

JESUS ON ATONEMENT

Paul W. Newman.

Did Jesus, the Jew, simply ignore the faith of his own religious tradition and expound a new and different way of atonement? Or did Christianity, independent of Jesus, develop the logic of atonement by the blood of Jesus as substitutionary satisfaction to God for the offense of all human sins? Given the origin of Christianity in Judaism, it is strange that the two religions appear to understand atonement so differently.

Walter Kaufmann, the distinguished professor from Harvard, in the Prologue to Martin Buber's I and Thou (2nd. Edition, p. 37) claimed that Christianity is founded on the implicit denial of the Hebrew idea of *Tshuvah*, which is the way of atonement central to Judaism. Kaufmann attributed the denial to Paul who, he claimed, taught that salvation under the Torah was impossible, God requiring Christ's redemptive death in order to forgive people of their sins. Kaufmann claimed that Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Lutheranism and Calvinism are founded on Paul's doctrine of atonement. Kaufmann might easily have added all the evangelical and fundamentalist Christian churches to the list.

The question is: Did Christians get Jesus wrong? What did he believe about atonement? Should Jesus' death be understood in a way that does not supersede or implicitly deny the Jewish theology of atonement? A supplementary question is: Was Kaufmann right? Did Paul actually replace Jewish theology of atonement with an entirely different way of atonement? A further question might be: If Christians and Jews shared the same theology of atonement, what difference might that make to the relationship between the two religions?

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is firmly based in the covenantal theology that permeates the Hebrew Scriptures. According to this theology, 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. In Jewish theology, the greatest gift that God gives to people is the Torah, or law of the covenant, which is the blueprint, so to speak, for living life abundantly, as God intends.

Keeping the law, however, is not the sole determining factor for Jews in atonement. It is primarily God's faithfulness and love that make possible the reconciliation of people with God when they return from doing evil to commit themselves again to following the Torah. It is true that there can be no atonement without repentance, but the premise for repentance is the promise that God will accept it and faithfully forgive anyone who repents.

The Hebrew word for repentance, *Tshuvah*, is usually translated "return" in the Hebrew Scriptures, and there are literally dozens of passages which affirm the basic covenantal promise that God will forgive those who return to doing the will of God. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the Book of Jonah is read in synagogues all over the world. The people of Ninevah, much to Jonah's discomfort, "returned

from their evil ways" (3:10) and God forgave them. 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" (3:2,3.) Yom Kippur celebrates this gospel with the appropriate liturgy.

On the basis of the Synoptic Gospels and John's Gospel, it is clear that Jesus did not repudiate this covenantal theology of atonement from his Jewish heritage. In Mark 1:15 Jesus is said to have begun his public ministry proclaiming, "the time is fulfilled and the Reigning 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 concept of return to the Reigning of God. *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.

Christians, of course, call for change of behavior as a result of atonement, but it is surely fair to say that the traditional Christian teaching of atonement downplays the keeping of God's law and emphasizes the "unconditional" love of God for sinners regardless of actual performance in keeping the covenantal law.

The teaching of Jesus, however, includes a number of passages in which performance is emphasized. Numerous times in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John the emphasis on the "fruits" of faithfulness is made. "You will know them by their fruits every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down" (Mt. 7:16-19) 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 then points out that the tax collectors and prostitutes who, when they presumably do what God intends, will enter the Reign of God before those who claim to be children of God but do not do God's will. 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." 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. In the Gospel of John and in the Johannine letters there are numerous passages that link love of God with keeping the commandments.

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 Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, Jesus says "You have given the right answer; *do this* (Italics mine) and you will live." (Luke 10:25-28) There is ample evidence here and elsewhere that Jesus did not repudiate or supersede the covenantal theology of salvation by return to keeping the law of the covenant.

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, presuming that the man from Jerusalem who fell among thieves was a Jew. If Matthew's Sermon on The Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain are to be trusted, Jesus explicitly taught that love of enemies, willing their well being, was included in the covenantal law of love.

