

go ye therefore twain

Welcome to the final fireside on models of atonement. We've trawled through the bulk of mainstream Christian models of atonement, and now we're ready to see how Mormon thinkers have engaged the topic. Fundamentally, the questions we have to answer are these (in Blake Ostler's words):

- Why are healing and reconciliation impossible without Christ?
- Why can't we simply be forgiven without punishment and the whole apparatus of atonement?

Bruce R. McConkie stated in his final testimony that the atonement is "the least understood of all our revealed truths". We have a clear doctrine that Jesus saved us, and some of the consequences of that fact, but we don't have a doctrine of mechanism—which is probably a good thing, as it allows us to discover what we can on our own.

I find that I tend to read my fallen notions of power into my model of God's behavior. This can lead to imagining God as a malicious genie—you can pray for something but it may not turn out the way that you hoped or desired!—or as a capricious despot if we conflate together happenstance and the will of God.

And yet.

Given absolute power, the lever to bend the universe any way he chose, God chose one thing, which was to submit himself below all of that in order to raise the universe up. God is not whimsical or malicious, but humble and kind. And yet fierce. I've never really known a power like that in this world, which makes it hard for me to conceive of the nature of God without imparting something of the despot to him. But we do not revere him because he is the greatest power—the "Almighty"—nor do we revere him because of philosophical necessity. We revere him because he is good, and because he is mighty to save.

EFFECTS OF SALVATION

It is worth considering for a moment what the atonement prevents—what it saves us from, and what effects *should* be accounted for in our understanding and experience of it.

- death, sin, suffering, nihilism
- (Nephi's "angels to a devil"—this has been called both a "negative atonement" and a "super-fallen state", שְׂאוֹל *š'ol* Sheol, etc. v. modernity)

The atonement is what makes agency *possible*. Without meaningful choices, without the possibility of a real difference in outcomes, agency would be impossible. Since in the absence of atonement, all outcomes would be the same—"angels to a devil"—the atonement made of judgment a joyous event rather than a terrible one, because we could actually be brought up as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ.

As the *Lectures on Faith* have it, "all will agree in this that [Christ] is the prototype or standard of salvation, or in other words, that he is a saved being" (LF 7:9). (That raises a separate and interesting question of whether Jesus himself is saved, and if so from what, but I'll set that aside for now.)

RESTORATION

Many Latter Day Saint accounts of atonement have drawn heavily on Protestant Christian models of atonement, particularly Arminianism and Penal Substitutionary views. This is particularly visible in many of the popular accounts of atonement, such as the parable of the bicycle.

The key innovation in Mormon thought is Joseph Smith's revelation D&C XX which explicitly extends the scope of the atonement to include Gethsemane. In addition, this is probably the major root of divergence between our expression of atonement as a single event (or, indeed, an ordinance—see NAM) and the mainstream Christian expression of atonement as the process of reconciliation.

In the early Utah period, particularly during 1856–1857, known as the Mormon Reformation, a relative deemphasis on the rôle of Christ in our redemption was made in favor of encouraging loyalty and ecclesiastical engagement. This particularly led to blood atonement, a strong form of paying for our own sins and a doctrine that Jesus will not extend his atonement to cover certain crimes. Although this has had its day in Utah Mormonism and again in fundamentalism, we won't delve into it.

A historical detour of interest: Amasa Lyman served as a counselor to Joseph Smith in the First Presidency from 1843, and later entered into the Council of the Twelve. His Dundee speech, reproduced in the primary sources, represents an extreme pole of thought. Lyman also perceived the fundamental failure of the explanations known to him to explain why Jesus had to suffer, and he proposed a rather innovative solution, for a Mormon.

But was it decreed, then, that Jesus should die to save men who were thus pure and holy?" No: it did not form any part of the purpose of God that he should die. "What, then, was he ordained to as a Savior?" Why, to be a Prophet, Priest, and King,—a preacher of the Gospel of the kingdom of God.

In essence, Lyman argued that Jesus' teachings were sufficient for us to follow and be perfected, and that although Jesus' passion and death were foreseen they were by no means necessary. Wilford Woodruff termed Lyman's doctrine "the worst herryry [sic] man can preach"—so extreme that continued promulgation of these doctrines led to his expulsion from the Council of Twelve and the Church. I am not even aware of any fundamentalist groups which hearken back to these teachings, which thus represent a dense historical trivium. So he is an interesting but inconsequential edge case.

