

The Death of Jesus: Historically Contingent or Divinely Ordained?

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A Paper Presented to the Annual Meeting
of the Wesleyan Theological Society, 2000

Introduction

There has been a recent interest among biblical and systematic theologians to reconsider the theological significance of the death of Jesus, to say nothing of the historians' quest to determine the political and religious currents of first-century Palestine that brought about the crucifixion of Jesus. Christian thought throughout its history has always viewed the death of Jesus in one way or another as atonement for sin and not merely the result of human decisions. If so, is there any logical way we can avoid the implication that God manipulated human history to cause the death of Jesus?

While the New Testament writers explicitly proclaim that the death of Jesus was in accord with God's redemptive purposes, the passion narratives of the four Gospels and the sermons in Acts leave no doubt that the death of Jesus was brought about by human beings, whether Jewish or Roman authorities, and therefore historically contingent. I am defining historical contingency as any event for which human beings, rather than God, are responsible. Christian theology over the centuries has grappled with the dilemma of reconciling the historical contingency of Jesus' death with its divinely ordained purpose. The atonement theories that have emerged are various attempts to come to terms with this theological dilemma. That is, in view of the fact that it was human beings who killed Jesus, how can the death of Jesus be, if at all, a divinely foreordained event? Are we to conclude that it was God who orchestrated and manipulated human decisions in order to bring about Jesus' death?

As a student of the New Testament and one who is committed to Wesleyan theology, I wish to look at this issue from the perspective of New Testament theology and critique some of the atonement theories that have emerged in the history of Christian thought. I will first formulate the theological dilemma by laying out before us key statements from the synoptic gospels relevant to the issue of Jesus' death. Then I will take a look at the historical Jesus to see what can be said, if anything, about his understanding of the probability of his own violent death. Then I will examine various New Testament writers' interpretations of the death of Jesus. I will finally raise the question as to which of the theological interpretations of Jesus' death in the history of Christian thought is most viable from the perspective of the historical Jesus and the biblical witness, and whether such an interpretation would be consistent with the core of Wesleyan thought.

The Theological Dilemma

The New Testament itself understands the death of Jesus to be in accordance with the redemptive purposes of God. One of the most significant ways that the New Testament speaks of the death of Jesus is that it was for us, for our sake, in our behalf. According to Mark 10:45, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom (*lutron*, λυτρον) for many (*anti*, αντι)." Using an early Christian tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Paul unequivocally declares, "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for (*hyper*, υπερ) our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." In Galatians 2:20 Paul says, "The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for (*hyper*, υπερ) me." Perhaps Paul's most puzzling statement is in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake (*hyper*, υπερ) he (God) made him (Christ) to be sin who knew no sin." In 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 we find a reference to Jesus as *hilasmos* (ιλασμος), atoning sacrifice, and in Romans 3:25 Paul says, "whom (*i.e.*, Christ) God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement" (*hilastarion*, ιλαστηριον). There has been much debate about the translation and exact meaning of the nouns *lutron* (λυτρον), *hilastarion* (ιλαστηριον), and *hilasmos* (ιλασμος) and the prepositions *anti*

(ἀντι) and *huper* (ὑπερ). Although a detailed exegesis of those passages is not within the purview of this paper, some reference will be made to that discussion in this essay whenever it is relevant.

At the same time, however, the New Testament writers clearly understood not only that the death of Jesus was in keeping with God's redemptive purposes but also that it was caused by human beings, who therefore stand guilty before God. All four gospels see human factors at work in the death of Jesus. Judas is held responsible for betraying him (Luke 22:3). "For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" (Luke 22:22). At a later point in this essay I will comment on the first half of this verse, but for now, it is clear that the second half of the verse holds Judas culpable for his betrayal of Jesus. It is true, of course, that in some sense all human beings are culpable for the death of Jesus. However, that is not a historical statement but a theological one, frequently occurring in Christian hymnody and spirituality. As the gospels see it, Judas had a part in the historical events that resulted in the death of Jesus.

The Jewish leaders are also blamed for the death of Jesus. According to Mark, the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him (14:1; cf. Matt 26:3-5). Matthew says that when Jesus was before Pilate, the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed (27:20). Regardless of the actual facts of the case, there is no doubt that the gospel writers hold the Jewish leaders responsible.

On the other hand, the gospel writers do not exempt Pilate himself from blame either. Although Pilate washed his hands before the crowd and announced that he was innocent of Jesus' blood (Matt 27:24), Matthew does not regard that little ritual as an absolution of Pilate's guilt. A few verses earlier Matthew reported that Pilate's wife sent word to her husband about her dream, which is taken to be a vision from God as a warning to Pilate (27:19). But Pilate heeds the voice of the crowd rather than the voice of his wife or his own conscience. Even after he had decided that Jesus was innocent, he gave in to the public demand and handed Jesus over to the will of the crowd. The Gospel of John seems to attribute Pilate's decision to his cowardice, confusion, expediency, sarcasm, or a combination of all the above. When the chief priests say, "We have no king but the emperor," Pilate decides to have Jesus crucified (John 19:16). Whatever Pilate's actual motives may have been, John in this dramatic portrayal has skillfully created a narrative in which Jesus emerges as the true judge and all other parties, including Pilate, stand condemned.

Many critics have argued that for polemic reasons the gospels tend to shift the blame for the death of Jesus from Roman authorities to Jewish leaders. This anti-Jewish stance eventually turned into anti-Semitism in the later history of Christendom, ultimately resulting in the Holocaust. Others point out that the gospels find both Jewish and Roman authorities equally blameworthy. Although I concur with the second view, my purpose here is not to resolve the historical question as to which human person or group was ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus, but merely to point out what appears to be a theological dilemma, namely, that the evangelists can on one hand point an accusing finger at human actors in the drama of Jesus' crucifixion, while on the other hand holding on to the conviction that God's purpose was somehow being accomplished. Perhaps for someone like Augustine or John Calvin the dilemma would be minimal: God's sovereign will is accomplished with or without human cooperation. But what would be a Wesleyan response?

