

The Terminology of the Atonement

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The Latin dramatist Horace has given a rule of dramatic art to which John Calvin refers in our present context. It is that a god must not be introduced into the action unless the plot has got into such a tangle that only a god can unravel it.

That is our apologia for thrusting a particular viewpoint of the atonement – that from God’s side – into the forefront of theology. It is that the human race has got into such a tangle because of sin that only God could unravel it. And so a God-centered atonement is fundamental to the faith of the Church.

Atonement

But why a theory of the atonement? If the atonement occupies this position of centrality in the faith of the Church it is inevitable that men should try to understand something of what it means – its presuppositions, its objective reality, its implications for mankind. And so the attempt to make it intelligible to some degree has led to the formulation of a theory of the atonement that is self-consistent, true to biblical revelation, and loyal to Reformed teaching, and that is intelligible to human thought and can be justified before the bar of the human conscience. Thus it is that on the human side its intelligibility and its morality must distinguish any doctrine of the atonement that is acceptable to mankind.

There is, of course, always the question: why make a mystery into a theory? An infinite truth into a finite one? Why try to reduce the things of God into the narrow limits of our little field of vision?

We admit this is an ever-present danger, and the ‘judicious’ Hooker has warned us against the tendency to make things ‘more plain than true’. Because it partakes of the spiritual and transcendental in so marked a degree, we may as well face the fact that we cannot explain the atonement on the natural plane. Yet faith demands illumination, and the human mind asks for understanding. We think that here God has not left us completely in the dark. He has given us, at least, enough light for faith to act, and for love to trust and commit. And the classical claim still holds: *credo ut intellegam*.

In considering our sources, we must recognize that in a discussion of the atonement there are three possible lines of approach.

What Christ Himself taught about His saving work.

What the Apostles who interpreted His mission and message taught concerning Christ’s saving work.

What the Christian experience of the atonement suggests as to its meaning.

Is it possible to take any one of these to the exclusion of the other two? It is possible, of course, but it may be misleading. At least we do not attain in this way to the full truth of Christ’s saving work.

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It may well be asked: is it not enough to ask what Christ Himself taught regarding His saving work? Will not the Gospel records of the four evangelists suffice? The truth is that alone they do not suffice. We cannot build up a doctrine of the atonement from any one of the evangelists or from all four put together. Christ Himself had not shed, in any or all of His discourses that have come down to us, sufficient light on His saving work for us to establish a doctrine on that alone. It may seem strange that the Gospels do not cover it all. Why did not Jesus Himself explain Himself sufficiently for us to need no further explanation?

The answer would seem to be that our Lord did not will to disclose fully the nature of His saving work until the work had been accomplished. It must become an accomplished fact before the full light of revelation is shed upon it. It was in the mind of Christ obviously to commit the revelation and interpretation of His saving work to His Apostles and He promised them His Spirit to enable them, not only to understand His own teaching, but to receive light on what He could not impart to them at that stage. 'I have many things to say unto you', were His words to His gathered disciples, 'but ye cannot receive them now; howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth' (John 16:12-13). It required the cross, the resurrection and Pentecost to shed this further illumination upon His mission. It is indeed a fact that the Apostles who wrote of Christ claimed that the doctrine they taught came to them by the revelation of Jesus Christ through His Spirit. It is this interpretation given by Paul, by Peter, by James and John that, by and large, constitutes the doctrine of the atonement. And the Church, through all ages, has gone to this source of truth for all the facts she needed for the formulation of a theology of the atonement.

Now, though we claim all this cannot be derived from the Gospels alone, we recognize that it is this doctrine that most adequately explains the Gospels. Not only is it consistent with the Gospel narrative of the life and death of Jesus, but His life and death are largely meaningless and purposeless without this doctrine to interpret and elucidate them.