The middle treatments of atonement in LDS thought, notably starting from Orson Pratt and John Taylor, rapidly returned to some version of penal substitution. His *Mediation and Atonement* seems to me to be a straightforward expression of this doctrinal position, although it consists in the main simply of a scriptural exposition.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, Latter-day Saint thinkers began to publicly explore new theological modes of framing the atonement. While nothing so well-defined as a school of thought has really arisen as a result of any of these, some of these (such as Skousen's intelligence theory) have had a strong impact in certain circles. Most of these theories start from two mutual points of departure: first, the inadequacy of penal substitution as a principle of *justice*, and secondly, a consideration of the expanded canon available to Latter Day Saints.

DIVINE INFLUENCE

The earliest public consideration in this new vein was Eugene England's divine influence theory. England was a professor of English at BYU and a perpetual gadfly. He founded the journal *Dialogue* as one of the premier non-Church-affiliated outlets for Mormon intellectuals. In the first volume, England published an essay arguing that the demands of justice refers not a cosmic law of the harvest but to our own inability to truly accept ourselves due to our sins. He argued that

Paradoxically, our moral sense of justice both brings me to the awareness of sin that must begin all repentance and yet interferes with my attempts to repent. I feel that every action must bear

its consequences and that I must justify my actions to myself; since there is a gap between belief and action I am in a state which brings into my heart and mind a sense of guilt, of unbearable division within myself. ... This same moral nature, this sense of justice that demands satisfaction, causes me to want to improve my life but also to insist that I pay the penalty in some way for my sin. But of course there is no way I can finally do this. ... God pierces to the heart of this paradox through the Atonement, and it becomes possible for us personally to experience both alienation and reconciliation, which opens us to the full meaning of both evil and good, bringing us to a condition of meekness and lowliness of heart where we can freely accept from God the power to be a god. And Alma also taught his son this other essential role God plays in the Atonement. Besides giving mortals "remorse of conscience" by giving the law and judging us, "God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice ..." (Alma 4 2:15).

[However, God intervenes through Jesus to assuage this sense of moral responsibility that leads to estrangement from God and ourselves. He penetrates our refusal to accept ourselves by showing us that we are worthy of our own self-acceptance because God accepts us unconditionally:]

Christ is the unique manifestation in human experience of the fullness of ... unconditional love from God. Christ's sacrificial love was not conditional upon our qualities, our repentance, anything; he expressed his love to us while we were yet in our sins—not completing the process of forgiveness, which depends on our response, but initiating it in a free act of mercy. This is a kind of love quite independent from the notion of justice. There is no quid-pro-quo about it ... and that is precisely why it is redemptive. It takes a risk, without calculation, on the possibility that we can realize our infinite worth. It gets directly at that barrier in us, our sense of justice, which makes me incapable of having unconditional love for myself—unable to respond positively to my own potential, because I am unable to forgive myself, unable to be at peace with myself until I have somehow "made up" in suffering for my sins, something I am utterly incapable of doing. The demands of justice that Amulek and Alma are talking about, which must be overpowered, are from our own sense of justice, not some abstract eternal principle but our own demands on ourselves; those demands which bring us into estrangement with ourselves (as we gain new knowledge of right but do not live up to it) and thus begin the process of growth through repentance, but we cannot complete that process.

MORAL INFLUENCE

Another strand of Mormon thought—perhaps not so heterodox as some others—adhere to what is essentially a moral influence theory. In this telling, the atonement is notable for the subjective change it produces within us. Jesus suffers because of his immense empathy with the sinner, and this is efficacious because it allows him, knowing all, to understand and thence forgive all.

He was crucified because of sin (that is, by sinful people) and allowed himself to be crucified for sin, that is, as a witness, to enable others to overcome sin. Gethsemane was necessary because it was the essential approach to understanding and forgiveness, Jesus preparing for the role of mediator. And the crucifixion of Jesus was necessary (in the sense that it was inevitable) and necessarily allowed (to preserve human freedom and present an effective witness). (Hansen, p. 219)

Another form of this theory exists as a sort of gnostic, or knowledge-based atonement. In this account, what Jesus did gave him participatory knowledge of sin and its effects, and thus he is enabled to lead us back by walking us through the consequences and elements of our sins.