In Peter's Pentecost sermon the death of Jesus is alluded to in these words: "this man, handed over to you according to the definite (*horismena*, ὁρισμένη) plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law" (Acts 2:23). Likewise the prayer of early Christians in Acts 4:27-28 states that "both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan predestined to take place." There is no question here that the blame is placed not on any single people or nation, but both "Gentiles and the peoples of Israel," that is, all the human actors in the passion narrative, whether Jew or Gentile, are equally culpable for the death of Jesus. But this statement in Acts raises the thorny problem of the death of Jesus seemingly being divinely predestined, which is the issue that I am concerned with in this paper.

Luke-Acts as a whole seems to present the death of Jesus consistently in this way. The Lukan Jesus speaks of his death in the same language as that of Peter in the Pentecost sermon alluded to above: "For the Son of Man is going as has been determined (*horismonon*, ὁρισμένον)" (Luke 22:22). In his first passion prediction, Jesus speaks of the

necessity (*dei*, δεῖ) of his suffering and death. In the second prediction, Luke makes the words of Jesus more emphatic: “Let these words sink into your ears” (9:44). In the third prediction, Luke adds these words to his Markan source: “everything written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished” (Luke 18:31). After his death and resurrection, when Jesus appears to the two disciples on the Emmaus road, who are overwhelmed by the traumatic events of the last few days, Jesus reprimands them for their foolishness, slowness of heart and unbelief and says, “Was it not necessary (*edei*, εδει) that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26). Later, when Jesus appears to the eleven disciples, he says to them, “[E]verything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. . . . Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise. . . .” (24:44, 46).

It is clear from these statements that *dei* (δεῖ) is highly significant in Luke-Acts. In his article on *dei* (δεῖ), Grundmann points out that of the 102 occurrences of *dei*, (δεῖ), or *deon esti* (δεον εστι), 41 are found in Luke-Acts. It is worth noting Grundmann’s assessment of the importance of this term in Lukan theology:

Jesus sees His whole life and activity and passion under this will of God comprehended in a δεῖ [*dei*]. Over Him there stands a δεῖ [*dei*] which is already present in His childhood. This is the δεῖ [*dei*] of divine lordship (Lk. 2:49). It determines His activity. . . . It leads Him to suffering and death, but also to glory. . . . It has its basis in the will of God concerning Him which is laid down in Scripture and which He unconditionally follows. . . .

The major voices in the New Testament seem to concur with this perspective. According to 1 Peter, the Old Testament prophets testified in advance to the sufferings of Christ and his subsequent glory (1:10-11; cf. 1:18-20). Revelation 13:8 makes reference to “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world,” although an alternate translation is more likely, such as the NRSV rendering, “everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world. . . .” “Paul of course has much to say about the death of Christ. Perhaps his most puzzling statement is in 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For our sake he (God) made him (Christ) to be sin who knew no sin.”

Jesus of History

Before we reflect further on the New Testament understanding of the death of Jesus, it may be well to consider how Jesus himself viewed the possibility or even the probability of his own violent death. This of course raises the issue whether it is legitimate or possible to do any kind of quest of the historical Jesus. In the earlier decades of this century, Schweitzer and Bultmann argued that quest of the historical Jesus was impossible. But since then studies of the historical Jesus have exploded, and the interest shows no sign of abating, particularly with the work of the Jesus Seminar launched in the eighties. At this point in the debate, however, there is no consensus as to how much or how little of the gospel tradition can be traced back to Jesus himself. While an overwhelming majority of critics recognize redactional tendencies in the gospel accounts, there is considerable disagreement as to the extent of those redactional tendencies and, conversely, the extent of material that can be attributed to Jesus with certainty. It would be fair to say that all critics, including the most skeptical, agree that in spite of the theological formulations of the evangelists, it is possible to isolate a basic core of sayings and actions that can be attributed to Jesus with certainty.

However, a more basic hermeneutical principle must be voiced here. Not only am I claiming that it is possible to do a quest of the historical Jesus, but also that a historically reconstructed portrait of Jesus is necessary for theology in general, and for our understanding of the death of Jesus in particular. This is not intended as a disavowal of the canonical authority of the gospels in their present form. Nor is it a matter of having to choose between the historical Jesus and the theology of the gospels. It is a matter of recognizing that the four evangelists present four different portraits of Jesus, each of them composed in a particular setting and for a particular theological purpose, but all of them bearing witness in different ways to Jesus. This diversity of witness in a wide variety of contexts makes a quest of the historical Jesus necessary for theology. As Leander Keck has reminded us, “the good news does not concern a Jesus who can be collapsed into the various forms of gospel-preaching as they develop from era to era but concerns a Jesus who stands over against them all.”

With the above cautions and hermeneutical assumptions in mind, I wish to ask whether Jesus himself understood his mission to include a violent death as atonement for the sins of humankind. Did he go to Jerusalem expressly for such

a purpose? If not, did he at least anticipate the possibility of a violent death and sought to interpret it in atonement categories? Since Christian theology has understood the death of Jesus as atonement for sin, the assumption has been in some circles that that understanding must have derived from Jesus. He predicted on numerous occasions that the Son of Man would be betrayed and handed over into the hands of sinners, that he would suffer and be mocked, and that he would be flogged and killed, and after three days he would rise again. His death has been predetermined by a divine decree, and Jesus accepted it and went to Jerusalem to fulfill God's intentions, the argument goes. Calvin put it this way:

Now we must speak briefly concerning the purpose and use of Christ's priestly office: as a pure and stainless Mediator he is by his holiness to reconcile us to God. But God's righteous curse bars our access to him, and God in his capacity as judge is angry toward us. Hence, an expiation must intervene in order that Christ as priest may obtain God's favor for us and appease his wrath... The priestly office belongs to Christ alone because by the sacrifice of his death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins [Heb. 9:22].

In his recent book on the atonement, Richard S. Taylor has argued that "Calvary was not an option. The cruel death of God's Son on a cross, if some other way to save the human race would have worked equally well, is not only inconceivable, but would be indefensible." Since "God [is] the ultimate ground" of the atonement's necessity, "Christ permitted himself to be slain."

