

# Editorial Matters

## Rediscovering and Re-Imagining the Atonement

Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of the Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1988.

Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement*, Darton Longman and Todd, London 1989.

John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1992.

Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation: An Essay in Universalism and Particularity*, CUP, Cambridge 1991.

Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989.

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, IVP, Leicester 1986.

Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, IVP, Leicester 1993.

Alister McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1987.

This edition of *Anvil* takes as its theme a topic which has frequently been at the forefront of evangelical debate and notoriously a matter of contention: the atonement. Indeed, in some evangelical circles, authentic 'soundness' hinges on one's particular outlook on the work of Christ. In the wider theological arena, however, until recent years remarkably little has appeared in the English-speaking world since F. W. Dillistone's *The Christian Understanding of Atonement*.<sup>1</sup> Not long ago, Colin Grant could even write an article entitled 'The Abandonment of the Atonement.'<sup>2</sup> Now the tide seems to have turned. In the last decade a spate of books has appeared on the theme from a variety of theological quarters. They enable us not only to re-discover the atonement as belonging to the heart of all Christian doctrine, but in many

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1 (2nd edn), SCM, London 1984.

2 *King's Theological Review*, (9), pp 1-8.

cases to re-imagine the atonement from fresh and hitherto unexplored perspectives.

### Re-invigorating ancient themes

It is an oft-heard cry that the classic metaphors used of the atonement — sacrifice, victory, etc. — have been rendered lifeless and vacuous in the contemporary Western world. New models must be forged if the atonement is to take root in people's lives. While there is a measure of truth in this, a great deal of the recent writing has been concerned to show that we abandon the traditional images at our peril. Especially notable here is *The Actuality of the Atonement* by Colin Gunton, Professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College, London. It is a tough book, not for the newcomer to theology, but well worth the effort of reading it. Gunton's chief concern is with rationality: how rational is it to speak about 'God reconciling the world to himself' in a post-Enlightenment culture which tends to dismiss 'God-talk' as irrational and meaningless? While being careful not to assume that the 'old, old story' can simply be re-told in the old, old language, he aims to demonstrate that the great metaphors of atonement still have currency today. Against the idea that metaphors are merely dispensable, decorative frills, Gunton argues (in line with Janet Martin Soskice's *Metaphor and Religious Language*<sup>3</sup>) that metaphors are capable of conveying objective truth and are present in all fields of human enquiry. With this in mind we can 'reappropriate aspects of the Christian tradition which rationalist criticism has called radically into question' (p 24) and speak of the atonement as the achievement of a new state of affairs within the created order. In a similar way, the Baptist Paul Fiddes, Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford, in his very accessible and sensitive paperback *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement*, seeks to rehabilitate the ancient themes of sacrifice, victory and justice in ways which take full account of the difficulties of using such images today and also of the new connotations these metaphors have gathered.

So, for example, both Gunton and Fiddes believe that the metaphor of sacrifice possesses great contemporary power. (Interestingly, a major series of essays has just appeared by writers convinced that sacrificial imagery has a vital role in the constructive expression of Christianity in the modern world.<sup>4</sup>) The heart of sacrifice is seen as having to do with removing dirt or pollution. The offering of Christ 'demolishes the barrier that uncleanness erects, and so restores fellowship'. (Gunton p 138) Fiddes believes that the image of sacrifice will cut most ice today, not in what it tells us about the death of Christ, but in what it tells us about our response to God. He draws on the Old Testament notions of 'gift offering' and 'communion offering': we offer our lives as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving 'in tune' with the self-offering of Christ. We do this as a community, supremely by means of the Eucharist. The perfect self-offering of Christ enables and creates our offering;

3 Clarendon, Oxford 1985.

4 *Sacrifice and Redemption: Durham Essays in Theology*, ed. S. W. Sykes, CUP, Cambridge 1991.