There is another angle of approach which we mentioned, that of Christian experience. Doctrine that has no relevance to Christian experience is not Christian doctrine, and it is not derived from the Scriptures. Rather is it speculative doctrine that has no validity for the Christian's mind because it has no relevance for his experience. God has not revealed anything that is not relevant to our need whether to heal or comfort or assure us. Not that it is the creation of our Christian experience, or the product of our self-consciousness. It is the other way round: Christian doctrine creates Christian experience.

It can be argued that the word atonement itself may be an unsatisfactory term. It occurs only once in the New Testament (Romans 5.11), and there it can be translated more accurately as 'reconciliation'. The word atonement is an attempt to give the significance of the Hebrew word *kipper* (to cover), which in the language of sacrifice came to signify covering an offence from the eyes of offended justice by means of an acceptable compensation, namely, the blood of sacrifice. Hence it came to signify forgiveness or reconciliation. We must, however, guard against the over-simplification which makes atonement mean merely 'atonement'. The word as used in Scripture and in Reformed theology means much more than that, for it signifies not only reconciliation but the ground of reconciliation.

For our present purpose, the terminology of the atonement can be gathered up under four comprehensive terms suggesting four distinct categories under which the doctrine must be viewed. They are representation, substitution, satisfaction and redemption. Representation indicates how the fact of atonement can be contemplated as a possibility: its great presupposition. Substitution indicates how the atonement was undertaken: its basic element. Satisfaction indicates what it involved: the nature of the

transaction. Redemption indicates what it signifies when it is communicated to our experience: its overall significance.

Representation

The term is generally acceptable to all shades of opinion on the theories of the atonement, even when they do not all mean by it the same thing.

It is held to mean generally, that Christ was a representative person – what is sometimes called a ‘public person’ – and that He acted throughout in a representative capacity. It is not unreasonable to believe that what a man, any man, could not do, a representative man might accomplish. Vincent Taylor asks: ‘Can modern Christianity speak of Christ as man’s representative before God?’ He replies: ‘An affirmative answer is not capable of demonstration: it is an utterance of faith based upon reason in the light of relevant facts.’

It would not seem hard to get the relevant facts if we examine Christ’s own conception of His life and mission as one who came ‘not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many’ (Matthew 20:28). He identified Himself with mankind at every stage of His development and experience – in His growth to maturity, in His baptism, in His temptation, in His death. It belonged to His Messianic ministry as Son of Man. His was the office of the Old Testament Goel – the Kinsman-Redeemer.

Involved in it is the Incarnation as its starting place. Anselm recognized this when he entitled his great work on the atonement: *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why did God become man?). It is clear that to be the moral and spiritual representative of humanity Christ must be perfectly human in order that in Him humanity might find a new Head. In Him humanity was summed, and in Him the humanity of which He was the Head obeys, suffers, and dies, in order that ‘through the obedience of one many shall be made righteous’ (Romans 5:19). Thus the second Adam, who was also the last Adam, came to lay the foundations of a new humanity that would attain to its divine goal.

Representation is made possible only because God had organized life, not on an individual, but on a collective basis, and made of humanity an organic unity. This fact made the fall of the entire race possible in one man Adam, and made the restoration of the race possible in one man, Jesus Christ, rightly designated the Last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). It is thus obvious that if the race is to fulfil its divine destiny, it must have a new start under a new Head, and this is the terminus a quo of the atonement.

It is true that many theologians do not go beyond that. They lay the emphasis on what Christ was, rather than on what He did. This viewpoint entered the stream of the Church’s life and thought through some of the early Fathers who tended to follow Plato rather than Paul. The idea was naturalized in the West by Duns Scotus, and popularized at a later date by Schleiermacher. In more recent times Westcott presented conception of the atonement in which Christ’s offering is not to be identified with His sufferings and death, but rather with the presentation of His life in Heaven, a life set free by death. This is revived in much of recent theology, the overall conception being that by the very fact of taking our nature Christ had redeemed it. This is elaborated in Bishop Gore’s ‘Incarnational Theology’, in which the emphasis is that it is not so important to define what Christ wrought in our nature, since the decisive thing in our salvation was not so much the precise character of His work, as that community of nature between us and Him. Thus came about the shift from the atonement to the incarnation. [Most notably in the theology of Karl Barth (see pages 199-202). For Karl Barth the incarnation is ‘the conversion of us all to God, the

realization of the true humanity. This actualizing of the incarnation makes it an ongoing process rather than a historical experience, and has laid the foundation for universalism - if Christ took the nature of all men, will not all men be saved?]