The problem with the above scenario is that there are other incidents in the synoptic gospels that would be simply inexplicable. If Jesus knew with utmost certainty that his primary mission in Jerusalem was to die for the sins of the world, what do we make of his prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42)? Mark tells us that Jesus began to be distressed and agitated and he said to his disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death." The meaning of the verbs used by Mark to describe Jesus' mood is that he was troubled, disturbed, stirred up, disquieted, perplexed, unsettled. Jesus prays that the cup of suffering and death be removed from him.

Various attempts have been made to make sense of this episode. One option might be that the whole Gethsemane account was invented by Mark or an earlier tradition that Mark used, as the Jesus Seminar has concluded. Jesus himself never experienced anything like the Gethsemane story. Mark, or the tradition before him, invented the story to historicize Old Testament prophecies. However, if we apply the test of multiple attestation to this episode, it would be difficult to dismiss it altogether as pure invention. The writer of Hebrews, using words that are intriguingly reminiscent of the Gethsemane episode, says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (5:7-8). Even the Gospel of John, which otherwise portrays Jesus as one who is in command of his own life and destiny in accord with divine purpose, includes a statement about his consternation at the thought of his own death, reminiscent of the synoptic account of Gethsemane. Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (John 12:27).

If the Gethsemane story is at least in its core historical, whether as a single event or a protracted demeanor on the part of Jesus throughout his life, what exactly does it mean for him to pray that the hour may pass from him or that the Father may remove this cup from him (Mark 14:35-36)? Some have proposed that Jesus was not agonizing over suffering and death as such but over the prospect of God's wrath on sin that he would have to endure. Brown argues that since this "cup" language was used earlier in Mark in the dialogue between Jesus and James and John, where the meaning could not be anything but suffering and death, so also here the cup means not God's wrath but suffering and death.

D. M. Baillie, while giving serious thought to the atoning death of Christ, nevertheless says the following about Jesus himself:

It is true, I believe, that Jesus accepted the Cross as from the will and purpose of God. But it was by human faith that He did it, not by the superhuman knowledge which can 'declare the end from the beginning'... [I]t would be equally artificial to think of Him as forming the *intention*, at any point in His career, of being condemned to death... The Gospels...do not conceal the fact that to Jesus

Himself, when He looked forward and saw that it was likely, and even when He embraced it by faith, it appeared as an unspeakable tragedy, and that up to the last night He hoped and prayed that it might not come.

If it were the case that Jesus was utterly certain that his death was his primary mission and destiny in the world, why such agony, agitation, supplications, loud cries, and tears? Why pray that God remove this cup from him?

We should seriously consider the likelihood that Jesus understood his mission in a more inclusive way than in terms of atoning death. Indeed, Jesus understood himself, his mission and his message as part of the kingdom of God. Mark 1:14-15 summarizes the message of Jesus at the beginning of the Galilean ministry in these words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

For Jesus, the kingdom of God may or may not include death. His commitment was to the kingdom of God, the will and purposes of God. It may mean death, but then it may not. It is not the death itself that is primary. He was not seeking death; he certainly was not suicidal. He was seeking the reign and rule of God in all things. He can pray that the cup of death be removed; *that* is negotiable. The kingdom of God is not negotiable. He can recoil from the thought of violent death; he cannot recoil from the kingdom of God and the will of God. His violent death was the result of human decisions; it was not metaphysically necessary to bring about the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus often speaks of the coming of the kingdom of God without a word about a violent death as atoning sacrifice. He says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 11:20). “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20). The kingdom of God is offered to all because God’s love includes everyone. God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matt 5:45).

Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God in parables, drawn from everyday occurrences and realities familiar to his audience, with no violent death presupposed as a condition for its advent, except possibly in two parables. “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened” (Matt 13:33). “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matt 13:44-45). The examples can be multiplied, but these should suffice to make the point that for Jesus the kingdom of God rather than an atoning death was central. A violent death, though likely, is not absolutely a prerequisite for the coming of the kingdom.

To digress a bit, it is worth noting John P. Meier’s comment on Jesus’ kingdom saying at the Last Supper, “Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom God” (Mark 14:25). Meier says:

The prophecy in Mark 14:25 is thus a final cry of hope from Jesus, expressing his trust in the God who will make his kingdom come, *despite Jesus’ death* [emphasis added]. To the end, what is central in Jesus’ faith and thought is not Jesus himself but the final triumph of God as he comes to rule his rebellious creation and people—in short, what is central is the kingdom of God.

The two parables that involve a violent death are that of the wicked tenants in Matthew 21:33-45 and the wedding banquet in Matthew 22: 1-14. In the latter, some of the servants who are sent to invite the guests are killed, an obvious allusion by Matthew to the fate of the prophets whom God sent to Israel. Their violent treatment at the hands of the guests, however, was surely not the intended purpose of their being sent. More to the point of this paper is the parable of the wicked tenants, which could best illustrate how Jesus understood his mission and its possible consequences. This parable, which is found not only in Matthew but also in the other two synoptics (Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19), is placed after the “cleansing of the temple” and the questioning of Jesus by the chief priests, scribes and elders as to what gave him the authority to cause such a disturbance. Jesus refuses to answer their question directly, but instead he responds with a question about John the Baptist. It is to this group in this context that Jesus tells this parable. The story is about a vineyard owner who leases his vineyard to tenants and goes to

another country. When the harvest season arrives, he sends a servant after another to collect his share of the produce. But the tenants beat them up and send them away empty-handed. Finally he sends his own son thinking that they would respect him. Instead they kill him and throw him out of the vineyard. All three gospels conclude the parable with the statement that when the religious leaders heard this they wanted to arrest him but were afraid of the people.

