**ATONEMENT**

*“That we might have life” – a brief reflection on the Theory of Atonement and its implications for Christian living*

By Richard Cogill

To atone means to make amends, or reparation. Christian theologians believe that the crucifixion of Jesus atones for the Original Sin of Adam and Eve and restores the relationship between God and Man.

Anselm, in the 11th Century, wrote of the Satisfaction Theory, which came to dominate atonement Theology in the 2nd millennium. Jesus sacrificed his immortality, and accepted a death he did not owe God, because a sinless man need not have died. Thus, Christ filled the treasury upon which all the baptised would thereafter draw, to be made right with God.

If we believe Christ’s death and resurrection were pre-ordained by God for the absolution of all people, then God the Father is implicated in the crime of Christ’s torture and crucifixion. If we find this belief intolerable, we are obligated to formulate new explanations for the Death of Christ. Some 20th Century theologians have argued that if the Christian drama had ended with the cross, there would be no redemption. Jesus’ death would then be comparable to that of Stephen Biko or Martin Luther King— men whose ministries were ended forever by violent assassinations, even though they themselves were exemplars of peace, nonviolence, and justice.

But that is not what happened to Jesus. His followers proclaimed the risen Christ. They asserted resurrection. J. Denny Weaver, in his “Narrative Christus Victor” theory, revived the idea that God achieves ultimate victory over Satan, death, and the power of evil, through resurrection—not abstractly, but through the real political evils we face on earth. Resurrection is God’s “NO!” to the disasters we inflict on one another by our injustices. Evil—real, every day, human evil—will not have the final say.

Theologians are increasingly looking to Africa for an understanding of ubuntu, to think through atonement restoratively, rather than retributively. For example, Kimberly Vrudny has written a restorative model of atonement drawing on South Africa’s situation, specifically. She says that traditional models of atonement pit the Father against the Son and introduce conflict into the Trinity because they suggest that the Father must punish humankind for their sin, a fate that prompts Jesus to say, “take this cup from me.”

She wants Christianity to embrace a restorative model of justice rather than a retributive one, recognizing that God desires a restored relationship—that God desires reconciliation with humankind. Jesus is dying because human beings are rejecting the reconciliation he offers. She emphasizes that Christ forgives from the cross and does not seek vengeance. And when human beings eventually succeed in killing him, something the Father does not want--for the Father was advocating for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty to prevail—God resurrects him.

As a community of faith, we live into the resurrection by living as he lived—peacefully--resisting injustice and advocating for the poor and vulnerable. His forgiveness offers the beginning of a new relationship—and, through a process of spiritual development, the human heart is reconciled as it becomes more like Christ’s, desiring reconciliation with our neighbours through deliverance from the injustices that we inflict upon one another when we reject salvation in Christ.

*The Reverend Richard Cogill is an Episcopalian priest and currently serves as the Precentor at St. George’s Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town*