Introduction

Refocusing the Atonement

For most Christians, from professional theologians to lay women and men, the word "atonement" refers to the means by which Jesus' death on the cross saves us and reconciles us to God. Was that death a punishment? a sacrifice? an example? a victory over powers? Some people have insisted strongly on one of these perspectives, often over and against the others. Recently, some discussions of the atonement have tended to be more generous, incorporating multiple theories, models, or images from the New Testament and Christian tradition into a more comprehensive—and therefore less precise—account of the atonement.

However, the fact that there is no theory or model of the atonement called "covenant," "covenant-renewal," "new-covenant," or something very similar is, or should be, rather surprising. These terms refer, after all, to a biblical image connected to Jesus' death—originating, it appears, with Jesus himself at his Last Supper[1]—and the source of the term "the New Testament." The latter fact rightly suggests, indeed, that "new covenant" is what the New Testament is all about. The neglect of the new covenant in discussions of atonement is likely due to an over-emphasis on the theological question of *how* Jesus' death brings about atonement, salvation, etc.—the

1. Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20. There has been some scholarly debate about the authenticity of the synoptic account of Jesus' interpretation of his death in terms of the (new) covenant, but the point for now is that the Gospels certainly report Jesus interpreting his death this way, as does Paul (1 Cor 11:25) and, Paul implies, early Christian tradition more generally.

mechanics, so to speak. But this is not, I would submit, the focus of the New Testament.[2]

To put it a bit differently, I would suggest that most interpretations of the atonement concentrate on the *penultimate* rather than the *ultimate* purpose of Jesus' death. This ultimate purpose is captured in texts like the following[3]:

> James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him [Jesus] and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." (Mark 10:35–40)

> "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32)

> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. (Rom 6:3–6)

> And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them . . . For our sake he [God the Father] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:15, 21)

2. On the source and problem of fixating on the mechanics of atonement, see Green, "Must We Imagine?," 164.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural citations are taken from the NRSV. Translations marked "MJG" are those of the author.

> He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:14)

> To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev 1:5b–6)

In texts such as these, we see that the ultimate purpose of Jesus' death was to create a transformed people, a (new) people living out a (new) covenant relationship with God together. Moreover, this people will not simply *believe in* the atonement and the one who died, they will eat and drink it, they will be baptized into it/him, they will be drawn to him and into it. That is, they will so identify with the crucified savior that words like "embrace" and "participation," more than "belief" or even "acceptance," best describe the proper response to this death. (Even the words "belief" and "believe" take on this more robust sense of complete identification.) But most models of the atonement stop short of this goal, focusing on absolutely necessary but nonetheless penultimate issues, such as forgiveness of sins or liberation from evil powers. To put it even more starkly, some discussions of the atonement may be compared to arguments over which type of delivery is best in dealing with a difficult birth situation—forceps, venthouse (suction), C-section, or whatever—when the point is that each of them effects the birth of a child, each solving the problem from a slightly different angle. But it is the result (a healthy child) that is most important, and it is the child, not the delivery process, that ultimately defines the word "birth."[4]

Building in part on that analogy, I have chosen as the title for this book *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant*. Jesus' death and the inauguration of the new covenant are explicitly linked in 1 Cor 11:25 and Luke 22:20, with similar links in the parallel gospel texts. The birth imagery is not present per se in these texts, but the metaphor is not without New Testament roots (e.g., John 3; Rom 8:18–25; Gal 4:19). In certain liturgical traditions, the connection of the new covenant and Jesus' death to a "birth" is made explicit: "By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection, you [God] gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the

4. This is not meant to underestimate the value of carefully exploring the meaning of Jesus' death from various angles, but to urge a proper ultimate focus.

Spirit."[5] This liturgical tradition for the celebration of the Lord's Supper has it right, and it serves as a rather perceptive, if unintended, summary of the thesis of the present work.

In this book, therefore, I aim in a modest way to help in correcting the problem of penultimate models of the atonement by proposing a new model that is really not new at all—the new-covenant model.[6] In fact, this model may legitimately lay claim to being the oldest interpretation of the atonement in the Christian tradition, going back to Jesus, the earliest churches, and the earliest Christian theologians (i.e., Paul, the evangelists, etc.).[7] I will argue that this is not merely an ancient model in need of rediscovery, but also a more comprehensive, integrated, participatory, communal, and missional model than any of the major models in the tradition. It overcomes the inherent rift in many interpretations of the atonement between the *benefits* of Jesus' death and the *practices of participatory discipleship* that his death both enables and demands. I contend throughout the book that in the New Testament the death of Jesus is not only the *source*, but also the *shape*, of salvation. It therefore also determines the shape of the community—the community of the new covenant—that benefits from and participates in Jesus' saving death.