[I would suggest that Christ] enables my deep repentance. He grapples with every punctilio of my sins so he can lead me to understand and repent them myself. I repent through him. Such an

understanding of the atonement fits with the implication in Alma 7:11-12 and Matthew 25:40 that Christ's atonement involved a total communion with human experience.
(<http://www.jrganymede.com/2015/03/10/14716/>)

Another similar view is that repentance is not a function of our misdeeds and errors, but instead of acquiring more light and truth, and consequently what Jesus did is to acquire a precise and minute knowledge of those sins in order to lead us back out of the labyrinth of our own fallen devices.

AGENTIAL (EXPANDED MORAL INFLUENCE)

Raise your hand if you first encountered the theory of intelligences and atonement in a photocopied talk by Cleon Skousen on your mission.

This theory has a fairly strong hold on the imagination of many Mormons I've talked to, perhaps because of its compelling exposition of the old doctrine of intelligences.

Skousen proposes, in a nutshell, that the universe is essentially animist: every particle of creation is an intelligence. (He draws on Widtsoe, for instance, in elaborating this point.) God, as the being who established laws of progression and is the greatest intelligence among them, is held by all in reverence and esteem. This constitutes God's power and honor and glory: the absolute obedience of these intelligences to him. (This draws on Alma's passage about the conditions under which "God would cease to be God".) However, we as moral agents in this fallen world sin, and this is an outrage to the order of creation. If we are not punished, God's judgment and worthiness to rule is called into question by the intelligences, and this demand constitutes justice. To satisfy this demand, God instead sends his own son Jesus to earth to suffer and die—thus effecting sort of a reverse governmental theory: instead of suffering to show how serious God takes sin, Jesus suffers to show the constituent intelligences of creation how seriously God takes our salvation. When the intelligences observe the descent of Christ below all things, they are moved by his compassion for us and willing to relinquish their cry for justice, thus effecting mercy.

- What's good about this theory?
 - It accounts for many unique doctrines of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and Orson Pratt. It explains why we cannot be simply forgiven. It explains why Jesus had to suffer.
 - It does not seem to connect our personal sins directly to what Jesus did, except in a vague way. It places God in a precarious position with regard to his rulership over the universe. It doesn't explain why the Father himself can't atone for us.

EMPATHY

Dennis Potter presented a series of philosophical questions analyzing the moral structure of penal substitution from an LDS standpoint. Among other flaws he perceived, he asks what is "paid" by Christ: is it pain? What about guilt? Can Christ take upon him our guilt and still be "innocent"? His consideration of these problems leads him to reformulate a Catholic theory which argues that Christ's passion is efficacious because of the way it prevails upon God to be lenient to sinners. (Here is an echo of the governmental theory.) Thus the debt is not removed, but the payment is mitigated instead. The situation becomes like the priest's silver in *Les Misérables*. "Justice is satisfied even if the law is not", by *either* punishment *or* forgiveness.

Potter amends this Catholic suggestion by pointing out the long-standing Mormon belief that Jesus' suffering in Gethsemane helped him to understand *our* suffering better. This permits him to understand *why* we do what we do: in particular, *why* we *sin*. Given this insight, Jesus is thus qualified to pass judgment upon us because he knows our inner mental and spiritual states. The atonement is thus effective because Jesus knows when suspension of the debt would allow us to progress, rather than damning us further.

