take our bearing like the North Star.

But the Eucharist is not just a fancy history lesson: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (koineia) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (koineia) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10.16-17). The Holy Communion is precisely that, a means of our communion with God and one another in Christ. At this point we are moving beyond the specific thought of atoning sacrifice to a more general sense of sacrifice. Here we come close to St. John's Gospel in which the theme of communion in the Eucharist is not presented in specifically atonement language but in terms of having eternal life and abiding in Christ (Jn. 6.51-58).

**The core themes**

Thus we are back to our core themes: the death of Christ has brought forgiveness of sins and opened up access to God and one another. The sharing of the meal echoes the peace offering of the Old Testament, thereby signaling our fellowship as well as our celebration of deliverance and the blessings of shalom.

Having now surveyed passages referring to atonement and sacrifice we must briefly look at places where it is absent. It comes a shock to some to learn that there are major portions of the New Testament that do not dwell on the atoning significance of the cross as a sacrifice. This is true not only in John 6, as I just mentioned, but in the whole of that Gospel. *St. John's Gospel* is centered in the death of Jesus and develops this theme of union with God as profoundly as any writing in the Bible, but these themes are not developed in sacrificial categories. There are a couple of references to sacrificial thought (1.29; 10.11, 15, 17-18; 11.50-52), but the overwhelmingly dominant understanding of the death is as a revelation of the love of God. Indeed, this is so pervasive that one recent study tried, "to show that the properly Johannine theology of salvation does not consider the death of Jesus to be a vicarious and expiatory sacrifice for sin."(38) In fact, the verses just mentioned show that this theme was not missing from St. John's thought. Nevertheless, it did not play a very significant role in his telling of the story of Jesus as we have it in his Gospel compared to the theme of the cross as the revelation of the glory and love of God.

We find the same neglect of sacrificial language in *Luke* and *Acts*. In these documents Jesus' death is a focal point as much as in any other document, and there is an emphasis on the forgiveness of sins, but the specifically sacrificial idea is not developed. Indeed, St. Luke omits *Mark* 10.45, the ransom saying, even though he seems clearly to be following *Mark* elsewhere. As with John, there are indeed some indications of Luke's knowledge and appreciation of the more sacrificial categories (cf. Acts 8.32-33; 20.28), but there is no focus on the sacrifice of the cross as a key expression of the Gospel.(39) This is all the more striking if we accept the traditional view that the author was St. Luke, the companion of St. Paul.

Thus, it is quite possible in the New Testament to express the significance of the Cross without developing specifically sacrificial categories. But what are we to make of this fact? One response is to say that we also need not use sacrificial language -- we can be johannine or lucan Christians rather than following the *Epistle to the Hebrews* or St. Paul. On this view the canon of Scripture is a smorgasbord from which we can choose the dishes we prefer.
Another response says that the canon is not a smorgasbord but a balanced meal and we need all of it for our health. I think this second view is the truth and I think there is even a cautionary tale to be found within the New Testament itself which points us in this direction.

I have noted that St. John's Gospel has only slim references to Jesus' death as atoning sacrifice. Instead, the death is primarily depicted as a revelation of the glory and love of God. Some would argue that his expression of the gospel is the most profound in the New Testament. Yet it has its dangers, for it is very close to gnostic expression. Indeed, the Gnostics found it congenial; the earliest commentary we have access to is a Gnostic commentary on St. John's Gospel.(40) Now, it seems that some members of St. John's community actually went off to gnosticism.(41) This is the situation faced in 1 John and in that letter we find some of the most explicit atonement language in the whole New Testament (1 Jn. 2.2; 4.10). The trajectory needed to be brought back into line with the truth of the gospel, and a heavy dose of propitiation/expiation is a major part of the cure.

Is not such straightening out exactly what we would expect of the canon? After all, in Greek a kanon is a straight rod. The Bible does not give us a systematic theology but it does provide a plumb line to test any teaching, and, changing the metaphor, the essential markers so we can find our way.

Atonement and sacrifice

Thus far I have focused on sacrifice as it relates to atonement. There is also a more general notion of sacrifice that must at least be touched on. We may begin by considering how the Eucharist both celebrates our salvation and is itself a case in point of the communion we now have with God and one another. This sharing in Christ's life in Communion is both a source of our life and a model for our life. At the heart of both is the notion of sacrifice in the sense of self-oblation: God offering His life to us, we offering our lives to Him.

