

# Identifying with Jesus: Atonement as Royal Metaphor

PAUL W. NEWMAN

**M**ANY CONTEMPORARY Christians do not believe that Jesus died to satisfy God's requirements of payment or punishment for sin. They do not like to say that we are "saved by the blood of Jesus," and they absolutely wish to avoid the expression "washed in the blood of Jesus."

While there are good theological reasons for discomfort with the substitutionary views of atonement, many New Testament passages speak of Jesus' death as a sacrifice, ransom or expiation for our sins. Without the substitutionary interpretation, we seem to have no way to understand these passages.

In view of the fact that the central sacraments of communion and baptism focus on the meaning of Jesus' death, understanding the scriptural witness about that event is crucial. The words of institution for the Lord's Supper—"This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28)—do not seem to make sense without some logic of sacrificial atonement. Similarly, the logic of baptism depends on understanding Paul's claim that "when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death" (Rom. 6:3). If our identity and vocation as Jesus' followers are defined and remembered by reference to Jesus' death, we risk losing our true identity and vocation if we fail to understand the Scriptures' claims about Jesus' death.

A whole host of New Testament texts, representing virtually every New Testament author, seems to support the traditional substitutionary views of atonement. Among the passages that allude to the Hebrew sacrificial system are Mark 10:45; 1 John 1:7 and 2:2; Gal. 1:4; Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2; Col. 1:21-22; 1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 2:9 and 9:11-12, 28; 1 Pet. 2:24 and 3:18; and Rev. 5:9.

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However, the logic of substitutionary atonement does not accurately or appropriately interpret these verses. They should be understood in light of the royal metaphor, which has an entirely different logic than that of substitutionary satisfaction or punishment.

Theories of substitutionary atonement are based on ideas of satisfaction in civil law and punitive retribution in criminal law. The theology of substitutionary atonement originated among theologians who were lawyers before they became theologians and thus understandably were attracted to legal metaphors. Unfortunately, these legal metaphors misrepresented the scriptural witness. F. W. Dillstone in *The Christian Understanding of the Atonement* (1968) claims that "an extremely limited and unhistorical view of sacrifice was made the determinative legal symbol to interpret the significance of the death of Christ." Frances M. Young in *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (1975) concurs: "The New Testament was written in Greek to pagan converts and therefore it was only natural that the Jewish concepts lying behind the language of the New Testament would be misunderstood in a new cultural environment, and we can see that this clearly happened." J. N. D. Kelly in *Early Christian Doctrine* (1978) explains: "Tertullian, whose legal outlook led him to emphasize the necessity of reparation for offenses committed . . . transferred the idea to theology. Thus he has the theory that good deeds accumulate merit with God, while bad deeds demand 'satisfaction'—we observe the introduction of this important conception into Christian thought." Anselm, who developed the satisfaction theory of the atonement in its classical form in *Cur Deus Homo?*, was a lawyer before becoming a theologian; so was John Calvin, who preferred the metaphor of punitive retribution from criminal law.

The substitutionary views, besides being basically unbiblical, have the undesirable result of implying that God's love

is contingent upon the proportionate justice of *lex talionis*, in which the merits of sacrifice balance the offenses of sin. Those who think Jesus' substitution is essential for their salvation can easily develop a "chosen few" mentality. If we perceive Jesus as the legal bottleneck through which all of God's forgiving mercy must flow, we can deny that salvation can occur outside the church; if we believe that only the church may dispense the benefits of Christ's substitutionary death, we can easily argue for hierarchical rights for the clergy who administer the sacraments of Jesus' death.

**P**EOPLE TODAY do not often use royalty as a representative figure. Nonetheless, we can find examples of it in recent history. When the emperor of Japan apologized after World War II on behalf of the Japanese people, he acted as a royal figure who represented his people and spoke on their behalf. His actions were representative, not substitutionary. His apologizing did not mean that the Japanese people did not have to apologize themselves for their warring offenses. On the contrary, their apologies were included in the emperor's apology. His apology made no sense unless they were simultaneously apologizing with him. The individual representative and the people of the society he represented were inextricably united. To think of his apology as a substitute for theirs would miss the main point of his actions: namely, that on their behalf he apologized and that they apologized with him.