It seems clear that the New Testament never presents Christ's incarnation as constituting an atonement, and certainly not apart from His death. Rather is it taught that the High Priest of our profession assumed our nature that He might 'have somewhat to offer' (Hebrews 8:3). It is no doubt true that the self-offering of the Son of God began immediately He entered upon an earthly existence, and that from the cradle to the grave He bore the sin of many. But His life of obedience had to reach its consummation in His death, and only so could His offering be complete and an adequate atonement for sin. The atonement was, therefore, not due to His nature in itself, but to what He had done in that nature. It is merely giving a mystical turn to the already abstruse tenets of the Incarnational Theology to say, as D. M. Baillie says, that 'God's sin-bearing was incarnate in the passion of Jesus'. This merely serves to distract attention from the objective reality and centrality of the sin-offering on the cross which was the end and purpose of the Incarnation: for thus 'it behooved Him to be made in all things like unto His brethren to make reconciliation for the sins of His people' (Hebrews 2:17).

The evangelical import of the New Testament doctrine of representation in our experience is that as Christ in grace has thus identified Himself with us, so we are called to identify ourselves by faith with Him. In other words, faith in us is the response to the grace of His self-abnegation. But faith deals not with any theory of the atonement, nor with any or all of the facts that lie beneath the atonement, but with the person of the incarnate and atoning Lord. Nevertheless, it is the person as illumined for faith by what He was and what He became for us men and for our salvation. It remains, however, true to theology and to experience that the Incarnation must become an atonement before it can deliver us from sin.

Substitution

Representation is not synonymous with substitution. 'Christ for us' is a form of words accepted by those who do not accept substitution. But in the Reformed doctrine of the atonement, representation involves substitution. Christ is substitute for us because He is one with us. He stands not only in our nature but in our stead. It is only at this point that we attempt an exposition of the doctrine of the atonement.

The word substitution is not found in the Bible, though the reality is found throughout. In the theology of the atonement, it supposes that Christ was surety for others, that He made Himself answerable for them, and took over their obligations. The word 'vicarious' is also used for the same relationship, indicating that Christ acted for others rather than for Himself.

The New Testament, undoubtedly, lays bare a specific relationship, denoted often by the Greek prepositions hyper and anti, which can only be conceived of as referring to one taking the place of another. In the same connection the word antilutron is used (1 Timothy 2:6), indicating a 'substitute ransom'.

There are several elements in the doctrine of substitution that help to elucidate its full meaning.

(1) Identification

The substitute must identify himself with those he represents, identify himself so closely, morally and spiritually, that he and they can be reckoned as one. Christ acts on behalf of His people and stands in their

stead because He made Himself one with them. This relationship justifies all His transactions towards them, for 'both He that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified are all of one, for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren' (Hebrews 2:2).

That Christ had considered Himself so identified with His people is quite clear from His disclosure to His disciples. 'He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that despiseth you despiseth me', was often repeated in varied forms. As the paschal lamb in the Old Testament ceremonial must be taken 'from the flock', so Christ our Passover was taken from inside the family of mankind. He took part in our flesh and blood in order that He could be so identified with us, not only physically, but morally and spiritually, and not only in the sight of men but in the sight of God, that He could be 'numbered with the transgressors'.

On the precise nature of this identification there is a wide divergence of opinion. Some theologians speak merely of a 'sympathetic identification'. This means that Christ entered into the human situation so closely that He could take over our burden; He could repent for us, and with His sympathetic repentance for us, or rather with us, God is well pleased. Thus, as Vincent Taylor puts it, Christ is the Perfect Penitent for all mankind.

