
(More) Musings and Methodologies

We all hear them using our own languages to tell the wonderful things God has done. (Acts 2:11, CEV)

THIS IS NOT THE book it once was. While much remains the same, in the decade since this manuscript was first published, some of my own thoughts on it have changed. More importantly, it has been read by others within the Faith Community, some of whom have committed to paper their own opinions and criticisms of the biblical and theological ideas it contains.¹ Mostly, this has been done in the same spirit, and with the same intentions found within these pages—those being the vital and continuing need to understand and make meaningful the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This pastoral and missional focus, and the desire for open dialogue, is the fuel that drives forward theological reflection. Indeed, the original version of this manuscript contained a final section called, “Let the Conversation Begin,” in which Dr. Robin Parry engaged immediately with its assertions and observations. At the time, it was noted how vital and fruitful this was, the book finishing with these lines: “Though all writing inevitably ends with a full-stop . . . theology is ‘faith seeking understanding.’ . . . To that end, theology should never be an untouchable, propositional statement, but always open to dialogue.”²

To remain faithful to this methodology, the argument here has been revised in places to take into account the influence, and impact of those

1. See, for example, McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*; Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*; Holmes, *The Wondrous Cross*; Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement*; Tidball et al. (eds), *The Atonement Debate*; Jeffrey et al, *Pierced For Our Transgressions*; Falconer, *Atonement Synthesis*; Laughlin, *Jesus and the Cross*.

2. Mann, *Atonement for a “sinless” Society*, 210.

who have graciously and critically included these ideas within their own work. However, it has also been revised because its own internal argument is that a decade can be a long time in theology. The context in which we are all called to “do theology” constantly changes. That may not require us to make large-scale revision of long-held doctrinal beliefs, but it may well call us to communicate with more nuance, to prefer a particular theological standpoint, or to re-articulate our understanding of the biblical narrative, and the theologies we build (in this case, a theory of atonement). To fail to do so not only puts the Christian community at a disadvantage when seeking to make meaningful the life-changing message we carry, it also puts us at odds with our own history. As Laughlin has observed,

it must be strongly asserted that it is not possible to simply repeat the words of the Bible, Fathers, or the Reformers and expect to gain a hearing within our own contemporary context. Their terms and expressions are valuable, but this does not relieve us of the responsibility to articulate the saving message of the Gospel in contemporary language and within the constituted meaning of our own culture. . . . [T]he old light is both familiar and comforting, but as time goes on it does struggle to illuminate the far corners of the present.³

To ask oneself if our own articulation of the saving message of the gospel illuminates the far corners of the present is an indispensable question. It is certainly something that needed to be asked of this particular venture, and one that required re-asking again when making revisions. To that end, changes have been made, especially within the first half of the book. That said, the core of the argument remains. Indeed, in the decade since its publication, it may well be argued that its central thesis is as vital as ever. Certainly, sin remains conspicuous by its absence, not only in the language of popular culture, but quite possibly in the interface between Christian communities and the world around them. To state the words of outspoken evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins, who made a documentary looking at our move away from the concept of sin in developed societies, “The old notion of sin isn’t relevant anymore . . . it clashes with reality, it creates guilt, and a society full of lies. . . . In our post-religious world, we can look rationally at what we once called sinful behavior. We can weigh up actual harms and benefits, and temper our instincts.”⁴

3. Laughlin, *Jesus and the Cross*, 3 and 4.

4. Dawkins, “Sex, Death and the Meaning of Life,” Channel 4, 2012.

At the same time, the work of Brené Brown has catapulted talk of shame from the therapist's couch into mainstream vernacular.⁵ This has been one of the drivers for revisiting *Atonement for a Sinless Society*. For while shame, and the need to overcome its impact on human beings as social and spiritual animals, has a champion on the *New York Times* Best Seller List, it remains a theological Cinderella. Ten years on from the first edition of this manuscript, Robin Stockitt was still able to lament that if “shame is so pervasive, so universally evident, then surely we require a theology to understand and address it . . . [but] very little theological exploration has yet been undertaken on this theme.”⁶