The point that I wish to make is that when the vineyard owner sent those servants and finally his son, he certainly did not expect, let alone intend, to have them abused or killed. He expected the tenants to recognize the servants and respect his son. The mission of the son was to collect the produce. By the same token, the mission of Jesus in Jerusalem was to proclaim the message of the kingdom of God, pronounce judgment on the temple and its religious and political establishment, and call this very center of Judaism to repentance. *That* would be the fruit that God was expecting from the vineyard keepers in Jerusalem. But the religious hierarchy was in no mood to lend an ear to a fanatical prophet from Galilee who was a threat to the status quo. But the reality of the situation in Jerusalem was such that he expected his fate to be not much different from that of the son in the parable. In this vein, the mood of Jesus is graphically made clear from his lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39).

The one event during Passion Week that is widely viewed by critics as authentic is the disturbance that Jesus caused at the temple. It is also agreed that this was not a cleansing but “an enacted parable or prophetic sign of God’s judgment on it and, therefore, of its impending destruction. . . . The symbolic destruction of the temple was prelude to the coming justice of a different kind of reign, the reign of God.” And why such doom on the temple? Crossan provides a plausible explanation:

I think it quite possible that Jesus went to Jerusalem only once and that the spiritual and economic egalitarianism he preached in Galilee exploded in indignation at the Temple as the seat and symbol of all that was nonegalitarian, patronal, and even oppressive on both the religious and the political level.

Similarly, Herzog assesses the historical situation of Jesus in Jerusalem as follows:

Jesus’ rejection of the temple may well have derived from his analysis of the economic situation created by it. As the temple amassed wealth, the people of the land were getting poorer and poorer. In a society governed by the notion of limited good, Jesus drew the logical conclusion that the temple was getting rich at the expense of the peasants, villagers, and urban artisans.

Crossan rightly concludes that it was the incident at the temple that led to the arrest and execution of Jesus:

My best historical reconstruction concludes that what led immediately to Jesus’ arrest and execution in Jerusalem at Passover was that act of symbolic destruction, in deed and word, against the Temple. That sacred edifice represented in one central place all that his vision and program had fought against among the peasantry of Lower Galilee. In Jerusalem, quite possibly for the first and only time, he acted according to that program.

One must conclude from this discussion, that Jesus went to Jerusalem with his eyes wide open, he was not taken by surprise. At the midpoint of the Gospel of Mark, the reader begins to hear Jesus repeatedly foretelling his own suffering and death (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Even if these announcements reflect the later theological perspective and experience of the post-Easter church, as critical scholarship has tended to view them, there is no need to dismiss them entirely as *vaticinium ex eventu*. Jesus no doubt had a sense of what the national, political and religious climate of Jerusalem was like. “One would have to declare Jesus something of a simpleton if it were maintained that he went up from Galilee to Jerusalem in all innocence, without any idea of the deadly opposition he was to encounter there.” Even while in Galilee he faced several threats on his life. The synagogue crowd in Nazareth wanted to hurl him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). Mark tells us that the Pharisees conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him (3:6). At one point during his ministry in Galilee some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you” (Luke 13:31). Jesus knew that Herod Antipas had earlier executed John the Baptist (Luke 9:7-9). Therefore it is highly probable that Jesus anticipated the same fate that had befallen John.

If that is the case, there is no reason to doubt that Jesus reflected on the meaning and the direction of his mission in light of the possibility of his own death. His original message as summarized in Mark 1:15 was: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” But it was not long before the storm of controversy grew. Jesus came to the realization that in order for him to remain faithful to his mission of proclaiming and living out the kingdom of God, he may very well face a violent death. And it may be that it was precisely through his own violent death that the kingdom of God would come.

Now Jesus had the difficult task of teaching his disciples the meaning of all of this. The Caesarea Philippi episode is highly significant. Peter declares to Jesus, “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8:29). Immediately after that Jesus makes the first of his three passion predictions, the only one that uses the verb “must”: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). There ensues a vigorous interchange between Peter and Jesus. Words of rebuke are exchanged. Then Jesus teaches the crowd and his disciples that “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

The second passion prediction is similar to the first. The third prediction, ironically, is immediately before the request of James and John to Jesus that they sit on his right and left in his glory. It is little wonder that Jesus says, “You do not know what you are asking.” When the other ten disciples hear that these two brothers are conspiring to get ahead, they are indignant. Jesus calls them and says to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

What Jesus demanded of others, he himself practiced. His understanding of the kingdom of God was that one must deny oneself, take up the cross and follow him. The radical demands he made on his disciples were to be the result of one’s response to the kingdom of God that he himself accepted for his own life and mission. Again, it is not that God demands the death of Jesus as a penalty for sin. It is rather that Jesus comes to the realization that his faithfulness to the kingdom of God will likely mean his own death. Rather than mandated by God, the death of Jesus is the result of the conflict that the kingdom of God creates in the world. Jesus will drink the bitter cup if that is the only way he can remain faithful to the kingdom of God. In this way, then, Jesus understands his own death to be not only for himself but also for others. It is “a ransom for many because the power of the kingdom of God is unleashed in the world and will transform history. In this respect Jesus may well have identified himself with the suffering servant of Isaiah and seen his mission as that of dying for others. His experience with the realities of Palestinian politics brought him to the realization that the kingdom of God cannot come without cost.

In all three passion predictions in Mark, there is not a single statement to the effect that the death of Jesus was to be an atonement for sin as such. Even the ransom statement in 10:45 stops short of making the death a ransom for sin. Similarly, in the Lord’s Supper, the words of the institution, “Take, this is my body,” and “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:22-24), do not quite state that the death of Jesus was for sin. In fact, since the Last Supper was intended by Jesus as a Passover meal, that may open up for us another way of looking at the self-understanding of Jesus. The Passover celebration was not particularly understood as atonement but as commemoration of the Exodus from Egyptian slavery. Thus the death of Jesus, at least in Mark, does not allow us to make a case for atonement for sin. If anything, it points in the direction of an eschatological liberation or emancipation, much like Jesus’ initial announcement in his Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:16-30), with echoes of Jubilee themes from Isaiah 61:1-2. To take it a step further, several scholars have seen a connection between the temple incident and the Supper. According to Green, Jesus viewed himself as “the focal point of God’s great act of deliverance; in his death the temple and all that it signified regarding the ordering of Israel’s life were invalidated, and his own life and death were to be the basis of Israel’s life before God.”

