

The Sacrament of Nonlethal Love

Violence of one kind or another dominates the news every day. Violence in homes, schools, communities and nations destroys the well-being of life for countless people all over the world. With the possible spread of nuclear weapons, the capacity for violence even threatens the very existence of human life on the planet. Yet, the belief persists that either lethal violence or the threat of lethal violence is the only possible remedy, the only direction hope can pursue. A French anthropologist, René Girard, in the late twentieth century challenged this belief. He said, “The definitive renunciation of violence . . . will become for us the condition . . . for the survival of humanity itself and for each one of us.”¹ Girard insisted that Jesus’ nonviolence, based on a theme from the Hebrew Scriptures, was a breakthrough in human history that could now determine the survival of human civilization. Why have the Christian churches, the followers of Jesus, not proclaimed this hope more effectively?

This claim of Girard’s leaves Christians asking, “How should we change our ways to make the promise of Jesus’ nonviolent love more central to our worship and living?” The answer might be to rethink our central sacrament of eucharist or holy communion. If the central sacrament of the Christian churches was a celebration of nonlethal love for neighbors and enemies it would be a significant force for peace and compassion in the world. This change would depend on recovering the original meaning of Jesus’ words to his disciples at the Last Supper. It would be a

¹René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone Press; and Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987; orig.: Paris: Eds. Grasset et Fasquelle, 1978), p. 137. Other books by Girard include *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

valid response to Jesus' last request of his disciples: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19).²

During the Last Supper Jesus referred to his death as the pouring out of the blood of the covenant (Mk. 14:24). Those words have been interpreted as referring to his death as a scapegoating event, a substitute sacrifice of Jesus to satisfy God's need for retributive justice. Matthew and other New Testament authors add to Jesus' words and expand on the scapegoating theme. Matthew adds the phrase, "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28), but this explanation is missing from the words of institution in both Mark and Luke. As far as we can see, scapegoating atonement was not central to Jesus' teachings about the covenant. It is possible, and even likely, that the classic words of institution of the sacrament referred to Jesus' belief in the nonlethal love that *was* central to his understanding of the covenant. All three Synoptic Gospels add a reference by Jesus to the coming of the Reign of God after his death. The Reign was a condition of human life lived in covenant with God, not limited to a state of private forgiveness for believers. For Jesus, the blood of the covenant very likely referred to the blood that he would shed in keeping the law of the covenant. The same meaning applies to his reference to his body broken for us. If this was what Jesus meant in his words at the Last Supper, the sacrament of eucharist or holy communion should be a sacrament of nonlethal love. (Note that the term "nonlethal love" clearly excludes killing, whereas "nonviolence" appears to exclude legitimate force that does not intend killing. The sacrament might be called "the sacrament of mercy" if the nonlethal connotation were clearly understood.)

In order to help church members recover an understanding of the sacrament, the meaning of Jesus' death and the meaning of the sacrament should be interpreted in light of the biblical theology of covenant and its central gospel of atonement. Jesus, after all, was explicitly speaking

²Biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

about the covenant, and atonement has always been a central issue in the understanding of the sacrament.

According to the scriptures, God makes covenants with people and with the whole creation (in the Noachic covenant), and in these covenants God promises to be faithful in loving the earth and its people—providing that people, in turn, live as God intends them to live by keeping the law of the covenant. The idea of covenant and covenantal law has been largely downplayed in Christian history, perhaps due to Paul’s polarization of law and grace. The biblical covenant or its law of the covenant is not celebrated in Christian worship as much as the scapegoating interpretation of Jesus’ death that has dominated the interpretation of the sacrament.

However, in Lk. 10:25–28, when the lawyer asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks, “What is written in the law?” After the lawyer cites the classic summaries of the law from Dt. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18—“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”—Jesus says, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

On the basis of the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, it is clear that Jesus did not repudiate this gospel of the covenant from his Jewish heritage. In Mark (1:15) Jesus is said to have begun his public ministry by proclaiming, “The time is fulfilled, and the [reign] of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The word for “repent” here in the Greek manuscripts is “*metanoia*,” but there can be no doubt that Jesus, in his Aramaic language, was referring to the scriptural “*Tshuvah*,” the Hebrew concept of return to the Reigning of God that accomplishes atonement. *Metanoia* primarily reflects the Greek concept of changing one’s mind, whereas *Tshuvah* emphasizes not only changing one’s mind but also changing one’s behavior to do the will of God. Genuine faith, as Jesus and the Letter of James and the Hebrew Scriptures

maintain, must include some performance, not just talking the talk but also walking the walk. It is by such faith that people are reconciled with God.

The teaching of Jesus includes a number of passages in which performance is emphasized. Numerous times in the Gospels the “fruits” of faithfulness are emphasized: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down” (Mt. 7:19). In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, surely a classic story of return, the reconciliation does not happen until there is an actual return by the son who offers to be a servant in his father’s household. Jesus tells another story of two brothers, one who says he will not do as his father asked but in the end does it and the other son who says he will obey but in the end does not do what his father requested. Jesus asks rhetorically, “Which of the two did the will of his father?” (Mt. 21:31). In the Lord’s Prayer the petition “forgive us our trespasses” is followed by the condition, “as [long as] we forgive those who trespass against us.” Many Christians speak frequently of God’s unconditional love, but it would be better to speak of God’s unending love. Performance of mercy is not an unreasonable condition for receiving mercy. Jesus’ Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt. 18:23–35) explicitly makes the point. To quote from Shakespeare, “We do pray for mercy, And that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy” (*The Merchant of Venice*). In the biblical teaching about covenant, an actual return is required to keeping God’s commandments, especially the two Great Commandments. Numerous passages in the Gospel of John and in the Johannine letters link love of God with keeping the commandments.