The meaning of Jesus' death can be understood in the light of the Hebrew theology of covenant and its central gospel of atonement. Jesus not only taught the centrality of keeping the law, summarized in the Two Great Commandments, but he practiced what he preached, including extension of love of neighbor to include enemies.

The temptation of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was arrested may well have been the temptation to break the law of loving his enemies that Jesus had preached so rigorously. There appeared to be compelling reasons to do so. Jesus' mission was not yet clearly understood by even his closest followers, and his premature death might bring his whole ministry to a sputtering end in failure. To avoid the pain of violent death must have been a compelling temptation; but not to practice what he preached must have been an even heavier temptation.

There were many in Jerusalem at the time that, like Peter, would have taken up the sword to defend Jesus against his enemies. But Jesus is reported to have prayed "not my will but Thine be done." He could not kill his enemies and keep the law of love, so he affirmed the law of love and trusted that God would look after the consequences of his personal sacrifice of love. For Christians, the resurrection gives the confirmation that the crucified one received the affirmation of God for his sacrifice.

The sacrifice of Jesus, understood in the light of the traditional Hebrew theology of covenant, was not a *quid pro quo* in God's eyes for the sins of all people, according to a law of retribution. 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.

Christians have said that Jesus in his death did all the fulfilling of the law of justice, not the law of love, that is necessary for God to forgive everybody. But Jesus demonstrated in his life and teachings that God's justice is not primarily retributive but, rather, rehabilitative. Jesus consistently emphasized that the law was essentially about love, not retribution. If he died in order to keep God's law it is highly likely that it was the Great Commandments that he was following, not some speculative theory about how big a sacrifice God needs to allow for the forgiveness of sinners.

As far as Jesus being the substitute sacrifice for everyone's sins, the Synoptic Gospels, no fewer than six times, report Jesus saying that his disciples must take up their own crosses if they are to follow him. According to Jesus, as well as John and Paul; when there is no love there is no justification; when there is no forgiveness there is no being forgiven. This reality has not always been stressed in the Christian teaching about atonement.

Like the Jews in Jesus' time who did not personally enter the sanctuary to make the atonement sacrifices but who regarded the High Priest as their representative, Christians may regard Jesus as their representative and his death as a monumental historic event signifying atonement. But according to what Jesus is reported to have said, individual Christians are also required to follow through and keep the laws of love too, as Jews of all time have believed necessary.

What is operative here is the "royal metaphor," the dynamic of a representative action by a "royal" figure that is the criterion of inclusion for any who identify the person as their royal figure. The Jewish High Priest on the Day of Atonement was a "royal" figure that represented all faithful Jews in making the sacrifices of atonement in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Letter to the Hebrews uses this tradition of Jewish sacrifices of atonement in the Temple as a metaphor for the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

The Jewish theology of Temple sacrifices for atonement, however, is misunderstood if the sacrifices are thought to be *quid pro quo* for sins, according to the *lex talionis*, law of retribution. I once remarked to a Jewish rabbi that it was ironic that Jews no longer practiced Temple sacrifices for atonement whereas traditional Christian theology of atonement is based on the shedding of Jesus' blood on the cross. He replied; "we Jews never did believe that atonement was accomplished by the shedding of blood sacrifices. Atonement has always been by God's acceptance of *Tshuvah*. The sacrifices were offered as signs that the repentance (*Tshuvah*) was genuine." In other words, a proper understanding of the Hebrew Bible's requirements for sacrifices of atonement sees the sacrifices somewhat like sacraments, that is, as outward and visible signs of inward grace.

Jesus' death can also be so understood. In The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) Robert J. Daly SJ shows that "It is precisely an incarnational spiritualization of sacrifice that is operative in the New Testament and the early church" (p.138). In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus that his followers are to embrace as their "royal" precedent had to do with "the internal disposition" of "obedience and love toward God and of self-sacrificing love and service" to neighbors, including even enemies. Daly concludes, "Christian sacrifice was not a cultic but rather an ethical idea." (p.140.) In the time of Second Temple Judaism, during Jesus' lifetime, some Jews may have viewed the Temple sacrifices as cultic acts that were operative for atonement. But after the Romans destroyed the Temple in the first century of the Common Era Temple sacrifices were no longer possible. *Tshuvah* became the only way of atonement for Jews, celebrated on Yom Kippur.