This ethical use of sacrificial language is clear in the New Testament. St. Paul's one clear reference to Christ as a sacrifice comes in Ephesians 5.2: "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Here the context is obviously ethical. So also the concrete expression of such love on the part of the Philippians, the gifts they sent Paul, are described in the same terms (Phil. 4.18). Elsewhere Christ's example, though not explicitly mentioned, probably also lies behind the use of sacrificial language to describe the Christian life (Rm. 12.1) and St. Paul's own death (2 Tm. 4.6). St. Peter, also, tells his readers, "like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt. 2.5).

Thus, behind the notion of sacrifice both as applied to atonement and the life of self-oblation that flows from the atonement, there is the theme of gift. This theme is grounded in, and gives expression to God's own character. Redemption no less than creation is His gift. All flows from and bears witness to His grace.

There is a self-giving, even self-denial in God's grace. This truth is especially developed in St. John's thought. Here there is a profound meditation on love as self-denial. God is love (1 Jn. 4.8) and love is the laying down of one's life (1 Jn. 3.16). The self-denial of laying down one's life can be seen in many forms in this Gospel. To take one example, when Jesus washes the disciples' feet (Jn. 13.1-15) we must be sure to see the powerful humility of God, for Jesus said that He only does what He sees the Father doing (Jn. 5.19).

This thought is captured also by St. Paul in Philippians 2.6, though it is obscured in many translations. The Revised Standard Version, for example, refers to Christ Jesus, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself." I believe the translation should be something like, "who because he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a matter of grasping, but emptied himself."(42) That is, self-emptying is not something Jesus did despite His divinity but because of it.
At this point I think we are peering over the edge at a profound landscape, for we are considering how God Himself is revealed through atonement and sacrifice. Self-giving is a matter of sharing life; sacrifice in this sense is at the heart of all of life, for all of life is a web of exchange. The laying down of life in sacrifice for sin is a particular application of a principle of Reality itself, the love which is shared existence. Thus we see a connection with the central truth of the universe, the Holy Trinity. The atonement enables us to come into union with God. When we see the sacrifice we see revealed the coinherence of the Trinity and "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."(43)

The atonement is also bound up with Christ's divinity. As Darwell Stone has put it, "The reality of the Atonement depends upon the Godhead of our Lord."(44) If Jesus were not God He would be merely another human martyr -- or even worse, a human sacrifice! This might reveal love, but there would be little reason to think it was God's love. For what we need is not a message about love nor an example of love -- we need God Himself to come and Himself love us by taking on our sin and death and by sharing with us His own righteousness and life. The antichrists referred to in 1 John did not deny that Jesus was the Son of God, but they denied that in His death He was Son of God. St. John responded by asserting that if Jesus did not die as Son of God then God has not been revealed, because God is love and love is the laying down of one's life (1 Jn. 4.8; 3.16). If Jesus is not God, especially in His death, then we are left with an idol -- and St. John concludes his letter: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn. 5.21).

A final thought

One final thought. I have been focusing on how the atonement reveals God's character and actually achieves our access to union with God. I would add that it not only reveals God but it also reveals man, both our sin and our dignity. Whenever we are tempted to think lightly of our sin we should meditate before a crucifix, for when we see what sin did to Christ on the cross, Christ, the one person on earth entirely pure and beautiful, we can see sin for the twisted, ugly, destructive, evil thing that it is. Whenever we are tempted to despair over our sin, or be overwhelmed by loneliness, or question the value of life, we should meditate in front of a crucifix and consider how precious God considers each of us to be.

We have been bought for a price, the enormously high price of the blood of the Son of God. Our worth is found in God's opinion of our worth -- He was willing to pay an incredibly high price for us. We were not on sale, He did not get a bargain. It is His image we bear and that can now be restored in us as we are in Christ. The way has been opened for this through the atoning sacrifice. Thus our Conference is considering the heart of the Good News itself, which in turn reveals something of the very heart of God Himself.

ENDNOTES

(1) Cf. Josephus' claim that 255,600 animals were sacrificed at Passover in ad 66 (The Jewish War 6.424-425). This figure is surely exaggerated but suggests the magnitude of the sacrifices just before the destruction of the Temple in ad 70.