Back to the Beginning

In the “Musings and Methodologies” that appeared in the original version of this book, it was argued that in the present climate our theological communication needed the metaphorical equivalent of a new *Pentecost* (hence the quote from the book of Acts, above). While this may not be a totally fair observation, given the work that is being done in many areas of contemporary theology, it largely remains the case when it comes to our communication of atonement. Too often we remain guilty of speaking a foreign language when we tell the story of the cross of Christ—not because the story itself is irrelevant, even to a “sinless” society,⁷ but because we persist in thinking about it in narrow terms and in illustrating its significance in outmoded ways. As Green and Baker point out, “Many of us have been content merely to repeat the words of the New Testament itself, as though these words were themselves self-interpreting, requiring no translation.”⁸ This appears to be the case despite the fact that many, even within the worshipping community, struggle to understand the purpose and wisdom of much of the language that refers to atonement. In reality, the question: what

5. I first came across the work of Brené Brown via her TEDTalks (ted.com). At the time of writing she was one of the top five most viewed talks with close to 20 million views. Her research can also be accessed through her books, *Daring Greatly*; *The Gifts of Imperfection*; and *I Thought it Was Just Me*.

6. Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed*, 7.

7. I have put “sinless” here in scare quotes to indicate that by sinless society I do not intend to refer to a society without sin, nor a society that mistakenly considers itself perfect, but rather a society that does not see itself in terms of the category of sin at all. However, I will not deploy scare quotes for the rest of the book, but take them as given.

8. Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 18.

is the importance of the death of Jesus? “typically attracts either no answers at all, other than looks of puzzlement, or endorsements of . . . ‘penal substitutionary atonement’ [which many believe] interprets the significance of Jesus’ death fully, completely, without remainder.”⁹ This last observation is most tragic, for despite our confidence that *we* have the atonement pinned down, it remains anathema to the majority of people who we encounter within our towns and cities because we insist on speaking a language that was once fruitful, but is now incomprehensible.¹⁰ To twenty-first-century sensibilities, the crucifixion of Jesus was nothing more than a primitive, barbaric, pointless death.

At Pentecost, the people gathered were “surprised” to hear Jesus’ followers communicating to them in their own language, and as a result they became a captive audience, willing to listen because they were able to understand. In the same way, the Christian community needs to surprise its contemporaries by telling the story of atonement in their own language and so captivate them with a meaningful and sufficient account of the Passion Narrative. The Gospel narratives should not be a museum piece, and neither should the theology and cultural awareness that we derive from them. We need to read and reread the atonement as time and place change the context in which we are called to communicate the salvific work of Christ. Our responsibility is to discern the overarching predicament of our time, to understand *the* question behind the questions of our cultural and philosophical context, and to engage them with a meaningful and sufficient story of atonement.

We are called to be a community out of which ever-new expressions of our faith can emerge. This is a wonderfully creative process, but it is also a risky one. For “the problem with atonement theologies is that they are sometimes so perceptive and brilliant that they last beyond their appropriate time—and at the same time, they are perpetuated longer than they should be because too few Christians have the courage to enter into the new, emerging darkness and prefer to rely on the old light of entrenched

9. Ibid., 12.

10. At the time the first edition of this volume was published, there was a protracted debate taking place, particularly among UK Evangelicals, about the relevancy of certain atonement theories, largely generated by *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2004), a book authored by myself and Steve Chalke. The result of that discussion was the publication of a number of volumes on the atonement, including, *The Atonement Debate* (Zondervan, 2007).

soteriologies.”¹¹ This, of course, leads simply to the following questions. What is our time? How do people see themselves? And what influence will that have on the theological task of making the gospel heard? These are huge questions with myriad answers, but they are also the questions of culture and context that the church has always faced. Indeed, they are the questions answered by incarnation.

The starting point for what follows is the desire to wrestle with the observation that we live in a society that could be called sinless. That is, individuals no longer live with a sense of sin or guilt in the way that many classical models of atonement require in order for them to be successfully communicated. If this is the case, then the implications for the Christian community, and its models of atonement are obvious. Though evangelistic initiatives may wish to chart a society in which sin still abounds, the increasing reality is that the plight of the self is that he or she is “a sinner with no word for it.”¹²

There is a measurable hermeneutical task here. This task involves dealing with worldview questions. What’s wrong? What’s the solution? It is a task that deals with the limitations of a culture, a deficit in its understanding—and it does so by approaching that deficit through observing the rise of narrative for self-understanding and then appropriating its implications. Therefore, of utmost importance are questions regarding the role of the reader, the psychological self, and the storied self: What do they bring to the narratives of atonement? What do they look for? What do they understand?