DIVINE-INFUSION

In response to this, Jacob Morgan presented the divine-infusion theory. Morgan suggests that the empathy theory fails to account for why the atonement would affect anyone except Christ, since his internal empathy is the only factor materially affected by the act of atonement. Morgan proposes instead that the primary goal of the atonement was to prevent Nephi's super-fallen state from being realized. The atonement infused all of creation with a spark of divinity, the "light of Christ", and thereby raised the waterline of creation closer to heaven than it otherwise would have been. He accomplishes this by breaking the Book of Mormon's concept of justice into two pieces, punitive justice and deserts justice. *Punitive justice* is the justice that demands a full price be paid by the guilty party under any circumstances. *Deserts justice*, in contrast, is the principle of restoration: we not only reap what we sow, but we reap what we desire and merit. It is a tendentious reading of Alma's doctrine of restoration, essentially. The atonement allows a shift from punitive justice (designed to lead us to repentance) towards deserts justice to take place (deserts justice then being realized fully at the final judgment). Jesus atones, in this account, to give us the light of Christ or a conscience, thus redeeming our desires away from the super-fallen state into which they would otherwise completely settle.

In short, the atonement for Morgan doesn't react to a relentless demand of justice for suffering. Instead, the atonement pulls the entire universe away from the negative pole of annihilation and darkness enough that meaningful change and growth—repentance—become possible. Thus *our* works, as informed by the light of Christ, do change us and save us by bringing us to the ultimate restoration of our desires. Suffering is a *consequence* of sin designed to bring us to repentance rather than a *price paid* for it.

COMPASSION

The most rigorous theologian to work in Mormonism is Blake Ostler, who has spent a decade or so composing several very large books on Mormon theology in dialogue with Christianity and formal philosophy. Although in his earlier works (in the 1980s), Ostler promoted the classical penal substitutionary theory, since 2012 he has elaborated a novel theory of ongoing atonement, the *compassion theory*.

1. Sin is Self-Absorbed Alienation. As we grow from childhood we all freely (but initially innocently) make the choice to hide ourselves from God and each other by hardening our hearts. We betray ourselves by violating the law of love and choose to harden our hearts against God and others. In so doing, we alienate ourselves from authentic existence and engage in numerous behaviors that injure our relationships with others. We engage in a self-deceived way of being where we convince ourselves that remaining alienated will bring us the greatest happiness. 2. Atonement Persuades us to Give Up our Alienation. In the absence of atonement we would be "super-fallen" in the sense that we would be angels to the devil, stuck in our sinful nature and unable to freely choose to repent. However, God gives us our agency by: (a) giving us the light of Christ which actuates our conscience and a knowledge of good and evil; and (b) offering to enter into relationship with us as a matter of unconditional grace and unmerited love. Because of the atonement we are made free to choose between relationship in eternal life with him or to suffer the pain of alienation and spiritual death. He offers to accept us into covenant relationship through the sign of baptism. At the moment we freely accept this free gift, we are "justified" or in right covenant relationship with God. In the moment of opening our hearts to accept Christ, we are redeemed from our alienation and reconciled to God. Realizing that God loves us unconditionally and regards us as justified or worthy to be in covenant relationship with him as a matter of grace can persuade us to soften our hearts and open to relationship once again. 3. Repentance Heals and Maintains the Relationship. In order to be in relationship with a perfect

being, we must be willing to abide those conditions which are inherent in a close and abiding relationship of fellowship – the provisions of the law of love. The conditions of the law of love define the terms of the covenant necessary to remain in relationship with God and the community of God's kingdom. We must be willing to let go of our past and all of the behaviors that, by their very nature, create alienation. That is, we must repent by ceasing to engage in behaviors contrary to the law of love, making reparation for the harms we have caused and asking forgiveness of those we have treated with less than love. 4. Union with Christ Results in New Life and Light. When we repent and open to accept Christ, we 10 A more complete expression of the theory can be found in chapters 6 and 7 of Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Love of God and the Problems of Theism* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2006). 10