his death expiates sin by changing sinners and thereby issues in our self-offering. Of course, we might well ask what our self-offering 'in tune' with Christ actually means. It is in this regard that Gunton offers assistance and concentrates much more firmly on the sacrifice of Christ himself, and our sharing in Christ's continuing ministry today. He employs a much neglected, yet crucial part of John Calvin's thought, developed in the writings of the Scottish nineteenth-century theologian Edward Irving. The key idea is that it is primarily the Holy Spirit who heals our diseased humanity, turning it back to God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Gunton rightly speaks of the Spirit's role in the entire career of Christ: what the Spirit does here and now in us must echo what he first did in Jesus.) Christ is the perfect offering we could never make to the Father, rendered possible by the Spirit. Now, as the risen high priest, he who is 'the gift to us of God the Spirit becomes the one who gives to his people the Spirit who had been the means of his true humanity' (p 135). Through the Spirit of Christ, we are being transformed into his likeness. Our offering today is therefore in, with and through Christ our Priest, as he lifts us by his Spirit to the Father.<sup>5</sup> Here Gunton is expounding a rich theology of the high-priesthood of Christ, which, although soundly rooted in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the early Fathers of the Church, and amplified brilliantly by writers like Tom Smail and T. F. Torrance,<sup>6</sup> has yet to find its way into the main streams of modern evangelical theology. A fresh exploration of this field by evangelicals would help us move beyond the rather tired and sterile debates which tends to polarise Christ's offering and ours and thus miss the link between them, namely the continuing ministry of Christ in our humanity through the Spirit.

Also convinced that the models of salvation which have been deployed through the ages, though mostly biblical in origin, possess the ability to take root in many different cultures and ages, is John McIntyre, for many years a Professor at Edinburgh University. *The Shape of Soteriology* is a sensitive, clear-headed (though compressed) work, analytical in style yet with pastoral application carefully integrated with theology. McIntyre lists thirteen models and refuses to write off any as inappropriate for contemporary use. Most perceptive is his discussion of how the models relate to each other and to the death of Christ. The conclusions are fairly traditional (though very cogently argued) and it would be hard to find a better book to convey a mainline Reformed perspective on atonement and salvation.

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5 See also Colin Gunton, 'Two Dogmas Revisited: Edward Irving's Christology', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 41 (1988), pp 359-376.

6 Tom Smail, *The Giving Gift*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1988, ch. 9; T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1975, ch. 4; cf. J. B. Torrance, 'The Vicarious Humanity of Christ', in *The Incarnation*, ed. T. F. Torrance, Handsel Press, Edinburgh 1981, pp 127-147. See also Christopher Cocksworth's fine appropriation of this tradition in *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, ch. 14.

## Particularity and Universality

How can the life and death of a Jewish Rabbi two thousand years ago possibly have any impact on us today? How can we believe, with Gerard Manley Hopkins, that the 'stroke and stress' of salvation both 'rides time / Like riding a river' and also 'dates from day / Of his going in Galilee'? To be more specific, how does a particular act — in one place and time — constitute universal redeeming power — for all places and times? One response is to say that the work of Christ is principally about *revelation* — in Christ there is a disclosure of who God is (and who we are) and it is this which makes salvation in the present possible. But the New Testament (and subsequent tradition) says much more than this: something was *achieved* in Christ (not just shown) which actually constitutes our salvation. How does *this* link with being saved today? Two of the books under consideration focus on this as their main concern. Paul Fiddes answers the challenge in two ways. First he claims that the Christ-event is a 'new experience' in the life of God, and thus, in some manner, changes God: God's experience is expanded, 'increased'. Secondly, the Holy Spirit links this divine experience to us in the present: the Spirit conveys the living, divine personhood of Christ to us so that the experience within the very life of God which is Jesus' experience is linked to our response.