Macleod Campbell and R. C. Moberley pressed this sympathetic identification to the extent that Christ, by entering in to our position sympathetically, could feel our sins as His own, and confess them, and adequately repent for them before God. This repentance takes the place of expiation.

There is, of course, not a shred of evidence in the four Gospels, or elsewhere in the New Testament, that Christ repented for anyone's sins, nor is it reasonable to suppose that anyone could genuinely repent for sins which he himself had not committed. Rather does the New Testament seem to go out of its way to emphasize that He who was made sin for us Himself knew no sin', and this was indeed His own challenge to His accusers: 'Which of you convinceth me of sin?' (John 8:46). Bearing in mind the perfect holiness of Christ, it must be nearer the truth to say that His close proximity in sin-bearing to the sins of His people added immeasurably to the bitterness of His suffering, not less, but more, because they were the sins of those He loved.

(2) Imputation

This is a further element in the doctrine of substitution. The word is connected to *chashabh* in Hebrew and *logizomai* in Greek; the English term goes back to the Latin Vulgate which translates the Greek *logizomai* by the Latin for 'impute'. The word is used in the Bible both judicially and commercially: judicially to put to one's account morally, and commercially to put to one's account as credit or debit.

Reformed theology has always recognized three acts of imputation based on representation: the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity; the imputation of His people's sins to Christ; and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to His believing people. The divine act of imputation is precisely the same in each of these three transactions. In the doctrine of imputation we, therefore, recognize both imputation and counter-imputation, the imputation of our sins to Christ, and the imputation of His righteousness to us.

Imputation involves for us the moral problem of how a blameless person can stand for the blameworthy. But this is not the biblical way of presenting it. Rather is it that His people's sins were so set to Christ's account that He became a sin-bearer, and that He so remained to the end, 'bearing [His] sins in His body right up to the tree' (1 Peter 2:24). This was undoubtedly the principle underlying all the blood-sacrifices

of the Old Testament. By the laying on of the hands of the offerer, or vicariously of the priest, there was a symbolic transference of sin from the sinner to the sacrifice. This is a clear case of the symbolic transference of guilt from the sinner to the sin-bearer.

But even so, we are faced with a mystery we cannot fully penetrate, since there is no proper analogy to it in human relationships: it is the mystery of how the implication of guilt can morally be transferred from the sinner to the sin-bearer, even when the sin-bearer voluntarily accepts this position.

More important is it that Christ entered into this situation with a full consciousness of all its implications, as His experience in Gethsemane amply testifies. There He was suddenly plunged into the unspeakable horror of a relationship to sin from which His holy nature shrank. But His first thought was for those for whom He stood sponsor, as He pled with His captors: 'If therefore ye seek Me, let these go their way' (John 18:8). Henceforth He is seen to occupy the criminal's place, judged before a judicial tribunal, deemed worth of death, and eventually crucified between two malefactors. The shock that this was to administer to the moral consciousness of His followers is recognized in the New Testament narrative by the repetition on two occasions of the Old Testament declaration regarding the sin-bearer being 'numbered with the transgressors' (Isaiah 53:12): first by our Lord Himself before His trial (Luke 22:37), and then by the Evangelist Mark at the close of the proceedings (Mark 15:28, Authorized Version).

Whether we understand its inner working or not, we believe that substitution – the one for the many – lies at the very heart of the atonement. We can understand it in its counterpart, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to those in themselves unrighteous, so that the merits of Christ should be so set to our account that we, linked to Him in His voluntarily self-identification with us, are reckoned righteous in His righteousness. As substitution was a change of state for Him, so justification is a change of state for us when we are 'translated into the Kingdom of His dear Son' (Colossians 1:13). Paul places the two experiences side by side when he speaks of Christ 'who was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification' (Romans 4:25). The argument is that since, in infinite love, Christ linked Himself with us in our offensiveness, so by faith we are linked to Him in the risen life that declares His justification and ours. Elucidate it how we will, it shall be to us forever a supreme manifestation of divine grace as we come face to face with Him, and recognize the 'grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Satisfaction

The doctrine of satisfaction will always be associated with Anselm. He it was who brought in the idea of a debt of homage or service due to the Lord of the Universe, and the atonement as satisfaction for it. This is not the context in which it is generally discussed today, and all too often it is disparagingly referred to as the 'penal' or 'forensic' view of the atonement.