(2) Northrup Frye, The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982). The quotations are from page 2.


the person of Jesus Christ -- the historical Jesus acknowledged as continuous with the one now acknowledged as the transcendent Lord" (p. 17). He goes on to suggest that "this 'Christ-centeredness' -- this test of devotion to the historical Jesus as also the transcendent Lord" was "an important factor" in the segregation of the New Testament books from other early Christian writings (p. 18).


(8) Leon Morris, *The Atonement* (IVP, 1983), p. 24. This book is a very good general introduction to the subject of this paper, especially for the Old Testament material and the major motifs used in Scripture to develop the topic.

(9) Ibid.

(10) These themes run throughout the Prophets. Note, for example, how both cleansing from sin and consecration to the Lord's service are essential ingredients in the call of Isaiah (Is. 6.1-8).


(12) Ibid., p. 55-63 for the debate and the thesis followed here.


(15) Wenham, *op. cit.*, p. 59. He notes that the meaning "to cover" was "once favored by many scholars" but it "has little to commend it."


(17) Ibid., p. 35.

(18) This motif of energy, or power, provides a suggestive similarity to the "Christus victor" view of the atonement, Christ as the strong hero that defeats the enemy.


(21) Ibid., pp. 78-79.

(22) Ibid., pp., 93-96.

(23) Ibid., p. 110. Wenham would see this compensation to be in addition to the notion of substitution, which he finds clearly expressed in Is. 53.5-6.

(24) Before turning to the New Testament material it is instructive to briefly consider some other general notions regarding sacrifice that are found among Israel's neighbors, but that were not part of her understanding. R. de Vaux has spelled out three such differences in particular (*op. cit.*, pp. 447-450). First, sacrifice is not a gift to a malevolent or selfish deity. Israel believed that it was God in His mercy who gave the sacrificial system in order to remain in covenant relation with His people. Far from being malevolent or selfish, He is good-willed toward them and concerned for their welfare and therefore provides a means of access to Himself despite their sin. Second, sacrifice does not achieve union with the deity by magic. The sacrifice is not a means of controlling or manipulating God. God is sovereign and not subject to human control. The sacrifice is not something mankind has discovered as a means to approach God or get out of Him what one wants. Rather, these are God's gracious provision which He honors in His sovereign freedom and love. Third, the sacrifice is not a meal taken by the deity. God has no need of food and drink.
In Psalm 50 God mocks such a view: "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" (Ps. 50.12-13). This very passage in the psalm suggests some people did hold such a view, but it is not a part of biblical religion. Each of these three views suppose a view of God quite unlike the God revealed in Scripture. The material on sacrifice reveals to us the seriousness of sin and the graciousness of God's provision of a remedy for sin, enabling us to dwell with Him and be His people.


(26) Cf. P. E. Hughes, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 343-345: "Christ entered heaven not as victim but as victor. His entry is his exaltation: his humiliation, of which the cross was the deepest expression, is now behind him (Phil. 2:8f.).... In any case, there was no altar in the holy of holies and consequently never any suggestion that the victim slain outside at the altar of sacrifice was then carried in and sacrificed as a burnt offering in that inner sanctuary.... To 'make intercession,' as our High Priest does in the heavenly sanctuary for 'those who draw near to God through him' (7:25), is not the same thing as to offer up a victim in sacrifice. The place of sacrifice was outside the tent at the altar of sacrifice, to which, in the Epistle to the Hebrews and throughout the New Testament, the cross of Calvary corresponds." Cf. further the whole excursus, pp. 329-354. Cf. also Stott, *op. cit.*, ch. 10. The intercession of the High Priest in the Old Testament was connected with the breastpiece that had on it the names of the tribes of Israel: "So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment upon his heart, when he goes into the holy place, to bring them to continual remembrance before the Lord" (Ex. 28.29).


(31) Stott, *op. cit.*, pp. 158, 175. Robinson approaches the mystery differently. Following Dodd he notes that God is the subject of the verb hilaskomai (to propitiate or expiate), not the object. That is, the verb refers to what God does to sin. He distinguishes his view from views such as Stott's as follows: "Certainly one may agree that the process neutralizes the 'wrath of God' (cf. Num. 16:46-48) *so long as* one remembers that this is not in Paul's thought to be regarded as assuaging an irate deity but as doing away with that alienation, that distortion in the personal relationship with God, which sin brings and which compels men to know God's love as wrath" (*op. cit.*, p. 45). That is, it is the expiation that accomplishes propitiation. For Robinson's views on penal substitution cf. p. 48. See ch. 3 of *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (IVP, 1988) by David L. Edwards and John Stott for a liberal assessment of Stott's book and Stott's response.