Vernon White, in his admirably clear and concise book *Atonement and Incarnation*, extends Fiddes' argument, summarising his own model of atonement thus: 'God in Christ takes into his own divine experience that which qualifies him to reconcile, redeem, and sanctify in his relationship with all people everywhere. To adapt one of Fiddes' pictures: it is something like the mountain guide who first crosses a difficult terrain himself, in order to equip himself to take across all who will follow him. It is a journey we could not make apart from him, yet must make. It is, of course, the journey of dying to self and living wholly to God — through temptation, suffering, and death itself.' (p 53) So, there is particularity — Jesus died to self and lived to God as a mortal, fragile human being; *and* universality — the Spirit of the risen Jesus, unrestricted by the spatio-temporal order, can relate Jesus' achievement to every other individual. This view of atonement, elaborated with great philosophical delicacy, is backed up with a perceptive and nuanced discussion of the incarnation which stands as a *tour de force* on its own. White also offers a defence of his account as being consonant with basic moral intuition. This book can be confidently recommended to any at a first-year undergraduate level (or above) as a readable, orthodox and very fair approach to a complex field. My main hesitation is that White seems to work with too strong a distinction between redemption and revelation. He is determined not to let the particular action of Christ in the past dissolve into some revelatory event in the present, and properly so. But this seems to backfire on him: at times in his argument, God's self-revelation today and our relationship with him through Christ appear to be almost marginal. For example, in White's last chapter he urges that explicit knowledge of Jesus in this life is not

necessary to be saved; what may be required is 'the kind of personal humility and responsiveness which will accept the anonymous Saviour's gift... [and] could well be mediated and enabled through the positive values of another religious or humanitarian tradition.' (p 112) But if the goal of salvation is restored personal relationship, how can this take place without involving at least a degree of conscious knowledge?

### The Reasonableness of the Atonement

One of White's main concerns is the philosophical coherence of atonement. This is even more so in the case of Richard Swinburne, Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Oxford University. In the first part of his demanding book, *Responsibility and Atonement*, he scrutinises key concepts like merit, guilt, praise and blame, reward and punishment, resentment and forgiveness and concludes that atonement is morally reasonable and coherent, granted basic assumptions about the existence of a creator God. (Much attention is given to our 'proneness to wrongdoing' and the reality of human responsibility. Even on its own, this section represents a major contribution to ethical theory and deserves to be widely read.) Part II then goes on to deal with the Christian doctrine of atonement. He advocates what he calls 'a liberal position', in contrast to the 'hardline' Augustinian tradition. There can be no forgiveness without atonement and Christ's life and death are the appropriate means whereby the subjective and objective aspects of human guilt are overcome. Swinburne believes that a sacrificial model of atonement is by far the most fruitful, but unlike, say, Gunton, he has little time for the idea that Christ bore God's judgement on our sin. Swinburne instead claims that Christ's life and death embody everything that we, in ourselves, are unable to offer to God. God now makes available to us the sacrificial gift of the life of Christ: the sincere penitent can offer it to God as the life he or she ought to have led, and thereby secure atonement. We disassociate ourselves from our own sins (and from involvement in those of our ancestors) and offer Christ's life as our reparation and penance. We thus 'use' Christ's life and death to obtain forgiveness. Quite how this works out in practice is not entirely clear, but Swinburne does stress that salvation can only be realised by being baptised into the Church and enjoying the benefits which follow. In this connection, I would have wished that he said more about the role of the Holy Spirit.

One of the most attractive features of Swinburne's thinking is its refreshing independence. He is very hard to pigeon-hole: Part of the pleasure in reading the book is wondering what he is going to say on the next page. Where some readers will find most difficulty is in his well-known tendency to allow philosophical analysis to set the stage in such a way that both the need for, and the content of what God has done in Christ are underplayed. In one place he writes: 'Once we have got clear about how such notions as merit and reward, guilt, atonement and forgiveness apply to dealings between people in general, we can then go on to examine how they would apply to dealings between humans and God.' (p 1) Giving the moral philoso-