Here we turn to the God-ward aspect of the atonement, for the doctrine of satisfaction implies that the work of Christ has reference primarily to God and only secondarily to man. It is around this aspect of the atonement that the battle has raged throughout the years. It raises the question: Does God need satisfaction? Can He not fully and freely forgive sin by an act of clemency? Is there anything in God we ask, that requires more than clemency before sin can be pardoned?

But even if it happened that way, would a cheap forgiveness have a liberating power in our experience? Does not our moral nature require satisfaction too? Could we rest satisfied that, if this is a moral universe, the matter would not be raised somehow again?

Since sin is an intrusion in the moral universe that challenges the sovereignty and goodness of God, and that spells anarchy in the moral order, must not the Moral Ruler of the universe demand that the matter be put right at the point at which it had gone wrong? All these questions are involved in the doctrine of satisfaction.

The word 'satisfaction' in this context is not found in Scripture. By the term, theology means to assert that the obedience and sufferings of Christ, though not the identical punishment required by the offended Law from its actual transgressors, were, in virtue of the Person offering them, such as satisfied the divine justice and fulfilled all the moral purposes involved.

In the doctrine of Satisfaction there are several ideas closely related, though not identical, that we have to look at carefully. They are sacrifice, expiation, propitiation and reconciliation.

(1) Sacrifice

Here we have the thesis of the New Testament and all its Old Testament implications. It directs attention mainly to the fact of Christ's death, to the death of the victim and the shedding of sacrificial blood, and to the principle inherent in sacrifice, namely that it deals with God on behalf of men. Is this a legitimate way of viewing the saving work of Christ?

In the evangelical doctrine of the atonement, the satisfaction theory recognizes two offerings made by Christ: the righteousness of His life, and the sufferings of His death. This implies that it was not enough to regard the work of Christ as merely a provision in His death for the removal of human guilt; there is also a provision in His righteousness for fulfilling the demands that the divine Law makes upon the conduct of men. In other words, Christ's saving work must include the obedience which the Law of God demands as the condition of life, and the sufferings which it demands as the penalty of sin. These two aspects of Christ's offering are often spoken of as His active and passive obedience. Both, however, meet and reach their consummation in His sufferings unto death. In that final transaction He is viewed as both the officiating priest and the sin-bearing sacrifice, when 'he offered himself without spot unto God' (Hebrews 9: 14). The person of the Priest, however, and the sacrifice He offered, are distinct only to thought; in reality they are one and inseparable, the dignity of the Priest imparting infinite worth to the offering. In other days it was often put that 'He offered His humanity on the altar of His divinity', but this is a permissible summary only if we remember that priest, sacrifice and altar are all one.

In reading the narrative of the crucifixion one cannot escape the conclusion that Christ was active as well as passive in His death, that, in His own words, He was in full charge of His life, that 'no man took it from Him' and that He had 'power to lay it down' (John 10: 18). This means that death was not His fate, but His deed, His act of self-giving. At the close of it all, He did not expire as an exhausted man whose life was ebbing out, but 'He cried with a loud voice' (Luke 23:46) and shouted as in triumph: 'It is finished' (John 19:30).

The writer to the Hebrews has thus no difficulty in establishing the priesthood of Christ from His self-offering on the Cross. And it is a recorded fact that Christ Himself connected the thought of the Passover as a sacrifice with His own approaching death (Luke 22: 15). He is manifestly the first-born of the new

family of God for whom there can be no ‘passing-over’, since there can be no substitute lamb! It was surely in this spirit that he made the Old Testament institution pass over into the Lord’s Supper, as with infinite dignity He sets the paschal lamb aside and places Himself on the table, saying: ‘This is my body broken for you’, and then, ‘this is my blood of the covenant’, His blood being the fulfilment of all the symbolic blood-shedding of the Old Covenant. To this the Apostle Paul, in name of all the believers of his day, puts his Amen as he affirms: ‘Christ our Passover is also sacrificed for us’ (1 Corinthians 5:7).

(2) Expiation

The word is the same as is translated ‘propitiation’ (hilaskesthai), and signifies the removal of the guilt of sin. Hence it is found in the New Testament in close connection with sin (cf Hebrews 2:17).

The idea of expiation is doubtlessly involved in sacrifice. When the Law was given under the Old Covenant, one of its main purposes was to develop the sense of guilt, and this brought into prominence the need for expiation, which, in turn, led to the offering of sacrifice. The sacrifice made expiation by covering the guilt in order to remove the cause of offence. Hence the use of the Hebrew word kopher (to cover). Expiation thus becomes the basis of forgiveness; it signifies the annulling of guilt, the wiping out of demerit. This could be done ceremonially only by the immolation of death. As the animal bearing sin was ritually accursed and its body had to be consumed with fire, so sin involved the bearer in the curse, and only death could make expiation for the guilt, and extinguish the curse.

Thus the ritual of the Old Testament has a direct bearing on the use of the term expiation in the theology of the atonement. In the satisfaction that Christ rendered in life and death, there was this element of expiation, that is, amends made that would wipe out the sin, and remove the curse. This involved the divine Sin-bearer in the curse of sin, so that Paul could say that ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us’ (Galatians 2:13). The attendant circumstances of His death – the place, outside the camp; the medium, the cross; and the experience of dereliction – all pointed to the sinbearer entering into the curse of sin.

(3) Propitiation

This is the God-ward aspect of expiation, and follows it as its fruit. The word is found in the New Testament as hilasmos. Paul says in Romans that God sent forth His Son as hilasterion, a mercy seat or propitiation. There is a vast difference, however, in the New Testament usage of hilasmos and the use of the cognate word in pagan writings. In pagan literature the hilasmos was the altering of feelings of angry passion. In the biblical writers it signifies the removal of the cause of alienation, and this is the sense in which it has place in the theology of the atonement.

Propitiation implies an offended God. It has to be noted that in the three cases in which the term occurs in the New Testament it is applied to the one by whom the atonement was effected as being the sole actor in the case. Examples of this are: ‘whom God has set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood’ (Romans 3:25); ‘He is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2); and ‘He sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’ (1 John 4: 10). In all three cases God is the one who effects the propitiation. But the fact that there is no second party introduced must mean that the one who propitiates is Himself the one who is propitiated. Thus subject and object are one: the propitiation is effected by God and it operates Godward. This, one would hope, disposes forever of the grotesque imagery of an angry father demanding propitiation from an innocent son, the caricature so often produced by the opponents of this aspect of the atonement. But it does express, under human metaphor, the change effected in divine-human relationships

in the light of the eternal and immutable holiness of God. Here we have the sublime transaction of propitiation being offered by divine love to meet divine righteousness.

(4) Reconciliation

This is the fruit of propitiation. Its Greek origin *katalage* has a twofold significance. It means, in the first place, the reconciliation of parties estranged, and in this sense it is used of men being reconciled to God.