accept his light into our lives to commingle with the light of our lives. We become a new person "in Christ" living co-shared-life in which his light shines in our countenances. We become "new creatures" who are born- again into this newness of life in Christ. He takes up abode in us and we take up abode in him. We take his name upon us and his image is renewed in us. In this sense, we are at-one with Christ. Prior to entering into union with Christ our lives are burdened by the darkness of sin. When we overcome our alienation by entering into union of life in Christ, the darkness of our lives that we share with him is transformed by the light of his love to a greater brightness that grows in the process of sanctification. That is, sanctification is the process of growth in the light toward deification. Deification is the fulness of glorification in union with the divine persons in the Godhead 5. A Condition of Entering into Union is Willingness to be Vulnerable to the Other in Relationship. Love, by its very nature, entails vulnerability to the free choices of the other with whom one is in relationship. The compassion theory maintains that our sins cause pain for those who would choose to be in relationship with us as a natural necessity of the way that authentic relationships function. It is painful to be in relationship with us who violate the law of love in many ways. In addition, divine union entails the coinherence or indwelling of our lives in each other. According to Mormon scriptures, we share our light or life's energy with each other in union. The Compassion Theory posits that when the darkness of our sins is mingled with the perfect light of Christ we are enlightened, but the darkness that is in us causes him to experience momentary but excruciating pain. The darkness is a cause of momentary pain that is turned to joy through repentance and healing relationship. Christ is not punished for our sins, nor does he bear our shameful guilt or moral culpability; rather, what he experiences is the pain and subsequent joy of entering into relationship of shared life and light with imperfect humans. 6. Christ is Uniquely Able to Accomplish Atonement. To enter into the union of life in a way that expresses not merely empathy and omniscient knowing, but experiential sharing of our alienated condition, Christ learned compassion by the things that he suffered. According to Mormon scripture, Christ learned how to succor us and share our lives fully by the things that he suffered as a mortal. Christ is uniquely qualified by his experience because he achieved a fulness of union and glory with the Father while in the Garden of Gethsemane and knew first-hand the pain of omniscient empathy of all the sin that had occurred in the world. Further, fully divine beings, as such, cannot experience first-hand the alienation that is the essence of our human condition because they abide in a relationship of complete union with the divine persons. Only by becoming mortal and experiencing alienation first-hand can such experiential knowledge be possible. Christ suffered the essence of spiritual death while on the cross when he experienced complete abandonment by the Father following his complete union with the Father. Only he, in all of history, knew the fullness of the loss of that union and the depth of pain of complete abandonment. These experiences uniquely qualify Christ to succor us in pain and to persuade us to overcome our alienation by choosing to repent and enter into relationship with him. Only Christ had the fulness of experience to transform our darkness with

his light in virtue of his experiences in Gethsemane and on the cross. His forgiveness of those who nailed him to the cross while in this state of alienated abandonment is the completion of divine love necessary to render at-one-ment and overcome our alienation. Christ is also uniquely able to effect atonement because he has power in himself to lay down his life and take it up again. Christ is able to resurrect and to grant the power of resurrection to us as well. The resurrection overcomes our alienation by bringing us back into the presence of God to be judged according to our works. We are judged according to the desires of our hearts by the Law of Restoration which returns to us what we truly desire as shown by our works in life. (Alma 41) The Law of Restoration is also recognized by the fact that the degree of light or glory that “quickens” or gives life to our bodies in the resurrection is 11

dependent on whether we abide a telestial, terrestrial or celestial law. (D&C 88:20-32) 7. Atonement is the Mode of Relationship God Seeks to Have with Us. To be at-one is to be in divine union. Being at-one is the very mode of being that Christ seeks with us at all times. He seeks to have the greatest possible unity of loving relationship. He seeks for us to relate to him in the very same unity of oneness with which he relates to the Father and Holy Ghost. Through our union with Christ we shall thus also be at-one with the divine persons in the Godhead in the same sense that they are one. 8. Christ Satisfied the Demands of Justice of the Law of Restoration. Christ suffered as the first person ever to join together the fulness of capacity for experience as God with mortal experience intimately acquainted with human suffering first-hand. The magnitude of suffering was so great that Christ shrank at the prospect, but willingly experienced the pain to fulfill the will of the Father so that he is fully moved by compassion: “And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance.” (Alma 34:15) “Having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing betwixt them and justice; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice.” (Mosiah 15:9) The “demands of justice” are the demands of the Law of Restoration that each person shall have returned what s/he has sent out, reaping what has been sown. If we repent, then Christ willingly and lovingly accepts into his being what we would have suffered so that we don’t have to. If we don’t repent, then we must suffer for our own sins. (See Alma 41) The purpose of the law that decrees that we shall receive according to our works in judgment is to awaken us to the suffering we will endure as a natural result of our actions if we don’t repent. Thus, the demands of justice are answered in Christ’s atonement because we each receive what we freely choose – nothing could be more just than that. If we choose to repent, then we receive mercy by letting go of our past and forgiving all others. As we forgive and show mercy, so we are forgiven and receive mercy. If we don’t, then we suffer the full weight of justice for our sins by bearing the pain ourselves for the natural consequences of unloving conduct. Thus, the Compassion Theory rejects the retributive notion of justice that demands that someone must suffer and pay a price in order for someone to be forgiven. The demand of suffering and payment is replaced by the condition that one must repent and have a genuine change at the core of one’s being – one’s very heart – to meet the demands of justice. Because the atonement meets the demands of justice by placing us on probation and allowing us time to repent rather than executing justice immediately, we need not be punished to satisfy the demands of justice. Instead, God has demonstrated his mercy by placing us on probation and giving us time to repent before the final judgment. (See Alma 42)