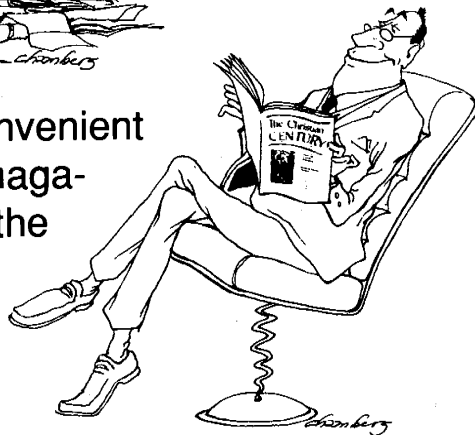
Such an understanding of corporate actions is not common in our individualistic society. An analogy from popular culture might be the emotional attachment people invest in national leaders or sports heroes. For example, when professional hockey player Wayne Gretzky was traded to Los Angeles, some Edmontonians and other Canadians felt somewhat as if their king had been kidnapped and that they had suffered an offense.

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Hebrew society in Jesus' time was thoroughly oriented to the royal metaphor. Jews believed the Messiah would be some kind of king anointed by God. The existing temple cult consisted of a high priest who acted as a "royal" representative of the people when he carried out the sacrificial ceremonies. When the high priest entered the holy of holies to make the representative offering of blood sacrifices, he did so on behalf of the people and *with* them, not as a substitute for them. The sacrifices made no sense unless the Hebrew people were thought to be identified with the high priest in his cultic action.

It was this well-known sacrificial system that the New Testament authors were adopting when they spoke of Jesus' death as a sacrifice or ransom. They were portraying Jesus as a royal figure who represented not only his own people but all humankind. They considered him the "Last Adam" who represented all people in his death and resurrection.

The royal metaphor depends on Jesus' being a human being rather than a deity. The substitutionary views of atonement depend on Jesus' being fully divine so that there is sufficient merit in his undeserved death to "cover" the offenses of all human sin, past and future. Cyril, for example, said, "It was no ordinary man . . . that God the Father delivered on our behalf . . . but it was He who transcends all creation . . . so that He might be seen to be amply equivalent for the life of all." Basil was perfectly clear about the logic of substitution: "It is only the Godman who can offer to God adequate expiation for us all." The logic of royal metaphor, on the contrary, depends on Jesus' being human in the same way as those he represents. If he were not one of us in every sense of the word, he could not be our representative. "He had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God" (Heb. 2:17). There is no soteriological need for Jesus to be God in the logic of the royal metaphor.

**R**ETURNING TO GOD was and is the Hebrew way of atonement for sin understood as separation from God and God's way of living. "Return to the Lord . . . obey his voice . . . with all your heart and with all your soul; then the Lord God will . . . have compassion upon you" (Deut. 30:2-3). All the great prophets called for people to return to God. Jesus stood squarely in this tradi-

tion. Mark 1:15 says that Jesus came into the region of Galilee preaching the gospel of God, saying "The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent, and believe the gospel." The Greek word for repent, *metanoia*, translates *tsuvah*, the prophets' word that we translate as "return." Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son is a classic story of forgiveness through return. Jesus would no doubt concur with the modern Jewish custom on Yom Kippur of reading from the book of Jonah, which is a paradigmatic case of atonement by return.

The New Testament's use of the metaphor of cultic sacrifice for the atonement that happened in Jesus' death com-

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bines the royal metaphor and the logic of *tsuvah*, atonement by return. Atonement for the New Testament authors meant return to the reign of God, as it had meant for Jesus and the prophets. As a royal figure Jesus did make a sacrifice, the sacrifice of his own life, which was "for us" because it represented in a "royal" way the sacrifices that his followers would make. The Resurrection convinced the early Christians that God had confirmed atonement and return in the way of the cross. In baptism we identify with Jesus' death and resurrection. By sharing the Lord's Supper we remember Jesus' death and receive his Spirit for our lives in the covenant mission of God. By showing mercy to neighbors and enemies we offer the sacrifice God desires (Matt. 9:13).