The Structure of What Follows

Chapter 1, “A Narrative-Shift towards Innocence,” charts the demise of sin in the storytelling vocabulary of many living in the West. We will see that the stories we tell seldom, if ever, attribute sin, guilt, or wrongness to ourselves. In turn, geneticists, sociologists, and psychologists increasingly legitimize our narratives and allow us to live in the confidence that we do no wrong. From the cult of victim to the loss of moral categories, the chapter also discusses the loss of “the other” (historically, socially, and spiritually) and its role in extinguishing the embers of sin.

The claim of chapter 2, “Recognizing Shame,” is that while we are able to push away sin and guilt in relation to others, the intensity of the

11. Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, 130.

12. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 198.

emphasis upon self has created an often-crippling phenomenon, typically labelled shame. Shame, or our failure to live to an ideal that we have held for ourselves, is an experience of self-deficiency. What we crave, therefore, is a coherent self—the formation of a unified wholeness. However, such desires always seem out of reach. The fallout from this is far-reaching, but perhaps of most significance for the individual is the social isolation that ensues, which drives an irreconcilable search for intimacy.

The final chapter of the first section, “Shame and Atonement,” considers the implications such a plight has for the Christian church and its central desire to communicate the atoning work of Christ to a lost and hurting world. As we shall see, the problem is relatively easy to establish, the solution a much more difficult prospect. Here the impasse will be spelled out in its starkest form: with sin and guilt there is at least the possibility of telling our story and relating our wrongdoing, bringing the hope of forgiveness and reconciliation. With shame, the primary victim is the self, making intentional acts of confession an anathema.

The second section, “The Function of Narrative: Story, Self, and the Shape of Things to Come,” develops the discussion about the importance of narrative, both in shaping the individual and for expressing a theological understanding of the humanity and world we inhabit. Therefore, chapter 4, “Narrative Now,” shows that, far from being peripheral in our perceptions about ourselves and the world, story is seen very much as a pervasive, necessary, and constructive epistemological category. Sociologists, psychologists, theologians, and scientists are recognizing this and using narrative in their work. However, narrative is not without its difficulties. Personal stories are typically isolated, localized, and pluralistic.

Chapter 5, “Narrative Possibilities,” focuses on the heart of the matter, discussing the possibility for narrative to construct, deconstruct, and perhaps most vitally, reconstruct the self. By briefly engaging the field of narrative therapy, we shall acknowledge the reality that personal stories often contain torment. Indeed, in the case of shame, they become cover stories to throw others off our scent; to protect us from the fear that our real self may be exposed, and we will be despised. Because we are isolated by our stories, and not liberated by them, narrative therapists have reached the conclusion that their role is to unlock this destructive cycle via counter-stories.

Chapter 6, “Narrative and Christian Soteriology,” takes this idea of the counter-narrative and suggests that conversion is, at one level, nothing more than an embracing of an alternative story for the self to inhabit.

Therefore, a narrative approach to the atonement is more likely to engage the self and society with its meaning. In this case, Christian soteriology becomes the joining of the individual's story with the story of the Christian community, and by implication, with the story of God.

The third section of the book, "The Intent of Jesus in the Gospels: Atonement and Human Coherence," introduces us to the story of atonement as told through the Passion Narratives. Taking the time between the Last Supper and the crucifixion, we re-read this story in the light of shame.

In chapter 7, "Jesus Narrates His Intent: A Story of Coherence," we enter the story of atonement as Jesus and his disciples prepare to share the Last Supper. This chapter will argue that Jesus narrates his identity and his intent both to himself and to others. This is no more evident than around the table he shares with his friends on the eve of his execution. For the reader, the narrative tension soon becomes clear. For what Jesus is portraying is effectively his ideal self. The question that arises, and which is played out in the events to come, is whether this Jesus is able to do precisely what the reader knows he or she cannot do: to coherently hold together the ideal self and the real self. This is fundamental in constructing a model of atonement for the sinless self, for without the intent of Jesus the cross itself becomes nothing more than a hollow act. The reader is looking for the hope of human coherence, for the possibility of living free from shame. The self is seeking a narrative identity, which can hold together the ideal self and the real self without contradiction. Here, it will be argued, they can find such a story.