(32) David Wells, *The Search for Salvation* (IVP, 1978), p. 29. Cf. Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 175. Stott's book is eloquent and profound. He recognizes the diversity of Scripture, e.g., that it teaches both expiation and propitiation (p. 175), and that there are a variety of ways of describing salvation (cf. esp. chs. 7-9). However, his view that substitution is the concept that lies behind all others (pp. 202-203) is questionable, although may be correct if combined with the notion of participation. Also, occasionally he collapses one category into another, as when he says, "Is not his payment of our debts the way in which Christ has overthrown the powers?" (p. 234, drawn to my attention by my colleague, Dr. Stephen M. Smith). Stott is correct here in the sense that the two images are trying to describe the one reality of salvation, but he seems here to blur the distinctions of two different ways of expressing that reality, thereby not allowing each note to make its own distinct contribution to the chord.

(33) Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 149.


Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, preface to book five, in *Ante-Nicean Fathers* (Eerdmans, 1973, original 1885), p. 526. There is no doubt that the theme of participation is very important in Paul's thought; I would even say it is one of the central elements. Unfortunately, a number of scholars who develop this aspect of his thought do so at the expense of his teaching on the wrath of God and the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. Cf. the critique in Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul’s Gospel* (Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 276-277.


Cf. I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Zondervan, 1970), p. 175: "It seems likely, therefore, that in Acts Luke has preserved one form of the early preaching in which particular stress was laid on the resurrection both as the certification of the Lordship of Jesus and as the token that through Him God offered forgiveness to men. The atoning significance of the death of Jesus is not altogether absent from Acts, but it is not the aspect which Luke has chosen to stress. His presentation of the saving work of Jesus is consequently one-sided. But it is going too far to say that he has no rationale of salvation. He demonstrates quite clearly that salvation is bestowed by Jesus in virtue of His position as the Lord and Messiah. What is lacking is rather a full understanding of the significance of the cross as the means of salvation."


By itself the circumstantial participle hyparchon (‘being’) could be either concessive (‘although being’), causal (‘because being’) or a number of other nuances. But recent research on the meaning of harpagmos (‘grasping’) supports my translation. See Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (Waco: Word, 1983), pp. 84-85.


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Theories of the atonement are made up of various views on biblical themes of ransom, redemption, propitiation, substitution, and Christ as moral example. Early theologians expressed an understanding of the substitutionary nature of the atonement quite clearly, but it took more time for different themes to become more explicit in the theology of the church. These theologians also developed themes such as recapitulation, ransom, and Christ as victor over opposing powers. In the medieval ages, Anselm continued to develop a theory based on substitution, redemption, and propitiation, while Abelard suggested an alternative viewpoint based on the moral influence of the atonement event. Thus in the English Bible the word ‘atonement’ is used in two rather distinct senses. In its one occurrence in the New Testament it designates the particular means by which such reconciliation is effected, namely, the sacrifice which God is pleased to accept in order that man may again be received into favour. Now of these two uses of the word it is unquestionably the Old Testament use which is followed when we speak of the ‘doctrines of the atonement’. I cannot possibly answer this question even in bare summary unless I call your attention to the Biblical doctrine of sin with which we dealt last winter. You cannot possibly understand what the Bible says about salvation unless you understand what the Bible says about the thing from which we are saved. In Catholic theology, the Atonement is the Satisfaction of Christ, whereby God and the world are reconciled or made to be at one. The great doctrine thus laid down in the beginning was further unfolded and brought out into clearer light by the work of the Fathers and theologians. And it may be noted that in this instance the development is chiefly due to Catholic speculation on the mystery, and not, as in the case of other doctrines, to controversy with heretics. At first we have the central fact made known in the Apostolic preaching, that mankind was fallen and was raised up and redeemed from sin by the blood of Christ. Unlimited atonement (sometimes called general atonement or universal atonement) is a doctrine in Protestant Christianity that is normally associated with Amyraldism (four-point Calvinism), as well as Arminianism and other non-Calvinist traditions. The doctrine states that Jesus died as a propitiation for the benefit of all humans without exception. It is a doctrine distinct from other elements of the Calvinist acronym TULIP and is contrary to the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement.