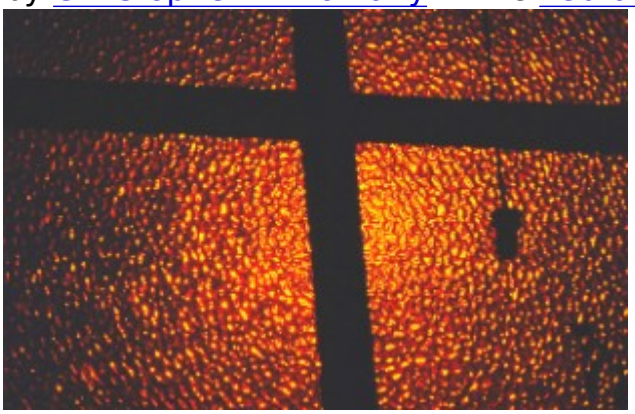
Affirmation of being: In defense of atonement theology

Explanations of the cross have been subject to major critiques in recent decades. Is it really the case that, given human sin, someone has to pay?

by Christopher P. Momany in the February 5, 2014 issue



During the waning days of the 1970s Jesus movement, I was 15 and clueless, like most people that age. My church's youth group had a tradition of traveling each year to a large, outdoor Christian music festival. The event, a self-styled alternative to the Woodstock legacy, offered camping, communal sources of drinking water and food—not to mention outdoor sanitation—and plenty of Jesus served up through "Christian rock" music. Of course, it was really the camp meeting tradition redux. The first evening, with several thousand others and in an atmosphere of drum kits, guitars and evangelical preaching, an "invitation" to faith was issued.

When the call came, I went forward. Several of us were ushered into the old tabernacle building, part barn and part chapel. It was a misty night, and I was greeted by a young bearded seminarian in a rain poncho. I don't remember his name, but I do remember him being genuinely kind, not condescending or controlling. He listened as I shared my heart, and we prayed.

I was not harangued about my sins. The discussion that night revolved around God's love, the conviction that God entered the world in human form with a tenacious care

that never quit. When those wielding power and privilege sought to make him stop, God in the person of Jesus remained steadfast, even accepting execution.

Then my conversation partner in the rain poncho tossed off an old saw about Calvary. He said that if I were the only person on earth—past, present or future—Jesus still would have gone to the cross. For me.

A cliché? Perhaps. Yet even the most hackneyed of sayings often reveals mind-bending concepts. The God who didn't have to get involved got involved unto death—for me. That meant something.

Last spring I was invited to lead a conversation at my college about the meaning of Holy Week. Wanting to open a dialogue about the cross sans heavy doctrinal explication, I began with a question: What is the best thing someone has done for you?

The responses were instructive. One young man explained that he had been hospitalized with a serious injury his senior year of high school. A friend took the bus downtown every afternoon to help him keep up with homework. The young man was able to graduate with his classmates because of this generosity.

Another student spoke about the struggles of getting to and from a job. Her grandmother saved to buy a reliable, used car—and then gave this young woman the keys when the vehicle arrived.

These were modest personal anecdotes perhaps, but they revealed important stuff to these students. When discussing why such acts of kindness were so powerful, many pointed to their sacrificial nature. There was a cost involved for those who gave. Affirmation came with a price. Love expressed through sacrifice is compelling.

Explanations of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross have been subjected to major critiques over the past few decades. Is it really the case that, given humanity's sin, someone has to pay? This line of reasoning ends up with a sacrificial victim. These theories become especially troubling when coupled with language of the parent-child relationship. Feminist scholars and others have emphasized the potentially abusive effects of such linkage. If God is Father (or Mother, for that matter) and Jesus is Son, then are we treading in the land of child sacrifice?

Perhaps more generally and insidiously, does our perpetuation of this theology sanction the abuse of those less powerful in an effort to satisfy an angry God? This question focuses the problem with utilitarian moral theories. When the “greater good” demands sacrifice, it is seldom the powerful who divest themselves of privilege. Someone else, someone with fewer resources and connections, takes the fall.

So I understand why thoughtful people would cringe at the idea of God offering up a daughter or son as sacrifice. We can talk about why anyone in particular has to pay in the first place, but even if we grant some unavoidable necessity, a God who makes someone else cover the gap is not a God of love. Those who find the atonement a deep and life-changing doctrine must hear such critiques and take them seriously.

In response, I find two avenues of reflection on sacrifice to be helpful. The first asks: Who is it that offers and even enacts the sacrifice of atonement? The second question is: For whom is this sacrifice given?

Why a sacrifice is necessary strikes me as an unanswerable question. However, to grant that human behavior created an environment in which Jesus did sacrifice himself instead of withholding love is plausible, even awe-inspiring.