The purpose of this book, then, is not to develop some new theory about the mechanics of Jesus' representative, sacrificial, nonviolent, and/or victorious death "for us." There are plenty of those around, and many of them have great merit. Rather, the purpose of this book is to show some of the connections between the themes of atonement, new covenant, participation, and discipleship in the New Testament, focusing especially on the participatory practices of faithfulness, love, and peace. At first, this trio sounds like a new version of the Christian tradition's three theological virtues of faith, love, and hope. It is, rather, the same triad articulated in a new (but not really new) way. What I will argue is that, throughout the

5. Present in the United Methodist services of Word and Table I and II, and sometimes used in other traditions or settings as well.

6. I have no connections with the developing theological movement within some parts of evangelicalism (especially Reformed Baptist circles) that calls itself "New Covenant Theology" as a via media between "Covenant Theology" and "Dispensational Theology." See, e.g., Swanson, "Introduction to New Covenant Theology."

7. Its origin in Jesus is (like everything else involving "the historical Jesus") debated. The major focus of this book is not the historical Jesus but the New Testament documents and their implications for Christian theology, though I will offer some theses, and arguments, regarding Jesus himself.

New Testament, *faith*, as a practice, is about faithfulness even to the point of suffering and death; *love*, as a practice, has a distinctive, Christlike shape of siding with the weak and eschewing domination in favor of service; and *hope*, as a practice, means living peaceably (which includes nonviolently) and making peace. Thus the summary triad "faithfulness, love, and peace" is appropriate.

The surprising part of this interpretation of the theological virtues to some readers will be the notion of hope as a practice, and specifically hope as practicing peace. But a moment's reflection on the theo-logic of this idea should reveal its inherent plausibility. The greatest form of hope in the Bible is for a new creation in which violence, suffering, tears, and death will be no more. We see this expressed in such lovely, inspiring texts as Isa 65:17–25 and Rev 21:1—22:5. Those who have this hope for a new creation and, more to the point, those who believe that this new creation has already been inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, will begin to practice its vision in the present. Accordingly, the practice of hope is the practice of peace. This sort of practice may be referred to as *anticipatory participation*. Such participation, however, stems not only from hope about the future (a purely proleptic participation), but also from participation in the death of Jesus that makes such hope possible by creating peace.

With this emphasis on participation, and thus transformation, I will claim that the New Testament is much more concerned about *what* Jesus' death does for and to humanity than *how* it does it. The New Testament employs a wide range of images and metaphors to portray God's gracious action in Christ's death. Yet this stunning array is part of a remarkably coherent picture of his death as that which brings about the new covenant (and thus the new-covenant community) promised by the prophets, which is also the covenant of peace. Many of the traditional and more recent models of the atonement related to the New Testament's various metaphors can be taken up into the more comprehensive model I am proposing as *penultimate* aspects of the *ultimate* purpose of Christ's death: the birth of the new covenant. Life in this new covenant is life in the Spirit of the resurrected Lord that is shaped by the faithful, loving, peacemaking (and therefore hope-making) death of the same crucified Jesus. Of course there is no Christian hope (or reason for faithfulness and love) without the resurrection of this Jesus from the dead. At points the resurrection will emerge explicitly, but even when it does not, we will assume its reality and significance throughout the entire book.

Along the way, we will intuit various implications of this model of the atonement for contemporary Christian theology and practice, and some of them will be noted explicitly, especially in chapter 8. The goal of this book, however, is not to present a complete, fully developed model of the atonement with all of its ramifications in place; that would require a much larger volume, and probably a different author. (Nonetheless, if given more years and energy, I may one day develop the arguments and implications of this book more fully. In the meantime, I leave that task to its readers.) Rather, the goal of this book is to present some of the basic New Testament foundations of, and its framework for, a new-covenant model of the atonement.

This is not to say that the New Testament (or even a single author, such as Paul) speaks with a single voice about these matters. As with other topics in New Testament theology, we will not find uniformity but unity in diversity. Yet, I will argue, the New Testament contains both sufficient raw material and a sufficient number of recurring themes—patterns, if you will—to justify discerning and describing a new-covenant model of the atonement. (Readers, in fact, will notice a number of lists and tables that display some of the various textual parallels and thematic patterns that express the new-covenant model of the atonement for which I am arguing.) Nevertheless, my approach to utilizing the New Testament writings is deliberately eclectic, as my goal is not merely, or even primarily, to survey the New Testament on a particular topic, but to develop a biblically informed model of the atonement that draws on the New Testament in its unity and its diversity. Not every New Testament writing will contribute equally to that project.