Jesus' self-sacrifice was a catalytic "royal" action that represents all who identify with it. For people brought up with the temple rituals, envisioning Jesus as a high priest made sense of their existence "on the way," following Jesus, realizing in their own lives the "return" that Jesus pioneered at the expense of his own life. Realizing the importance of his royal, "high priestly" precedent, they spoke frequently about it as the ransom, the expiation, the sacrifice made "for them" and, they hoped, for the overcoming of all the alienation from God that constitutes the sins of the whole world. He was not a substitute for them. That was unthinkable. They were with him,

sacramentally, in his death and new life. They "returned" with Jesus to the reign of God as they took up their own crosses and followed him.

Jesus' death was the ultimate act of "return" by Jesus himself, the epitome of his at-one-ment with God as he loved his enemies, rather than undertaking to kill them. His death at their hands came only after he had actively proclaimed God's prophetic judgment and promise to them. To kill them would have been inconsistent with God's reign and the call to love others as one loves oneself. He was tempted to choose an alternative but finally chose what he believed to be God's way. The "way of the cross," a radically active, prophetic, nonviolent strategy that finally trusts God above all else was the way of *tsuvah*, the way of the kingdom.

**A**LTHOUGH, as Martin Hengel notes in *The Atonement* (1981), ancient Israel actually entertained three or four kinds of atonement in its theology, the ethical view certainly prevailed after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. The prevailing Jewish tradition saw the temple sacrifices as a God-given system for signing, sealing and confirming the "return" already made by worshipers in their "internal dispositions." (Jesus, after all, did not invent the Great Commandment of love for God on which hangs all the law, including the laws of sacrifice.)

Robert J. Daly, S.J., in *The Origin of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (1978), insists that the early Christian use of the metaphor of the temple sacrifices in referring to Jesus' death did not assume that God's forgiveness was effected or influenced by the offering of blood sacrifices. On the contrary, he claims: "It is precisely an incarnational spiritualization of sacrifice that is operative in the New Testament and the early church." In other words, it was not the material blood or body of Jesus that constituted the sacrifice acceptable to God; it was the "internal dispositions" of "obedience and love toward God, and of self-sacrificing love and service to and for the brothers and sisters." Hence, "Christian sacrifice was not a cultic but rather an ethical idea."

Jesus' "return" reconciles human beings to God's reign as the "royal" sign of the godly way to world shalom, namely, loving one's enemies. His at-one-ness with God was also the start of a process by which those who believe in him take on the identity of the "royal" Jesus and follow in his way. ■

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# BOOKS

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## **The Acquittal of God: A Theology for Vietnam Veterans.**

**By Uwe Siemon-Netto. Pilgrim, 107 pp., \$7.95 paperback.**

Although the shadows cast by the Vietnam experience touch the lives of many people, few groups suffer from that war more than its veterans. Uwe Siemon-Netto documents the terrible spiritual turmoil caused by the Vietnam War and the lingering cloud it has spread over the souls of its American survivors.

Weaving together five years of experience as a war correspondent in Vietnam, themes from Bonhoeffer's essay "After Ten Years," and pastoral work with nearly 100 veterans, Siemon-Netto creates a powerful tapestry. He is particularly interested in the loss of religious faith experienced by many vets. While many believe in God, many vets also think that God let them down during the war and feel that the church has offered little support. Unable to forgive God and angry at the clergy, the vets are a special challenge to Christianity.

Nevertheless, Siemon-Netto suggests that it is precisely the Christian notion of a suffering God that can speak to the vets. Moreover, he argues, God can bring good out of evil. In particular, God can use the vets to help America move out of its adolescence to maturity. However, the theodicy that makes the most sense to him and the vets is the complex argument that while free will is the reason for evil, freedom will prove more beneficial than harmful in the long run.

Siemon-Netto gives credit to the vets for their rejection of popular religion. He finds a latent church in their support groups and urges them to become ministers to one another and missionaries to others. With a training that lasted twice as long as the education of a Jesuit priest, they are particularly suited to suffer with God in a godless world. Empowered with faith and courage, the vets can act out of their freedom in a way that could save the nation.

The diffuse nature of Siemon-Netto's argument—he appeals virtually to all major theodicies—somewhat thwarts his purpose in championing "God's acquittal