Running counter to Jesus' story is the intent of another—Judas. Therefore, in chapter 8, "Judas, and the Disciples: Stories of Incoherence," we take a risk in turning to Judas' story as a paradigm for the shame-filled self, lost within a narrative that lacks any sense of coherence. However, when Judas' story is handled in a more sympathetic way the reader becomes acquainted with one who is self-despising long before others scorn him. Here is one who, like ourselves, lacks the coherence he craves. Judas is also a victim in this story. He is the self-betrayed as much as he is the betrayer. But Judas isn't the only one lacking coherence, nor is he the only one doing the betraying. The other disciples demonstrate, one at a time, that they also all lack a consistency between intent and action. But, more than that, the power of the story is such that the reader cannot avoid repeating the anguished question raised by the disciples: am I also the betrayer? The chapter ends with the suggestion that there is hope to be found in this narrative. Our betrayals are not deliberate acts but personal failings. Just as the disciples

are not against Jesus but are simply failing at being for him, so we are not against those with whom we seek intimacy.

Chapter 9, “From “Death” to Life: The Hope Human Coherence,” argues that the cross is not a declaration that the narrative of Jesus’ life has collapsed and become unintelligible to him—it is a self-giving, not a hopeless giving up. Neither is it to be seen as the ultimate shaming of Jesus, his going to a place where none will follow. By contrast, the cross is the public reality of the private symbolism of the Upper Room. The bread broken at the Lord’s Supper is now brutally present on a hill named Golgotha. But it has to be so, for narration of intent without significant action leaves all concerned without the hope of liberation.

Finally, the section “Indwelling the Counter-Narrative” finds a home for encountering and appropriating these narratives of atonement through the Christian communities’ continual re-enactment of them in the Eucharist.

In the first chapter of this final section of the book, “A Rite of Identification,” the argument is put forward that the Eucharist is a rite of identification that allows for the atoning work of Jesus to manifest itself in the lives of those who encounter it. It is that moment when the death of the self can occur, and the possibility of divine authorship can become a real possibility. As the Eucharist is played out and the narrative of Jesus’ intent, betrayal, forgiveness, and eventual self-oblation is realized, the rite of identification calls on those present to offer and reorientate their lives in a similar way.

Chapter 11, “A Confrontation with Self,” suggests that the liturgy surrounding the Eucharist places words into our mouths to enable us to confess. This is not to dominate us, or to take us to a place that we do not wish to go, but to give us a point of recognition, and to enable the self to move beyond the inadequacies of its own narrative. Through confession we are brought to awareness that there is an absence of the “other” in right relationship to us, including the absence of God. It is these arguments that allow us to talk of the place of atonement in a sinless society. The Eucharist, in this context, becomes a place for the shamed and isolated self to discover for the first time transcendence and otherness, to be atoned for, to be reconciled, and to be authored once more by the Creator of life.

Finally, in “An Act of Communion,” we ask a vital question: where does the telling take place? To the isolated individual, wrestling with the issue of their shame, the fact that the Eucharist is a communal activity, and not simply a rite of identification acted out in isolation, is vital. As Jesus

faced the challenge of Gethsemane (the fear of failing in his resolve to go to the cross), so now also individuals must face their own dying to self, for they too are called to deny their self-seeking and self-justification and embrace the other in an act of mutual forgiveness. The community of faith is defined as a place of inclusion, where the self is called to confess his or her old self and embrace a new identity so that he or she can be atoned for, and reconciliation can occur.

John Bowker once wrote, “Theories of atonement are somewhat like lymphocytes in the body: they are solutions going around looking for a problem, and taking the shape of the problem as it is identified.”¹³ The task we are faced with, therefore, is not to go on a crusade in order to search out the sin that has hidden itself among the ruins of modernity—for sin, as we shall see, has become meaningless and insufficient as a descriptor for the plight of the self. Stories define who we are, and counter-stories change who we are, if we will let them. Therefore, the church needs to incarnate (or speak meaningfully) the story of atonement so it can be heard and understood, and bring about atonement. Although it is ultimately God, through the Holy Spirit, who reconciles us to himself, we need to play a part in communicating the story successfully.

13. Bowker, *The Meanings of Death*, 97–98. Cited by Sankey, “With, Through and In Christ: A Eucharist Approach to Atonement,” in Goldingay (ed.) *Atonement Today*.