If the cross is understood as Jesus' representative act of *Tshuvah* it is the reaffirmation of the Hebrew gospel of atonement, embodied in the person of Jesus who becomes the "royal" figure for any who see him as their definitive representative. By "taking up their crosses" and following him Christians are reconciled with God. In loving our neighbor, including our enemies, our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled with God. This kind of love, *Agape*, is not an emotional attachment like *Philia*, brotherly love, or *Libido*, sexual interest. It 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, the Spirit Jesus had, to enable the return to happen.

This theology of atonement is not "works righteousness," because the return is influenced by prevenient grace that empowers any returning that takes place. The Spirit of God is the operative power in keeping the covenant. So the great Reformation principles of *sola gratia* and *solī Deo gloria* still apply, providing that they are seen to include the cooperation of people in the process. The God of the Bible is from first to last a covenant-making God who chooses to collaborate with people. If *sola fide* is understood properly as the result of the Spirit, it, too, applies. Genuine faith (*fide*), as Jesus and The Letter of James maintain, must include some performance: not just a change of mind but also a change of behavior, not just talking the talk but also walking the walk.

Is Paul then the one who has led Christianity away from the Hebrew understanding of atonement? It would seem that his teaching about the law in Romans and Galatians does implicitly, if not explicitly, separate atonement from keeping the covenantal law. One wonders, however, if Paul has been understood correctly by Kaufmann or all the Christian theologians who have stressed salvation by grace without any reference to return to keeping the law.

In his theology of baptism and elsewhere, Paul emphasizes dying and rising with Christ. Paul's teaching about the Lord's Supper emphasizes the remembrance of Jesus' death and the renewed appropriation of Jesus' Spirit that makes the Church, in a sense, his body with his life in it. The way of the cross is, for Paul, the entrance into Christian discipleship and the ongoing ethos or Spirit of discipleship. Are we sure that Paul did not see the way of the cross as the way of fulfillment of the covenant law of love? In Philippians 2, Paul certainly calls for Christians to have the mind of Christ in sacrificial love. Paul also emphasized the fruit of the Spirit and the real transformation of life that discipleship entails. Paul, like Jesus, objected to any obedience to the law that was inconsistent with the Spirit of the law, but it is unlikely that he would disagree with what Jesus told the lawyer about keeping the law, as the lawyer had summarized it from the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus and Paul both stressed the freedom that the Spirit gives when one is fulfilling the law, but fulfilling the law of love is still the name of the game in keeping the covenant. Can there be any atonement without it?

It can be argued that in Romans and Galatians it is the law pertaining to circumcision that Paul is referring to when he insists that it is not the law that saves but grace that saves. He was arguing against the view that the cultic requirement of circumcision was essential for salvation. Thus, Paul's polemic against the law would not exclude the performance of the Great Commandments that summarize the covenantal law, as the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus affirmed.

The canons of the Council of Trent (1547) appear to strike a better balance on the issue of confession and performance than Protestants have traditionally had. The Council declared that it is anathema to say "that the free will of man moved and aroused by God, does not co-operate at all by responding to the awakening call of God,

so as to dispose and prepare itself for the acquisition of the grace of justification." Further, the Council declared it to be anathema to say "that all works before justification, for whatever reason they were done, are in truth sins and deserve the hatred of God, or that the more strongly a man (*sic*) strives to dispose himself to receive Grace, the more grievously he sins." The Reformers and the Council both tended to set justification and good works over against each other, separating them when they are in fact inseparable, the Holy Spirit being operative in both simultaneously.

Christianity in its doctrine of atonement, opened the door for "cheap grace" that forgets about forgiving others while asking for God's forgiveness and forgets about "Thy will be done" (i.e. loving neighbors and enemies) when praying for God's blessings. The theology of Yom Kippur seems to have the matter better expressed by simply referring to Deuteronomy 3:2,3.