(This theory and other popular LDS notions often seem to entail Jesus’ suffering continuing as we sin

and repent—an ongoing atonement. This is not to my taste—I may be wrong, but I don’t see evidence for his continued suffering or its necessity. I adhere to a more Protestant contention of *solus Christus*, that the sacrifice of Christ was single and sufficient.)

SACRAMENTAL

The giant of midcentury Mormon thought, Hugh Nibley articulated a ritualistic and Hebraizing view of the atonement. Elements of Hebrew and other classical sources of thought were brought together in his signature style to form a highly sacral view of atonement. He draws in everything from Egyptian hieroglyphics to the second law of thermodynamics, and ultimately offers less a theory of atonement and more a highly eclectic collection of symbols. Truman Madsen’s “The olive press” also explores the deep symbolic wealth contained in rituals which point to the atonement.

Perhaps inspired by Nibley’s strongly ritualistic view of atonement, Neal A. Maxwell promoted the idea that the atonement is an ordinance, a specific instance of a pattern which echoes back and forth throughout the broad eternities: “Imagine, Jehovah, the Creator of this and other worlds, ‘astonished’! Jesus knew cognitively what He must do, but not experientially. He had never personally known the exquisite and exacting process of an atonement before. Thus, when the agony came in its fulness, it was so much, much worse than even He with his unique intellect had ever imagined!” (I believe that Bruce R. McConkie was also of this opinion, but I couldn’t find a concise statement to back that up.) This view aligns well with what I’ll call the esoteric pre-Correlation orthodoxy, the school of Joseph Fielding Smith and McConkie, which was ascendant in the church until the mid-nineties.

DEVOTIONAL

The major strand of Mormon thought, however, even more dominant than penal substitution, is the devotional view. In this case, the means of Jesus’ success and our salvation are jointly explicitly deemphasized rhetorically in favor of exhortations to “apply” the blood of Christ, or to “use” the atonement. It’s typically an instrumental view of what the atonement accomplished, but has produced some of the finest sermons on the atonement within Mormonism.

There are a few documents I’ve included in the primary sources, although there are dozens of others: Jeffrey R. Holland’s “What is the heart of the atonement?” (which in particular I recommend as I would wager a fairly large sum of money that none of you have read or heard of before), and some apostolic talks by Oaks and Haight are included there. This is also the school of Stephen Robinson and Terry and Fiona Givens. The atonement here is cast as almost a waterfall into which one steps and is washed clean. It is a hopeful if nonrigorous depiction, and it is sincere and potent.

Often a generous portrayal of justice is involved:

I believe that His [Heavenly Father's] judicial concept of His dealings with His children could be expressed in this way: I believe that in His justice and mercy He will give us the maximum reward for our acts, give us all that He can give, and in the reverse, I believe that He will impose upon us the minimum penalty which it is possible for Him to impose.
(J. Reuben Clark, Conference Report, 3 Oct. 1953, p. 84.)

(Incidentally, this leads to one criticism made of Mormonism: that it doesn’t take sin seriously enough.)

