
The author, who has worked as a teacher, evangelist, human rights advocate and Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and currently is a minister in the United Reformed Church in London, summarizes the ‘master-story’ of atonement in a one-line narrative: “The Father gave his only Son to become as we are so that, in offering up himself on our behalf through the Spirit, he might reconcile us to God.” In his view, this mediatorial understanding of atonement is normative in that it gives us a coherent account of the whole range of biblical metaphors and themes that refer to salvation. Explaining this gospel is the particular mission of the church. The hope of the world lies in her faithful fulfillment of this calling because it is through the gospel that the promised kingdom of peace will come.

Spence offers his classification of soteriological theories regarding the atonement with an eye to the resolution that Christ brings to the human predicament. He pays particular and rather critical attention to what is called “the new perspective” (E.P. Sanders, J. Dunn, N.T. Wright). He contests on exegetical grounds that ‘victory’ can be used as an interpretative scheme for the early chapters of Romans. In his opinion, the whole structure and content of these chapters exhibit all the classic features of the mediator theory. It seems to me that he is correct in his warning not to be blinkered by the current prevailing aversion to the concepts of God's condemnation, wrath, or judgment in much of modern religious consciousness. The apostle Paul expounds a doctrine of justification as the solution to the fundamental plight of humanity, our culpability and subjection to the divine wrath. In his balanced conclusion in response to Wright, Spence affirms that first-century Judaism, as a theological system, might well have had important, gracious features. Also in that case, however, the question remains why, along with many Christian theological traditions with tendencies towards self-righteousness or legalism, it needed to be confronted with the argument that “all of our best deeds will not themselves earn God's approval”? In a context of human estrangement and even hostility towards God, concepts such as grace, repentance, and forgiveness appear more appropriate than those of triumph and victory. The major motifs of victory language can be explained within a mediatorial theory of salvation, but this is not the case the other way around.

The atoning work of Christ is something that Jesus does as a man towards God. Such a perspective does not appear in any way to undermine the biblical recognition that salvation comes wholly from God. It is correctly observed that the work of the Spirit in Jesus’ human life is a key to understanding his redemptive ministry. I am grateful to the author for his clear perception of the two fundamental approaches in the biblical narrative of atonement: on the one hand, the Father’s loving gift to the world of his Son, and, on the other hand, Jesus’ self-offering to God on our behalf. Jesus gave himself as a sacrificial offering to God, and nevertheless his death was a demonstration of God’s gracious love. Hereby the justifiable concern of many that ‘propitiation’ should not be understood in the pagan sense of bribing a vindictive and vengeful deity (Umstimmung) is fully to be honored. The atonement flows from God’s loving initiative. But it is quite wrong to make a simple identification between love and forgiveness. In his grace and love, God is the primary or formal cause of salvation;
Christ’s self-offering functions as the *material* cause of atonement and forgiveness. The story of the Father’s gift and the story of the Son’s loving obedience thus form a single coherent narrative. This integrated understanding of agency in atonement is succinctly summarized in 1 John 4:10.

Another important aspect that the author points out is the role of faith in effectuating salvation. Spence observes with Luther that the inability of sinners to do anything worthy of God, far from being a reason for despondency, spurs them to place their hope in Jesus rather than in themselves. It is a pity that Spence seems to contrast this view of Luther to some extent with Calvin’s classical formulation of faith in *Institutes* III.2.7. When Calvin speaks of faith as “a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us,” this may not be interpreted as a predominantly intellectual matter—an assent to revealed truth. Knowledge is experiential, as in the Hebrew word הוב. Calvin and Luther stand fully together in their dynamic and existential view of faith as a ‘marrying’ or ‘taking hold’ of Christ that leads to the *unio mystica cum Christo*. “Faith flourishes in a context of total human helplessness and of the unlimited grace, mercy and power of God’s love” (85). This faith is understood principally as trusting in and appropriating the divine promise of salvation. The ultimate promise is that God will be our God, and we shall be his people. The obedience of faith is required of us, and, in that way, the regenerating and transforming power of the Holy Spirit is experienced in our hearts and lives. Faith is not simply the means by which we come to know of our salvation; it is rather the instrument through which God in his freedom has chosen to reconcile to himself those who believe. It is more than a badge that proclaims that one is already a member of God’s people; it is really an indispensable instrument of salvation. The relationship with God is restored by faith in the good news about God’s favor in Christ.

Spence does more than simply restate the classic Reformed positions regarding the atonement. He firmly takes a stand against influential, recent approaches like the ‘new perspective’ on Paul. His language is clear and concise; his testimony warm and convincing.

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