Much has been written about the substitutionary sacrifice doctrine of atonement, but seldom is it acknowledged that the idea of substitutionary merit originated with Tertullian rather than in Paul or any other biblical writer. The highly respected historian, J.N.D. Kelly, in Early Christian Doctrines (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) observed that "... Tertullian, whose legal outlook led him to emphasize the necessity of reparation for offences 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.* (P.177) (Italics mine) Anselm, whose Cur Deus Homo is regarded as the classic exposition of atonement by substitutionary satisfaction, was also a lawyer before becoming a theologian, as was Calvin who changed the legal metaphor of atonement by satisfaction (a metaphor from civil law) to atonement by punishment (a metaphor from criminal law). Both the civil and criminal law metaphors depend on the *lex talionis* theory of retributive justice, *quid pro quo* being the operative principle. Jesus and Paul, on the other hand, emphasized the amazing grace of God's rehabilitative and restorative justice and the prevenient working of the Spirit who even teaches us how to pray.

If Jesus and the early disciples did not deny the scriptural Jewish theology of atonement by *Tshuvah* within the covenant of God, it might require a re-thinking of Christological claims about the divinity of Jesus and Christian supersession over every other religion including Jesus' own Judaism. This supersession has done immense harm in history to Jews and those of other faith, sanctioning extreme forms of Christian imperialism and ethnocentricity.

The logic of Jesus as a "royal" figure, representing the faith by which atonement occurs in "return" to keeping the law of the covenant, requires that Jesus be fully human. As the Letter to the Hebrews says: "He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest. ... " (2:17) Jesus can logically be "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2) only if he is human as we are. He has to be human to be a "royal" representative of people in his dying and rising.

It is also seldom acknowledged that the *lex talionis* logic of atonement by satisfaction was a key factor in the decisions at Nicaea and Chalcedon where it was decided that Jesus was necessarily "of one substance" with God and "very God of very God." At Nicaea, the Alexandrians, led by Athanasius and supported by Constantine for his own political purposes, cited the logic that "It is only the God-man who can offer to God adequate expiation for us all" (Kelly *op cit*, p. 385, quoting Basil.) Kelly also quotes Cyril saying "It was no ordinary man ... that God the Father delivered over 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" (p.399). This quantitative approach to transferable sacrificial merit has no basis in the life or teaching of Jesus.

The other main soteriological argument at Nicaea was based on the Greek idea of *theosis*, namely, that salvation consisted of people becoming divine. Again, Kelly quotes Athanasius: "The word could never have divinized us if He were merely divine by participation and were not Himself the essential Godhead, the Father's veritable image" (*op cit*. p.243). A basic premise of biblical covenantal theology, however, is that people are not divine, and that covenantal faith is for human beings, not to make them divine but to make them fully human. The idea that some people are divine has been as dangerous and damaging in human history as the idea that Christianity supersedes all other traditions of faithfulness and all other manifestations of love.

To sum up: it is quite possible to understand atonement for Christians as being essentially the same as the way of atonement celebrated at Yom Kippur. God's covenant with the Jews is opened radically to Gentiles by the possibility of them following the Jew Jesus as representative of the Hebrew way of salvation through "return" (*Tshuvah*) to living the Great Commandments.

This recovery of biblical faith does not diminish the importance of Jesus for Christians. His death on the cross and his resurrection to be a living Spirit, imitated and remembered in baptism and communion and emulated in living, are the constitution of the Christian religion, the touchstone which Christians see as the key to healing the world and reconciling people in their personal lives. As followers of Jesus, Christians are grafted into the covenantal relationship that God established with the Jews and with all of creation. Paul affirms this clearly in Romans 11.

If Christians could recognize that their gospel of atonement is common with that of Jews, atonement through *Tshuvah*, then the basis for Christian alienation from Jews would be removed. The claims of supersession that Christians have made through the centuries would have no foundation. The Christian thinking that led to pogroms and anti-Semitism and the Holocaust would be gone. Surely it is not too late to recover our common covenant and common gospel by realizing that Jesus gave his life in love to affirm that covenant and gospel from the Hebrew Scriptures.