The significance of Jesus' death, both in terms of theology and in terms of existential consequences, has been the focus of my professional and personal life for many years. I have given many lectures and written many essays, and authored more than one previous book, on this topic. The present book builds on other treatments of the New Testament that I have published, but it moves in new directions and is much broader than simply a consideration of one particular author, such as Paul, or one individual book, such as Revelation. Paul does, however, receive a significant amount of attention, as does Luke.[8]

The most obvious reason for emphasis on these two writers is that together the Pauline and Lukan writings constitute a little more than half

8. Soon to appear also is a book solely on Paul that takes up some of the themes in this book: *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*.

of the New Testament, and each author uses the phrase "new covenant." If further justification with respect to Paul, who receives quite a bit of attention, is needed, I would simply say three things. First, Paul has been the source of a great deal of the discussion about the atonement in the Christian tradition; he needs to be heard again and again, and he needs to be heard afresh. Second, all models of the atonement are necessarily selective, because the New Testament writers did not set out to write a theology of the atonement, and certain perspectives and themes emerge in particular writers and writings more than in others. In that respect, this book is within the range of "normal." Third, Paul is my own primary area of expertise. All of that said, however, I am convinced that the new-covenant model being proposed here is not restricted to Paul but is, on the contrary, widespread in the New Testament, even if Paul (by virtue of the quantity and variety of his canonical writings) preserves and develops the model more fully than others.[9] Hebrews, which also uses the term "new covenant," will also figure in the discussion, of course, as will New Testament writings that do not use the term per se.

The explicit and ostensible subject of this book is the death of Jesus, and the book's genre a kind of thematic treatment of a central New Testament theme that is simultaneously a constructive theological proposal for a new (actually, not so new) model of the atonement. It may seem rather brash or even foolish to attempt to offer a new, even a not-so-new, model of the atonement. Yet, as we will see in chapter 1, numerous new models have recently been suggested, and the new covenant has begun to emerge as something in need of renewed consideration in connection with the atonement. In reality, moreover, this book is also a broader contribution to New Testament theology and ethics. (It may be the closest thing to a "New Testament theology," which some people have urged me to undertake, that I will produce.) In fact, I intend it to be a contribution to Christian theology and ethics more broadly still. This is not really due to the original intention or the expertise of the author as much as it is to the nature of the subject. What I have discovered, and now offer as the working assumption of this book, is that the death of Jesus is itself an extraordinarily comprehensive reality and topic. At the same time, I also wish to register my conviction and assumption that without the incarnation (as well as the resurrection, noted above),

9. This claim will surprise some readers, as there are some Pauline scholars who argue that the theme of the new covenant is of minimal importance to Paul. I, obviously, think otherwise.

the death of Jesus has no salvific value. That conviction will also emerge explicitly from time to time in various ways and various places.[10]

My intended audience is also quite broad: any and all who are interested in the significance of the death of Jesus for Christian theology and life. Although the book is quite heavily footnoted and is, at times, somewhat technical, I am hopeful that these aspects of it will not discourage non-specialists from engaging its claims. From initial reactions to earlier versions of these chapters presented orally and in writing (including some blog posts by non-academics), the book should be of interest to, and accessible to, not only theologians and biblical scholars, but also pastors and lay people (among whom I am one). I of course do not intend or expect this book to be the last word on atonement, covenant, and participation, but I do hope that it will help to contribute to an emerging sense that these interconnected themes are worthy of exploration as the Christian tradition continues to think carefully about the meaning of Christ's life and death on our behalf.

10. Mark Gorman, in personal correspondence, has reminded me of two important things to note here. First of all, although the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) is important to all Christians, atonement, and models thereof, is a peculiarly Western Christian phenomenon going back to Anselm in the Middle Ages. At the same time, secondly, even Anselm was concerned about the incarnation. His work, *Cur Deus Homo?—Why the God-Man?* or *Why did God become Human?*—raises the fundamental question "Why did God become incarnate in Jesus Christ in order to accomplish salvation?" (See also, e.g., Spence, *Promise of Peace*, 1, 118.) The answer this book will propose in the next eight chapters is, at least in part, that God did so to enter into intimate, covenantal relations with a people so that they could share in the divine life revealed in the crucified Messiah and made available by the Spirit. For a constructive theological proposal about participation in relation to divine desire and the Holy Spirit, see Mark Gorman, "On the Love of God."