pher first bite at the apple certainly has its plusses. But we would need to ask: does not the cross confound and overturn many of our cherished ideas about the themes surveyed so carefully in Part I — mercy, gratitude, reward and punishment, etc.? Should we not seek to bring all our categories of theology under the searching light of Christ crucified? (See 1 Cor. 1!) Swinburne's weakness here is arguably one part of a larger deficiency in much English philosophical theology, namely a failure to take account of what makes the Christian *God* distinctive — the Trinity — and with it the truth that God is love in his very heart. Indeed, in the entire book the Trinity is conspicuous by its virtual absence. As Gunton and Fiddes urge, the Trinity is not something we can 'add on' after we have sorted out the basics of atonement; it belongs to the heart of the matter. The atonement is trinitarian through and through, and this is so because God is a tri-unity of Father, Son and Spirit, and his fundamental purpose is to make it possible for us to share in his relationships of love.

This failure to recognise the centrality of the Trinity, leads, I believe, to a number of deficiencies in Swinburne's account of atonement. To take just one example, he dislikes the notion of Christ suffering a 'penalty' because it goes with legalistic and merely 'mechanical' views of the atonement, whereas reconciliation is 'intimate' and 'personal'. (pp 151f.) But if we say that atonement is aimed at enabling us to share in the life and love of the triune God, we can understand 'penalty' in a profoundly intimate and personal sense: on the cross, the Son of God, as man, suffers alienation from the Father, the ultimate consequence of our rebellion against God, in order that nothing need stand between us and the Father. This, of course, requires a recognition that God himself has shared in the rupture between us and God which our sin provokes; the Son of God as man has plunged into our 'Godforsakenness' and uttered the cry: 'My God, My God....' It is just this aspect of the cross — so prominent in Mark's Gospel — which Swinburne never treats at length.

### Evangelical Discussion

The definition of 'evangelical' is becoming more complex by the day, but standing unambiguously in the mainstream evangelical tradition is John Stott's magisterial *The Cross of Christ*, summarising a lifetime of writing and preaching on the subject. Characteristically lucid, graceful (and full of grace), Stott provides what has already become a classic of great value, not least to preachers and pastors. He locates the centre of atonement in substitution — more specifically, the 'self-substitution' of God in which God in Christ bears the penalty for our sin. (Stott is very careful to distance himself from the cruder accounts of penal substitution.) Biblical and subsequent models of atonement are surveyed with consummate clarity, and, as one might expect, pastoral implications are drawn out powerfully. Much more firmly in the Calvinist tradition (especially that of Jonathan Edwards and John Owen) is Robert Letham's *The Work of Christ*, a recent addition to the IVP 'Contours of Christian Theology' series. Moulding his discussion around the threefold

office of Christ as prophet, priest and king, the book is marked by a close attention to Scripture and extensive allusions to atonement theology over the centuries. Those committed to a rigorous doctrine of penal substitution, limited atonement (Christ died for the elect only) and the belief that God's justice is primary and his mercy secondary, will be grateful for a lucid presentation of a system shaped around these tenets. But there could perhaps have been more sensitivity to the point of criticisms mounted against such a scheme.

A very different perspective is adopted by Alister McGrath in his book, *The Enigma of the Cross*. All the McGrath hallmarks are here — an accessible, lively style, anecdotes and contemporary application spread liberally, and terse summaries of theological movements. The intelligent layperson will gain much from this paperback. It is direct, moving and thought-provoking — McGrath at his best. The author follows firmly in the footsteps of Luther (the 'cross alone' is our theology), and more recently, Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel. In a world aching with the felt absence of God, McGrath invites us to consider God in Christ entering into and sharing in the pain and fractures of the world, taking on the curse of God's abandonment. It would be hard to find a greater contrast with Swinburne's approach; for McGrath (as for many in the Lutheran tradition) Golgotha and the empty tomb require a revolution in all thinking about God: "God" is whoever or whatever turned Good Friday into Easter Day.' (p 115)