To conclude, Jesus may very well have viewed his own violent death as a probability, but not because it was divinely foreordained as atonement for sin but because human beings, whether Israel or Gentiles, seemed poised

religiously and politically to respond violently to the message and program that he represented. Thus Jesus accepted that probability and sought to interpret it as part of the coming of the kingdom of God.

But there is still something very puzzling here—the cry of Jesus on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). One way to interpret it would be to deny the authenticity of the cry and relegate it to Markan redaction. Only Mark and Matthew have this saying. Luke apparently perceived the difficulty and deleted it, substituting a much less troublesome saying, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (23:46). Likewise, John has other words from the cross, but not this one. But why would Mark, or his tradition, create such a difficult saying? The answer is that this is part of Mark’s method of historicizing various statements from Psalm 22 and other Old Testament texts.

Another interpretation is that God did indeed turn his back on his Son as the penalty for all the sins of the world. This so-called “cry of dereliction,” along with the prayer in Gethsemane, was Jesus’ desperate response to the ultimate punishment of separation from God. But if this is Mark’s meaning, it is at best less than explicit. Furthermore, as Vincent Taylor put it, “it is inconsistent with the love of God and the oneness of purpose with the Father manifest in the atoning ministry of Jesus.” “Nothing in the Gospel suggests God’s wrath against Jesus as the explanation.”

A third possibility is to acknowledge that this word of Jesus is a quote from the opening line of Psalm 22, which is a lament psalm. Some interpreters have gone so far as to say that when Jesus said the opening line of Psalm 22, he really meant the whole psalm, which turns into praise about half way through. That may be taking it too far. Jesus does not die triumphantly as a heroic martyr. He dies in bitter anguish and turmoil. Jürgen Moltmann says:

The notion that the dying Jesus prayed the whole of Psalm 22 on the cross is surely implausible and far-fetched. For one thing the psalm ends with a glorious prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from death; and there was no deliverance on the cross. For another, people who were crucified were very soon incapable of speech... And it is only here, on the cross, that Christ no longer calls God familiarly ‘Father’, but addresses him quite formally as ‘God’, as if he felt compelled to doubt whether he *was* the Son of God the Father.

Luke’s omission of the cry is an indication that he did not understand it as a positive word. Furthermore, the context in Matthew and Mark precludes the positive interpretation in that the bystanders hear not a triumphant affirmation but a desperate cry for help.

We are left, then, with the option that the so-called cry of dereliction was an authentic and desperate cry of Jesus to God at the darkest moment of his life. Yet it cannot be taken to mean that God was in fact absent, or that Jesus despaired of God. After all, Jesus “continues to claim God as ‘my God’ and will not let him go...” If this were a despairing cry, it would be a contradiction of the whole tenor of Jesus’ message about the presence of the kingdom of God even in the most unlikely circumstances. What is remarkable is that even in the hour of his greatest darkness Jesus still turned to God. It was a cry of heartache, pain, and tears. But it was still a cry to God.

My conclusion from this brief survey is that Jesus anticipated his own violent death and sought to interpret it as part of his mission of proclaiming and living out the coming of the kingdom of God. It is also reasonable to conclude that at some point he came to the realization that if he proclaimed his message in Jerusalem, he would most likely suffer a violent death. This death is not in and of itself mandated and foreordained by God as atonement for sin arising out of the justice and wrath of God. Rather, it would be the result of sinful humanity’s idolatry of substituting social, political and religious institutions for the kingdom of God. In his role as servant, he would give his life as a ransom for many in order to liberate humanity from such idolatry and call the “powers that be” to accept the new reality of the kingdom of God.

Jesus did not die as a disillusioned messiah. He died with the conviction that not even his own death was going to put a stop to the kingdom of God, that the kingdom of God is even greater than his own life. In fact, he came to the place where he believed that if the kingdom of God meant his own death, he would accept the bitter cup and drink it. Even though the following saying of Jesus is colored by Johannine theology, it contains an authentic core that goes back to Jesus because it is also attested in the synoptic gospels. Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the

earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24-24; cf. Mark 8:34-36). Jesus died with the conviction that his own death was not the end of God’s story. The eternal God was still there even if surrounded with complete darkness.

New Testament Interpretation

No New Testament writer takes the position that the death of Jesus was merely due to human selfishness on the part of a treacherous disciple, obstinate Jews, or Roman politicians. The death of Jesus fulfilled a divine purpose in some way. Luke presents this interpretation in a variety of contexts. Earlier we noted the word of Jesus concerning Judas: “For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22).

When the resurrected Jesus appears to the two on the Emmaus road, he interprets to them the scriptures and chides them with these words: “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26). Later, when Jesus appears to his disciples, he says to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47).

This necessity of Christ’s suffering and death is also reflected in Luke’s account in Acts. In his Pentecost sermon Peter says to the Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem, “This man [that is, Jesus], handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:23-24).

After Peter and John are released from prison, the community of believers gathers to pray and ask for boldness to speak the word. In this prayer they recite the things that happened to Jesus their Lord: “For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27-28).

So here we have it: necessity of Christ’s suffering according to God’s definite plan, foreknowledge and predestination. According to these passages from Luke-Acts, it appears that the death of Jesus was not merely the result of human foul play but in some way in accordance with divine purpose and foreknowledge. In a word, Christ’s death was predetermined by God. But how, and why?

First, the statement that “the Son of Man is going as it has been determined” (Luke 22:22) does not excuse the human role of the betrayer, even though it is God who has determined the going of the Son of Man. “Human responsibility and divine sovereignty are not to be played off against each other.” Danker sees in this statement of Jesus a word of warning and an opportunity extended to Judas to change his mind. Nevertheless, divine predetermination is clearly stated here.