Notably, rather than offering a new theory, Stephen Robinson tries to explain that penal substitution is not in fact problematic. He argues,

Jesus Christ did not just assume the punishment for our sins—he took the guilt as well. The sin, the experience itself with all its negative consequences and ramifications, and not just the penalty for sin, became his He becomes the guilty party in our place—he becomes guilty for us and experiences our guilt. (Robinson, Believing Christ, p. 117)

Of course, this seems to imply that Jesus is no longer innocent... well, you see the sorts of tangles we get into with these theories at this point.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Now the big question: *so what?* We've been to the top of the mountain, as it were, but how will this impact our day-to-day life and behavior? The two final questions I'd like us to discuss are these:

- *We take upon us the name of Christ.* How are we saved by taking upon us his name?
- We often speak of *becoming a disciple*. I imagine for most of us that we have some sort of image of what we will be in the future as a result of that process. But how does the atonement of Jesus Christ help us actually accomplish that?

Since I've spent this much time talking about philosophy and theology, I may as well share with you my view of the atonement.

In all of this, I have spoken to you of Jesus Christ's atonement through my weakness. I'm not humble, but this is not a false humility now. I only come to know Jesus Christ because of the atonement, and I only use the atonement because of my weakness. "Sinne is behovely" (Julian of Norwich).

When I was a child, I had a misapprehension that repenting for a sin made Jesus pay the price for that sin. Thus repentance made Jesus suffer worse, and I had a moral problem with that. I've since come to believe (in contrast to, say, Ostler) that Jesus paid not in detail for each sin, but rather he paid for all sins, for all sin. It's almost like he just bought the whole farm, so he can do what he likes with it. (This harkens back to the ransom theory.) The atonement, furthermore, I do not believe to have been a discrete event with his passion, but to have encompassed his entire incarnation and mortal life. That was the experiential knowledge he gained as well which enables him to relate to me, and that has been driven forcefully home to me: *he knows my situation*.

Broadly speaking, I believe that baptism saves us from *sin*—removes us from the domain of the devil and makes us subjects of Christ in the kingdom of heaven—and repentance saves us from *sins*—the specific and repeated actions which we take to alienate ourselves from divine grace.

We spoke two weeks ago about parables and their application to the atonement. I would like to particularly highlight one paradigm of understanding which arises from Matthew 5:41: "twain" What I see in the operation of the atonement is precisely this second mile. There is an old observation of the Church Father Irenæus that it is the going of the second mile that renders you a free man rather than a slave.

Finally.

There are many questions, including very important ones, which we have not had an opportunity to address in details, questions like "Was repentance and reconciliation the same prior to Jesus' coming?" or "Why an atonement in Gethsemane and another at Calvary?"

But the one I will consider in closing is this: "Why is Jesus *Christ*? Why him, and why not Lucifer, and why not God the Father?"

Lucifer followed the rules, at least almost always and up to the end.

God the Father similarly in some sense discovered or established the rules, and perhaps that placed him beyond the ability to atone. I don't have any idea for certain.

But Jesus is Christ *not* because he "followed the rules". That qualified him in a sense, certainly, but Jesus is Christ because he laid all aside, even the presence of God, and submitted himself below all things. He followed the rules, and then laid aside the just reward to descend. I can't begin to really understand that—beyond all loss, all torture, all nihilism, all despair. He took our hopelessness upon himself. He took our emptiness into himself, and the light was not ultimately comprehended by the darkness, but overcame.

And so that, for me, is the message of the atonement: that all breaches that will to be closed, will be closed. That all wounds will be healed—and not with scars. That all that is tired will rest and be renewed. That all that is separate will be at one. And not just the big things—children gone astray or wars ravaging like wolves—but God marks the fall of the sparrow.

What I have tried to do is use the knife of analysis to carve reality differently, to give you a new set of concepts to try on. If they fit your experience, then by all means take them and make them your own. If they do not, lay them aside. Even false beliefs and false models, even untestable models, actually have consequences on subjective states and behaviors.

So, in the end, the point I wish to make generally is this: ideas have origins, and they have destinations. Too often we encounter them simply *in media res*, in the midst of their and our journeys. Bereft of their history and context, we make use of them will they—nil they, and we find it difficult to trace them to their ends. I hope that we can do more, for this is an exercise in discernment. What I have attempted to do here is not rigorous nor exhaustive, but has suggested to me at least the possibilities of understanding and perspective which I can explore and try and prove true or false as I come unto the Lord.

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