Atonement, as well as covenant, needs to be rethought and retaught as it relates to the meaning of the sacrament and the meaning of Jesus’ death. It is possible to see that Jesus as a Jew preached and practiced the traditional gospel of atonement that permeates the Hebrew Scriptures and continues to be central to Jewish faith today. Most of the prophets and many of

the Psalms reiterate the teaching of Deuteronomy: “return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey [God] with all your heart and with all your soul . . . then the Lord your God will . . . have compassion on you” (Dt. 30:2–3). Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, celebrates **this gospel of forgiveness by return (*Tshuvah*)** with a reading from the Book of Jonah that is a classic story of repentance and forgiveness.

In contrast to some legalistic interpretations of the Torah, Jesus emphasized the spiritualization of the law and of sin, and he stressed that the scope of love includes enemies as neighbors under the law. The Good Samaritan exemplified loving enemies. In Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, Jesus explicitly taught that love of enemies, willing their well-being, was included in the covenantal law of love (cf. Mt. 5:43–47 and Lk. 6:35–36). But Jesus not only taught about love for enemies; he also lived it and died for it. “There is no other cause for his death than the love of one’s neighbour lived to the very end.”³ This was the breakthrough in human history that Girard emphasized.

The sacrifice of Jesus was not, as in the law of retribution or the theory of scapegoating, a *quid pro quo* in God’s eyes for the sins of all people. It was the price of obedience on Jesus’ part. It was his fulfilling of the covenant obligation of *Tshuvah*, the “return” to doing what the law of love requires. It was not a cultic act that is of personal benefit only to those who subscribe to the theory of scapegoating. Jesus’ death was an ethical sacrifice that he asked his disciples to remember and imitate. The Gospels six times report that Jesus said that his disciples must take up their own crosses if they are to follow him. There are many “crosses” in life that call for mercy and nonlethal love. Individual Christians are, like Jesus, required to follow through and keep the laws of love, too. He is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb.12:2). By “taking

³Girard, *Things Hidden*, p. 211.

up their crosses” nonviolent people are reconciled with God. In loving their neighbors, including enemies and having concern for victims, peoples’ sins are forgiven, and they are reconciled with God. The churches will have to teach this understanding with strength of purpose if there is to be a renewed meaning in the sacrament of eucharist or holy communion.

The love that Jesus taught and lived, *Agape*, is a clear-eyed willing of well-being for others, including enemies whom we may not even like. God has promised to accept any who return to keeping this law of love, and God gives the Spirit of love to empower the return. We do not make it up ourselves. “It droppeth as the gentle rain from Heaven.” All we can do is to ask for it. This way of atonement is not “works righteousness.” The Spirit of God is the operative power in atonement and in keeping the covenant. The Spirit of love, which is not of our own making, carries us in the return. But, like Jesus in Gethsemane, Christians have the dignity—and often anguish—of surrendering to the intentions of God. That is the way covenant with God works.

Jesus’ huge temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane was whether or not to resist his enemies with violence. They were poised to take his life and terminate his mission for the Reign of God, but Jesus, in faith, deferred to the will of God and trusted that God would further God’s Reign with or without him. It turned out that he made the right decision. As Jesus foresaw in his words at the Last Supper, the disciples’ experience of the Resurrection opened the way for God’s peaceful Reign to continue to come to the world,

Churches now can participate in the peace of the Reign by joining ecumenically or otherwise in actions and services in which Jesus’ teachings of the covenantal law of love are remembered and the scriptural gospel of *Tshuvah*, return, is celebrated. These basic scriptural and historic foundations of Judeo-Christian existence can be explicitly proclaimed in times when our communities or others’ are responding to such disasters as terrorist acts or outbreaks of war or

events of personal violence in the community. In one case in Saskatoon, such an ecumenical service was held in support of the abolition of the death penalty in Canada. This focus on the law of the covenant and atonement by return may, one hopes, be combined in more frequent celebrations of the sacrament of nonlethal love and its explicit remembrance of the meaning of Jesus' death. Without egregious disputes the churches could recover the central biblical emphases on the law of the covenant as Jesus taught it and the gospel of return.

Jesus' message and Spirit have had an enormous influence in the world, despite the prevailing emphasis on scapegoating. The imitation of Jesus has been working in human consciousness. Girard observed that concern for victims has become a universal reality in the world as never before in human history. He claims that the growing concern for victims all over the world is a kind of "Christianizing" of the world, even though it is often not happening in the name of Jesus and even though some Christian churches are shrinking. In his view, many people now cannot believe in the efficacy or validity of scapegoating or substitute punishment. A recovery of the sacrament as a celebration and recommitment to nonlethal love might result in growth in the churches as more people see that lethal violence holds no true promise for peace in the world. The death of Jesus calls for all people to be peacemakers. They will be recognized as "children of God" (Mt. 5:9). The world desperately needs such peacemakers.

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