But is it thus one-sided? James Denney says: 'When reconciliation is spoken of in St. Paul, the subject is always God, and the object man. We never read that God has to be reconciled.' This is, at least, challengeable. It is possible to show that in the New Testament – and in Paul – the word *katalasso* means the mutual reconciliation of estranged parties, and not merely a one-sided reconciliation. It is used by Paul of the reconciliation of husband and wife who were estranged (1 Corinthians 10: 11). This must mean the reconciliation of both parties to one another. Similarly in the classical passage so often quoted to prove that only man needs reconciliation, where Paul declares: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.' How was He effecting this reconciliation? The rest of the passage indicates: 'not imputing their trespasses unto them' (2 Corinthians 5:19). Thus the harmony was effected on God's side first, so that He was able not to impute trespasses unto us. Nor, by any way of looking at it, can it be said that He reconciled the world to Himself, for the world is still at enmity with God. But having effected the reconciliation, by the word of reconciliation He is urging the world to enter that reconciliation. That is to say, the objective and Godward side is properly that involved in the atonement and reconciliation. The subjective side – our reconciliation – is the work of the Holy Spirit in us, as He makes over to us the divine reconciliation. Thus we enter 'the peace of God which passeth all our understanding', being the sense of forgiveness and peace with God. This then becomes in us a power that 'garrisons heart and mind' – the two gateways of dispeace – and extends over our entire being, integrating and healing and restoring.

Redemption

This is the overall word to describe the atonement in its total meaning in human experience. It effected and secured forever the *apolutrosis*, the redemption. This again includes several factors.

(1) Ransom

The Greek words *lutron* and *apolutrosis* are terms of rescue and speak of ransom and consequent redemption. The *lutron* was the price paid for the liberation of a criminal or captive. Christ used it in definition of His own mission: it was 'to give his life a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).

The imagery belonged to the thought of that age, and the idea of redemption and ransom, in the sense that we have indicated, dominated the thinking of the Greek Fathers. Athanasius, an outstanding representative of that age, laid special stress on this aspect of Christ's death. It was then the question arose: To whom was the ransom paid? It is well known, and all too often asserted, that some of the early Fathers answered: to the devil. And so the 'Ransom to Satan' theory of the atonement was widely held in the early Church, though not without protest from such enlightened leaders as Gregory of Nazianzus. It received the knock-out blow from Anselm. The question would never have been asked, if it had been borne in mind who the Redeemer was and for whom He had redeemed us: it was the God from whom we had fallen, and He redeemed us to Himself and for Himself that we might dwell in the fellowship of His love.

Without doubt *lutron* is used for the two reasons, to signify the deliverance, and to signify that it was not cheaply wrought. In this connection Peter reminds the Christians of his day; 'For ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ' (1 Peter 1:19). It was, therefore, appropriate to claim that the *lutron* was what Jesus gave, when He gave His life as full amends and restitution for man's transgression.

But it also means that the Christian in his entire being is Christ's 'purchased possession'. This applies to body as well as to soul, so that the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly can make the audacious claim in the case of all believers: 'And their bodies, being still united to Christ, shall rest in their graves till the resurrection.' As death cannot annul the ransom price, so it cannot sever the ties that bind the Redeemer to His redeemed ones, and when body and soul are reunited in resurrection Christ shall be in possession of a redeemed personality.

(2) Emancipation

This was the point at which the Passover was pressed into service as the symbol of Christ's death: it was the prelude to deliverance. The underlying thought here is the bondage in which men are held to sin and death. The atonement was thus represented as an act of emancipation, the making possible of giving liberty to the captives and opening of prison to them that are bound.

Deliverance and emancipation are still in use as expressive of the fruits of Christ's atoning death. And it is subjectively the most comprehensive term, since it is a deliverance that is felt in the conscience as the removal of guilt and the entrance of peace, in the mind of man as deliverance from darkness and the entrance of light, and in the realm of heart as deliverance from pollution and the bestowal of purity. To the entire being of man it spells the liberty wherewith Christ makes us free.

(3) Everlasting Security

Redemption is often used in the wider sense of the fullness of salvation that is ours in the eternal state. Thus we find phrases in the New Testament, such as: 'your redemption draweth nigh' (Luke 21:28); 'the redemption of the purchased possession' (Ephesians 1:14): and 'the day of redemption', all pointing towards the consummation.

It enters the here and now, however, as security, or perseverance, or indefectible grace. All that is involved in security is attributable to the work of the indwelling Spirit of God, who was secured for us as a fruit of the atonement. Thus Christ not only secured our redemption, but He secured the gracious operation of the Spirit to apply its efficacy to us. We believe that this spells our eternal security.