But secondly, scholarship has long noted that Luke views the death of Jesus as part of the redemptive work of God in history. God has predetermined to act redemptively in the world. In this respect, the passage in Acts 4:27-28 does not quite assert that Jesus’ death itself was predestined by God. It states that Herod and Pilate and the rest of the people gathered against Jesus to do whatever “your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” What God predestined is not primarily or exclusively that Jesus die. The purpose of God is to act redemptively in the world. God is so committed to that purpose that even the worst case scenario, namely, the death of Jesus, could not dissuade God from his redemptive purpose. When human beings had done their worst, God still found a way to be gracious and redemptive, even to the point of turning this dastardly deed of humanity into an act of redemption. The death of Jesus becomes redemptive because God chooses to make it so. Human beings can kill Jesus, but only God can make his death into an act of salvation. It is not so much that God predestined the death of Jesus as that God overturned the tragedy of Jesus’ death by raising him from the dead and making him “both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36).

Here, again, just as in Mark, so also in Luke-Acts, one does not find explicit statements that the death of Jesus was *for sins*. In the eucharistic words, the body and blood are given and poured out “for you” (Luke 22:19-20). This of course does not mean that the death of Jesus in Luke is non-salvific. But its significance lies elsewhere. The indication in Luke is even more emphatic than in Mark that the Last Supper was a Passover celebration (22:15), signifying that Christ’s vicarious suffering and death, rather than being an atonement for sin, is intended for humanity’s liberation from slavery and bondage. The significance of Jesus’ suffering and resurrection is that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).

In this respect, note the way 1 Peter states the issue of the predestination of Christ and his death in these two passages:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory (1:10-11).

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake (1: 18-20).

It should be noted first that the word “destined” in verse 11 is not in the Greek text. The Greek text simply says “testified in advance to the sufferings *for* Christ” (emphasis added). Michaels translates it “the sufferings intended for Christ,” which is not that different from “destined.” Secondly, it is the Spirit of Christ in the prophets that testified in advance to Christ’s sufferings. That the Old Testament bears witness to Christ and his sufferings becomes understandable only after the Christ event itself. PHEME Perkins raises the issue of the Christian appropriation of the Old Testament and urges that Christians today

. . . need to be more self-conscious than 1 Peter about the difference between reading the prophets as witnesses to their own time . . . and reading them as witnesses to Christ. We cannot suppose, as 1 Peter argues, that God had only the Christian community of faith in mind throughout the Old Testament.

Perkins suggests that other Jewish groups such as the Essenes also found connections between the prophets and their community. Is the Christian connection to the prophets more valid than the Essene? I am simply making the point that prophecy cannot be understood naively as prediction of the future and on that basis conclude that the future references in the prophets are predetermined.

It was the early Christians who after their experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus that looked back to the prophets and searched the Old Testament scriptures to make sense of their own cognitive dissonance relative to the awful enigma of a suffering and dying Messiah. In the Old Testament scriptures they found ample evidence that the vicarious suffering of the innocent for the guilty is very much the way things have been from Abel in Genesis to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53.

Third, the statement in 1 Peter 1:20 clearly states that it is Christ himself who was “destined before the foundation of the world” and not necessarily his death, which is mentioned in the previous verse. The noun cases in the Greek text clearly support this translation in the NRSV. One cannot build a firm case for the idea that the death of Jesus itself was intended by God before the foundation of the world and predicted by the prophets. It is Christ himself who is in the purposes of God from eternity to eternity.

More than any other New Testament writing, Hebrews has much to say about Christ’s role as a superior high priest and sacrifice compared to the Old Testament. The passage in Hebrews most directly relevant to the concern of this essay is 9:23—10:18. Two comments are in order. First, the purpose of Christ’s sacrifice is to remove sin from “the heavenly things,” that is, to provide a spiritual purification, perfection, and sanctification, which the old ritual sacrifices could never accomplish (9:23—10:4, 14). Christ’s sacrifice brings moral and spiritual transformation. The

second comment has to do with the quotation in 10:5-7 from Psalm 40:6-8 (LXX). The point here is that God does not desire sacrifices and offerings but a readiness to do God's will, which Christ did by offering his body, through which "we have been sanctified" (10:10). Thus the purpose of Christ's death is not primarily judicial. Its purpose is the moral and spiritual transformation of the believer.

Two statements from Paul's writings are relevant for the subject at hand. The first is Romans 3:21-26, which states the thesis for the whole letter. According to Käsemann, it is one of the most difficult and obscure sections of the letter. Verses 24-25 are particularly significant:

They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed."

It is widely agreed that nearly all of verse 25, with the exception of "effective through faith" (no "effective" in the Greek) is a pre-Pauline, Jewish Christian tradition.

Three words are especially significant for our consideration: "redemption" (*apolutrosis*, ἀπολυτρωσις), "put forward" (*proetheto*, προεθετο), and "a sacrifice of atonement" (*hilastarion*, ἱλαστηριον). In a volume of essays growing out of the Pauline Theology Group of the Society of Biblical Literature, Andrew Lincoln and Jouette Bassler comment on these verses. Lincoln notes that in these verses Paul employs three types of imagery: (1) that of the law court—justification; (2) that of the slave market and Israel's slavery in Egypt and Babylon—redemption; (3) propitiatory sacrifice, averting the wrath of God—sacrifice of atonement.

Bassler responds with the observation that while the atonement does reveal God's justice, "justice is not the whole of it." God's justice does not preclude forbearance (v. 25). "Now this forbearance takes an active quality, for God provides through the atonement a means to make it productive." She goes on to point out that in Romans 5:8 the atonement demonstrates not only God's forbearance but also God's reconciling love. This point is powerfully made in several ways in subsequent chapters: in the confidence that nothing will separate us from the love of God at the final judgment (8:31-39), in the mediating role of mercy and compassion between God's impartiality and faithfulness in the face of Israel's disbelief (chaps. 9-11), and finally in the exhortations of chapters 12-15 where "God's self-disclosure in the atonement establishes a model for human behavior" as love for one another. From such construal of Pauline theology it seems reasonable to conclude that penal satisfaction, with its emphasis on the justice or honor of God rather than his love, is not the best way to understand Christ's death.