The most profound consideration of all is the identity of the one who makes atonement. A traditional Christology offers the strongest answer. A God who is not in Christ does little more than throw Jesus under the bus, but a God who is in Christ empties the self at the cross. This is an astounding proposition.

It is also a counterintuitive proposition, something that cuts across the grain of all reigning ideologies. For this reason alone, if for nothing else, the notion that a God of supreme might would put aside prerogative on behalf of humanity leaves me breathless. Anyone who considers the pathetic attempts to project power that surround us on a daily basis should pause and ponder the magnitude of a God who gives it away. This is not a defeatist doctrine or rationale for accepting the abuse of power. It is simply a statement about the stark contrast between petty attempts to leverage authority and the grace that knows how to be for others.

Acknowledgment of the divine self-emptying is the strongest critique available when reprehensible behavior must be named. Those who would be great might approximate the kind of sacrifice demonstrated on the cross, but let’s be bold

enough to confront counterfeit greatness and its abuse of privilege. An atonement that conceives of God voluntarily taking on humility is not for suckers. It is an indictment of all that the world assumes about power.

For whom is the sacrifice made? Theological traditions have seldom been able to resist parsing the issue. Several have posited that the atonement is limited in some sense, that it applies only to those destined for eternal life.

To posit, by contrast, an unlimited or universal atonement is more than an act of inclusion. The very fact of claiming to cover all entails some hard thinking about the meaning of the word *all*. What kind of being falls under such comprehensive love? A universal atonement addresses core questions regarding personhood, and matters of personhood are behind the most vexing problems in ethics and social justice.

My interest in personhood is not intended as a parochial neglect of more organic concerns. A world that is truly reconciled to God is not one that pits human destiny against the environment. Yet what does a universal atonement say about the very nature of people and their common design?

For starters, we might note the distinction between a universal atonement and universalism. Universalism posits a common destiny regardless of humans' response. Universal atonement, however, is closely allied with a conception of agency. Sacrificial love is offered for all, but the free receipt of this love matters. This combination of universality and freedom is crucial for understanding our shared humanity.

The college where I work was founded in 1859 by antislavery advocates. Our town was a prominent stop on the Underground Railroad. The founder of our institution was an able philosopher, in addition to being a pastor and educational theorist. Our library holds his personal notebook, which contains a phrase that became the fulcrum of his human rights approach: *intrinsic worth*.

These two words expressed a particular metaphysic and epistemology. This president was a "realist" and claimed that reality could be known in itself. *Intrinsic worth* was his language for describing the real value of the world outside of us. These words were given a more specific application when applied to people. The phrase was intended to name the inestimable value of all people. This meant that human beings do not derive their worth from others, or from their usefulness, or from accidental circumstances. Their worth is unique to them, endowed by a divine

authority, and not to be manipulated for the aggrandizement of those with power.

Such an understanding of humanity is compatible with those theologies that support modern human rights. Yet this emphasis is not some hopeless individualism. A closer look reveals a definition of personhood that embraces shared realities. The claim of intrinsic worth implies that there are attributes possessed by all in common. There is a collective dignity inhabited by people that helps to define the very meaning of *person*.

A divine act of sacrificial love intended for all assumes that there is something shared which constitutes the “all.” It is perhaps an intellectual cul-de-sac to posit some magic quality of personhood that ties humanity together, but one very critical aspect is implied through the idea of universal or unlimited atonement—freedom. This freedom is perhaps best understood as the ability to determine action.

I would argue that sin is a matter of behavior, not a matter of being. People do incredible wrong, and this is one potential use (really a misuse) of freedom. But atonement, as an unlimited offer of grace, is an affirmation of being, not of behavior. Sacrificial love does not overlook injurious or diabolical action but reaches out to the being responsible for such action. Freedom is the troubling meeting ground of being and behavior, the place where capacity is embraced and behavior not always endorsed.

Forget the old existentialist mantra about humanity being condemned to freedom. It does not tell us much. The truth is more complicated and potentially more liberating. The atonement does indeed judge our action, to the extent that we often behave in ways that fail to honor the being of others. Yet the promise of the atonement is precisely its affirmation of our being and the being of all—a being that includes the capacity to act in ways that love others.

Some might dismiss this as an entirely subjective view of the atonement: the sacrifice of Jesus for us makes us feel better about ourselves. The point is that atonement celebrates the objective value of humanity within the created order. Just because the news is good does not make it sloppy, fuzzy or subjective. In fact, perhaps the best news about the good news is that it is a genuine gift given from outside.

We can even speak of freedom as an attribute and a gift at the same time. We are given ourselves through grace. Freedom is being invited to choose relationship with

a loving God, which is, after all, our proper destiny. The atonement is not so much about calculating merit and penalty as it is about the re-creation of our humanity and the restoration of relationship with One who never gave up on us—any of us.