In the evangelical constituency, the issue which has probably provoked more furore than any other in the evangelical world is that of substitution and representation. (See the illuminating conversation on this between David Edwards and John Stott.<sup>7</sup>) A large stream of evangelicalism has seen substitution as the centre around which atonement revolves — Jesus endures the judgement of God in our place. Others have felt bound to lay the stress on representation: the heart of the matter is not that Jesus bore something instead of us, but that he accomplished something on our behalf. It is in tackling just this kind of issue that a more vigorous dialogue with those who might not immediately identify themselves as evangelicals would be of great benefit. For a number of the books we are considering make it clear that a false polarity is at work. Certainly, against much nineteenth-century theology we must insist that substitution belongs to the inner logic of atonement, as Gunton and McIntyre make abundantly clear. The Son of God bears the full consequences of our disobedience and rebellion, and *only he* can do this, for if we were 'to undergo it without him, it would mean our destruction' (Gunton p 165; cf. McIntyre pp 97f.). And yet, left there, the doctrine of substitution bristles with danger (as the history of theology shows) especially when tied to retributive views of punishment (White pp 91ff.). To begin with, we must also speak of *God* coming in Christ to fulfil the purposes of his love. This avoids any suggestion that Jesus was merely a 'third party,' the whipping-boy who steps in to bear the punishment meted out by an irascible Father. (Hence Stott's phrase: the 'self-substitution' of God.) But,

7 *Essentials*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1988, ch. 3.

furthermore, we must speak of *representation*: Jesus doesn't simply act instead of us, he stands as one of us on our behalf so that we may be included with him and follow him. (Gunton pp 165ff., McIntyre pp 97f.) Substitution without representation will tend to turn Christ's work into a merely external operation; representation without substitution will tend to trivialise evil and deny the need for atonement. It is very telling that though Stott is intensely keen to stress substitution as the hub of atonement, he also asserts unequivocally that Jesus' work was both substitutionary *and* representative (Stott pp 276f.).

### Encouraging Trends and Fresh Avenues

Standing back from this literature, a number of encouraging trends are discernible and it is part of the purpose of the articles which follow to carry them forward and open up fresh avenues for future discussion.

Evident in nearly all the writers we have mentioned is a desire to take biblical exegesis with immense seriousness. Many of us know the kind of biblical studies which gets lost in minutiae of texts and refuses to speak about 'the bigger questions' of theology. But just as damaging is the kind of systematic theology designed to promote a pre-conceived orthodoxy but whose feet never seem to touch the ground of Scripture. If the books above are anything to go by, the damaging hiatus between biblical theologians and systematic theologians, so typical of the British scene over the last fifty years or so, might be narrowing. Dr Douglas Campbell's article below is a timely reminder that Pauline verses have been liberally used (and abused) to support very dubious atonement theologies. He demonstrates that systematic theologians and biblical scholars urgently need each other.

It is also encouraging to find a willingness to come to terms with something of the variety of images and metaphors used in Scripture — McIntyre is especially strong in this respect. Even so, a weakness of many surveys of models of the atonement is that though they may map the territory skilfully, we are left dissatisfied when they fail to 'take a line' and explore a particular model with any intensity. Further, if the survey is purely historical ('so-and-so said this, and so-and-so said that') we can easily be blinded to the contemporary potential of biblical images which are often ignored. Professor Ford invites us to look at the biblically prominent model of the 'face' and explore the extraordinary fruitfulness of conceiving the atonement through the icon of the dead face of Christ.

Another noticeable feature of the books we have cited is a desire not to limit atonement to the cross, but to see it as one movement encompassing incarnation, the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. As Oliver O'Donovan observes in his study of the Thirty Nine Articles, 'good theology should be able to treat of all these moments distinctly, while showing how they are one act of God and not several'.<sup>8</sup> Much Western

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *On the Thirty Nine Articles*, Paternoster, Exeter 1986, p 27.