The verb *protithami* (προτιθημι) in the middle voice means "to display publicly." According to Käsemann, the idea is that of public manifestation, not God's predestination or apostolic proclamation.

The other Pauline statement is in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Parenthetically, perhaps a parallel to the last sentence is Galatians 3:13 where Paul says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." Richard Taylor says, "Jesus bore in our stead the curse of God's wrath as if the sins were his own." It is not clear to me from Paul's statement that the curse is that of God's wrath. It is rather the law, not God, that puts Christ under a curse. And it is God who in Christ redeems us from the curse of the law.

The crucial statement in 2 Corinthians 5 is in verse 21, "he made him to be sin who knew no sin." One should also note that it is God who in Christ reconciles the world to himself. This is critical not only in understanding Pauline

theology but also in articulating a theocentric view of the atonement. It is not that Christ appeases an angry God, but that it is God who initiates reconciliation of the world to himself. And yet Hughes interprets verse 21 as penal substitution: “God made Him *sin*: that is to say that God the Father made His innocent incarnate Son the object of His wrath and judgment.”

The language of Ralph Martin’s comment is much more in keeping with Pauline theology, as already indicated in the previous comments on Romans and Galatians. Martin says that the purpose of God’s appointment of the innocent Christ to be sin for our sake is twofold. First, “God identified his Son with the human condition in its alienation and lostness.” Second, “God declared that believers might become righteous with a righteousness that is his own. . . . The middle link of connection in this equation is that God in Christ has acted sovereignly to establish this new order.”

There is a difference of opinion about the meaning of “sin” in the statement, “he made him to be sin.” It has been suggested on good grounds that sin here means sin offering, perhaps echoing Isaiah 53:10, “When you make his life an offering for sin.” The observation that Paul nowhere else uses such language is countered by the argument that here Paul is using an early tradition and therefore the words are not his own.

From this brief survey of Pauline statements I conclude that Paul interprets Christ’s death as an expression of God’s reconciling love rather than God’s wrath. A corollary is that it is not God who predetermines Christ’s death. Rather, when the death does occur, God *makes* the death an act of reconciliation.

One final passage to discuss is Revelation 13:8. One cannot be absolutely certain about the translation of this verse. The NIV and NRSV represent two different possibilities. The NIV translates it, “All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to *the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world*” (emphasis added). The NRSV on the other hand renders it this way: “And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone *whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered” (emphasis added). The prepositional phrase “from the creation/foundation of the world” in Greek can be linked either to “Lamb” (NIV) or to “names” (NRSV). The other English versions as well as the commentaries seem to be equally divided. But in either case the issue of predestination is present, whether it is Christ’s death or the name of believers in the book of life. Even if the author’s intention was to say that it is Christ who was slain from the foundation of the world, what exactly does that mean? How was Christ put to death from the foundation of the world? Does “from” mean “since” or “at the time of”? If it means “since,” there is no issue to grapple with. If it means “at the time of,” which is probably the more likely meaning, it would imply that as soon as God created the world, the possibility or even the probability of the cross entered into the picture.

Theological Reflections

A series of articles in two recent issues of *Interpretation* (1998 and 1999) examined the atonement from a variety of biblical and theological perspectives. Charles Cousar, William Placher and Nancy Duff in separate articles raise the question whether the church’s proclamation of the atonement glorifies violence and suffering. In three different ways they all affirm our need of the atonement. Cousar argues that Paul not only does not glorify suffering but also urges his churches to refrain from violence. Paul himself as well as some of the people to whom he wrote were already experiencing suffering in their service of the gospel. Suffering is a matter of course for a community that embodies the new creation, which continues to groan along with the rest of creation. Paul’s theology of the cross is the basis of a power that accomplishes its purpose in weakness rather than domination and control.

William Placher asks whether women and other oppressed groups have been called too often by the Christian faith to endure suffering. Does vicarious suffering make moral sense? His answer is that it would depend on whether the suffering perpetuates injustice, or the acceptance of suffering serves the cause of justice, peace and liberation. In this regard, Christ’s suffering is not that of a scapegoat dragged to sacrifice against its will but a volunteer in the battle against evil. Placher then responds to the question as to whether the atonement fosters the image of a vindictive God by saying that God’s love becomes painful wrath, “but in Christ God takes that wrath on God’s own self.”

Nancy Duff looks at the Reformed doctrine of the atonement from a feminist perspective. She observes that debate over the atonement now marks one of the most heated conflicts in contemporary theology. The question for her is whether the feminist critique of the atonement will receive a hearing in Reformed circles. She does not advocate rejection of the doctrine but reexamination of its salvific character in response to the feminist charge that the image of cosmic child abuse portrayed in the willingness of God the Father to sacrifice the Son glorifies suffering and condones abuse. Her answer is to appeal to Christ's prophetic office which must be rooted in the incarnation. The cross of Christ, who is fully divine and fully human, is not something that God required of or did to Jesus, but something that God did for us. By the same token, an abused wife is not the incarnate God suffering on behalf of others. Christ on the cross represents her and reveals God's presence with her. Duff understands the cross to stand for God's unconditional love. However, that does not mean permissiveness and tolerance of evil. "Humanity not only needs to be *forgiven* for guilt incurred through sin, but *freed* from the power of sin which holds the human will captive and causes some people to be victimized at the hands of others."

Baillie rightly argues against the facile liberalism of nineteenth-century Protestantism that minimized the significance of the biblical understanding of the depth of human sinfulness and the vicarious suffering of the Son of God.

When we speak of God's free love toward us, continuing unchanged through all our sin, and eternally ready to forgive us, there is always the danger that this should be taken to mean that God is willing to pass lightly over our sins because they do not matter much to Him; that it is all a matter of easy routine, about which we need not be greatly concerned and need not greatly wonder. . . . It is as if God were to be regarded as indulgent and good-natured, making as little as possible of our misdeeds, glossing over our delinquencies. . . . Is God's love for sinners simply 'kindly judgment'? Nay, it is 'a consuming fire' . . . God must be inexorable towards our sins; not because He is just, but because He is loving; not in spite of His love, but because of His love.