The question will be asked as to how to connect what happened in time, at a certain date in history, with a reality that has eternal value for us.

Emil Brunner presents the Neo-Orthodox view thus: 'The atonement is not history, it cannot be conceived of from the point of view of history. The event does not belong to the historical plane – it is superhistory.'

This statement of the case might be passed without dissent were we sure that it does not remove the redemptive act out of history. The fall of man took place in history and his restoration must take place in history. The atonement belongs to history, for God in Christ entered the historical process, and so made it the vehicle for the fulfilment of His eternal purposes.

To suppose that no event of human history has any direct relation to the divine sin-bearing is to leave the atonement unrelated to man in history, it is to vaporize it into an impenetrable spiritual mystery. Though in its consequences it transcends the temporality of past, present and future, we cannot reduce the importance of the historical event as the pivot on which eternal issues turn.

We are often told that ‘the work of atonement was eternally present with God’, but this must not be made to mean that Christ was sin-bearing throughout the ages, or that He is still in a victim-state bearing the sins of men, though His historical passion is over. With the triumphant cry: ‘It is finished’, He completed the work and laid the foundations of an eternal reconciliation between God and the Church He redeemed with His blood.

The sort of speculation and mystical language we have referred to only serves to neutralize the historical atonement, and to lead us away from what happened in human history, in time and place, when Christ ‘in the end of the world – at the end of the age, of the process of education and preparation – appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, and in so doing ‘obtained eternal redemption for us’ (Hebrews 9:26, 12).

Epilogue

When the Cross of Christ crashed into history, it signaled a stupendous act of divine intervention. It happened in ‘the fullness of time’, and that it was God’s ‘time’ – the time to which Christ so often referred as controlling the program of events to which He had subjected Himself – is evident when we reflect on the historical circumstances of the crucifixion to which John refers in John 19:30-37. Had it taken place some sixty years before then, the Jews had then sufficient political power left to them in their own country, not only to try and sentence Jesus before their own judicial tribunal, but also to carry out the sentence. For the crime of blasphemy, with which Jesus was charged, the death assigned by their law was by stoning (Leviticus 24:16), and this alone would satisfy their lust for Christ’s blood.

Had the death of Christ taken place some sixty years after it did, that is after the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, the Romans had then taken over all political power in Palestine, and not only would they not have permitted the Jewish Sanhedrin to pass sentence, but their sentence, even if it were passed, would not have been executed. In that case Christ would not have died.

But at the precise time at which it had happened, the balance of power between the Jews and the Romans in Palestine was such that the Jews could pass sentence, and confront the Roman governor with the demand: ‘We have a law, and by our law He ought to die’ (John 19:7). And the Romans retained the power of execution, and would reply: ‘If he is to be put to death, he will be put to death in our way and not in yours.’ And that meant crucifixion, reserved for the slave-criminal and for political rebels who were not Roman citizens. It is quite clear, therefore, that the exact nature of Christ’s death was, on the human plane, determined by the incidence of power-balance between Jews and Romans.

But this is not John’s interpretation of the crucifixion. On the higher level, as indicated by prophetic disclosure, the Messiah was not stoned to death, for it was written ‘A bone of him shall not be broken’ (Exodus 12:46). By the same disclosure Christ was to suffer death by crucifixion, because the Scripture said: ‘They shall look on him whom they pierced (Zechariah 12: 10). In other words, John took only the religious and divine view of history which is the view that every Christian must take. Every Christian

born of the Spirit is peculiarly in God's time, and subject to the purposes that belong to God's time, even though they operate in earth's time and so enter into our historical experience.

And the fact that the work of atonement reached its climax in historical crucifixion, colors the entire historical appeal of the gospel, as it indeed colored the thought of the Lord Himself.

Thus it is that 'Christ crucified' – as distinct from a crucified Christ – wins attention, awakens conviction, creates trust, and regulates the redeemed life.