Protestant theology has failed dismally to do this. The incarnation has often been construed as little more than a convenient 'entry point' for the Son of God's journey to the cross, and this in turn has often meant that the humanity of Christ becomes no more than a kind of neutral vehicle through which a transaction takes place on the cross. For most of the writers above, the cross is regarded as the apex of vast movement of God's direct engagement with our fallen humanity, stretching from Christ's birth to his ascension. Though the resurrection could well have received more attention by some (especially McIntyre), the general trend is towards integrating the different facets of the story of Christ without for a minute minimising the significance of the cross. Professor Ford's article exhibits an intriguing way of doing this: the 'face' of Christ is, of course, an image which can be related to virtually every aspect of the earthly and risen life of Christ.

It is also refreshing to find a readiness to consider the practical, ethical and pastoral dimensions of atonement, without treating these as secondary or not properly theological. Fiddes' chapters on atonement as it relates to forgiveness, politics and suffering are extremely penetrating; his treatment of forgiveness is one of the most moving and eloquent meditations on this theme you are likely to find. Similarly McGrath's obvious concern with the consequences of the cross for all aspects of the Christian life is evident throughout his book. In the next issue of *Anvil*, we shall include an article by Dr Montague Barker on Atonement and Counselling, written after a lifetime of rigorous engagement at the interface of Christian and medical practice (regrettably, the article was not available for inclusion in this issue). An aspect of contemporary practice receiving little sustained attention in the books we have surveyed, however, is corporate worship. Protestantism has often been so frightened of suggesting that the death of Christ is repeated in worship that atonement and worship are rent asunder. One effect is a distancing of the work of Christ from our experience today; another is a theology of worship which leaves the dynamic of God's radical grace behind so that worship becomes little more than a self-generated human performance to please God. Dr Trevor Hart below offers a badly needed re-integration of worship and atonement centred on the humanity of Christ, in whom our atonement has been worked out and through whom we can now 'hallow the Father's name'.

Perhaps most significant — and this applies particularly to Gunton, Fiddes, White and McGrath — we notice a concern to bring the trinitarian dynamic of atonement to the fore. This is linked to a desire to see atonement as primarily a matter of *relationships*. Atonement flows out of the relationships within God and is geared towards our partaking in those relationships. Gunton and Fiddes are adamant that the great metaphors of sacrifice, justice and victory must all be understood against the background of God's passionate desire to enter into partnership with us. Moreover, serious attention to the Trinity means that the Church is seen to be integral to atonement theology (a point often missed by evangelicals): God's purpose in atonement is to create a community bound together with the same love which binds Father and Son

(John 17:22). To be made at-one with the Father through the Son in the Spirit is to be made part of a community which will reflect and share in the perfect communion of the Godhead. It is surely time to abandon once and for all the idea that the Church is merely an instrumental institution designed to save individuals, rather than the community in which atonement is lived out concretely in the world and which is thus utterly central to God's purposes (Gunton, ch. 7). Moreover, a trinitarian perspective brings to the fore the underlying motivation of the atonement: God's eternal self-giving love. God's love, after all, is the source of atonement, not its consequence, and evangelicals have not always given due weight to this truth. It is precisely the trinitarian character of atonement which Dr Elaine Storkey highlights in her measured and powerful response to the challenges posed by feminist theologians. A similar stress emerges in Dr Campbell's essay on Paul and even more clearly in Dr Hart's piece on worship.

Whatever the shape of future writing in this field the signs on the horizon are that a new kind of conversation is already under way, one less concerned with defending party lines than penetrating to the key issues at stake, less anxious about repeating theories than understanding them, exploring their hidden riches and re-fashioning them for today. Such a conversation will do much to help us not only re-conceive and communicate the astounding goodness of God in Christ, but also to live as those for whom nothing matters more than that 'while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8).

**The Revd Dr Jeremy Begbie** is Vice-Principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and guest editor of this issue. He is also a member of the Editorial Board of *Anvil*.