Although in the history of the church satisfaction theories of the atonement, penal or otherwise, have dominated Christian theology, other voices have raised objections against them. Peter Abelard and J. McLeod Campbell are but two examples. A century and a half ago Campbell argued against the penal substitution theory at the cost of losing his standing as a Presbyterian minister in Scotland. Campbell said, "[W]hile Christ suffered for our sins as an atoning sacrifice, what he suffered was not—because from its nature it could not be—punishment." Rather, Christ's sufferings are rooted in "Divine Holiness and Divine Love."

Moltmann says:

[I]n Christ's God-forsakenness, God goes out of himself, forsakes his heaven and is in Christ himself, is there, present, in order to become the God and Father of the forsaken. . . . Christ's cross stands between all the countless crosses which line the paths of the powerful and the violent, from Spartacus to the concentration camps and to the people who have died of hunger or who have "disappeared" in Latin America.

Yet because of the influence of Greek philosophy, Christian thought over the centuries has been dominated by a concept of God who is impassible, immovable and self-sufficient.

Right down to the present day, the apathy axiom has left a deeper impress on the fundamental concepts of the doctrine of God than has the history of Christ's passion. . . . The ability to identify God with Christ's passion dwindles in proportion to the importance that is given to the apathy axiom in the doctrine of God.

It is perhaps for this reason that the pervasive view of the atonement in Western Christianity has been that the death of Jesus had been foreordained by God's demand of justice. But if one starts with the biblical understanding of a passionately loving and therefore vulnerable God, the ground upon which the satisfaction theories of the atonement have stood will have been shaken.

Long before Christ's death, God has suffered, wept and agonized over the sinfulness of the human race. In that sense Christ is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The cross of Christ bares the heart of God, a heart full of love that is broken and weeping.

God does not shrink back from giving himself to humankind completely and unreservedly, regardless of the risks. In the words of Frances M. Young,

God accepted the terrible situation, demonstrating that he takes responsibility for evil in his universe, that he recognizes the seriousness of evil, its destructive effect, its opposition to his purposes; that it cannot be ignored, but must be challenged and removed; that it is costly to forgive; that he suffers because his universe is subject to evil and sin.

Geoffrey Wainwright places this understanding of the atonement in the context of contemporary hermeneutic:

[T]he sharing by Christians in the priestly office of Christ requires contemporary exercise: the question of peace and reconciliation. As those who, in Christ, know themselves to be part of a world that has been "reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10f.; cf. 2 Cor. 5:18f.), Christians have been given a "ministry of reconciliation." . . . The case could be no more dramatic than in Northern Ireland, where there is a chance that water, bread, and wine could prove themselves more potent symbols than sashes, berets, and flags, and that hands lifted in prayer or laid on heads in forgiveness and healing could turn out closer to reality than hands that plant bombs or squeeze triggers.

The satisfaction theories of the atonement are inadequate to express the richness of divine love that suffers because they arise out of the faulty assumption that God's primary attribute is justice and that God must vindicate himself and his moral government and demand payment for a moral debt. On the other hand, understanding the death of Christ as an expression of God's endeavor to reconcile the world to himself, along the lines of the moral influence theory, is not only consistent with biblical theology but is also most congenial to Wesleyan thought.

I must admit that my expertise is not in Wesley studies. I will therefore depend on the insights of others for the few remarks I will make about Wesley's understanding of the atonement. First, there seems to be a consensus that Wesley did not have a distinctive doctrine of atonement. The following is Dunning's assessment of Wesley's position:

The absence of a systematic treatise by Wesley on the Atonement is a serious weakness and creates a profound tension, since it results in his apparently adopting or at least using the formulations of some form of the satisfaction theory. He was constantly having to fight against its implications. Had he developed a logical analysis of his own, he might have become aware that this view did not support, in fact was antithetical to his major theological commitments.

Secondly, in spite of the fact that Wesley depended on some form of the satisfaction theory, he seems to have been open to a variety of formulations. For example, Maddox finds "more resonance with Abelard's central theme in Wesley's reflections on the Atonement than is often admitted." Maddox summarizes Wesley's understanding as "a Penalty Satisfaction *explanation* of the Atonement which has a Moral Influence *purpose*, and a Ransom *effect!*"

Third, Lindström and Maddox see a link between the atonement and sanctification in Wesley's thought. Lindström says that sanctification is indirectly related to atonement, since sanctification is primarily the consequence of Christ's royal office. Maddox sees the relation of the atonement to sanctification when he says, "If we will respond to this pardoning love of God and allow God's Presence deeper access to our lives, then we will be liberated from our captivity to sin and the process of our transformation into the fullness that God has always intended for us can begin."

Conclusion

I began this essay with the question as to whether the death of Jesus was historically contingent or divinely foreordained. It seems to me that the answer is that the death of Jesus was brought about through human decisions and therefore it is historically contingent. Survey of material from and about the historical Jesus indicates that social, political and religious forces were at work to bring Jesus to his violent death. At the same time, however, Jesus was not simply the victim of circumstances. At some point in his life he began to see that his message and what he represented would probably result in a violent death and that this was part of the coming of the kingdom of God. His words at the Last Supper indicate that he understood his own death in the Passover imagery of liberation for captives from the old order.

The various New Testament writings interpret the death of Jesus as atonement, understood as God's reconciling love toward humanity. It is God who takes the initiative to act redemptively through the death of Jesus. I conclude that the death of Jesus was not divinely foreordained as penal satisfaction but the result of God's coming into human history vulnerably through the incarnation.

In the context of contemporary theology with its concern for the oppressed and the spiral of abuse and violence, the least viable formulation of the atonement would be penal substitution. The moral influence theory with its emphasis on the suffering love of God should at least be given a renewed hearing, but without underestimating the power and seriousness of sin. Such an articulation of the atonement is a more faithful rendering of the New Testament understanding of the death of Jesus than satisfaction theories. It is also more congenial to the central commitments of Wesleyan theology than the other classical theories.

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