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Understanding atonement and the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the teachings of the prosperity Gospel

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Abstract

I have been trying to argue the well known fact that the context often defines the understanding and in Christian theology it often becomes part of the way we read Scripture and also of how we develop theology. I also try to argue that in order to understand the Scriptures adequately we need first of all to be able to gain a critical distance from our context but maybe even more important to gain a more nuanced understanding of God. This is possible only if some openness is maintained so that God who is free can address us.

Keywords: atonement, Holy Spirit, Gospel, prosperity

The Church's understanding of atonement

A few years ago, in a newly started Orthodox convent in Romania, a nun who had been diagnosed with epilepsy had a series of fits. Instead of taking her to the doctor and administering the prescribed medication, her colleagues and the priest looking after the convent decided

that her state was a result of her being demon possessed and that she needed exorcism¹. After some unsuccessful attempts with prayers, fasting and exorcisms the nun was tied to a cross for number of days of enforced fasting while the community continued to pray and perform exorcisms on her. Her physical and emotional state started to deteriorate and she became very vocal, as she could not move being tied to the cross. The noise she produced lead her colleagues gag her with a piece of cloth. Unfortunately their lack of understanding of the situation and their carelessness lead to her death as she accidentally asphyxiated while she was left on her own.

Last year I saw a Romanian Baptist minister (who left the denomination in the mean time) perform in a service in which he was praying over little paper tickets with names of women who did not get married and thought that their marriages “were tied” (by some spirit or curse). During the meeting, the pastor poured oil on the tickets, which were collected from women he did not know and then prayed for these women to be liberated so that they can finally find a husband. Interestingly enough this is also an Orthodox practice, which evangelicals general consider to be a kind of superstition. Also interestingly enough, the Romanian Baptist minister was inspired and taught by a certain Chris² who has a ministry of healing and wonders in South Africa.

¹. <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1223117-exorcizarea-tanacu-romania-medievala-miruna-munteanu.htm>, (accessed on 15 November 2013 at 22:00).

². <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqCaafGDU-Y>, (accessed on 15 November 2013 at 22:00).

The renewed interest and raised awareness in the experiential side of Christian life has brought about a concern in understanding how the work of the Holy Spirit relates to Christian living and also, on a deeper level, how God relates to man and to his creation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I would like to start my response from the fundamental affirmation that I believe that God is and remains free, as that he is the only one who is not contingent upon anything and therefore he can be truly free. God does not need anything to be God and even relationally speaking, in his being as Trinity, God reveals himself as a personal God as he is in an eternal set of relationships as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Because of his self-sufficiency and freedom, the image we have is that of God who, like the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, stoops willingly from his otherness to reach a fallen man because he loves the one he has created in his image and likeness. God loves man in his freedom and that is the wonder that makes salvation possible and at the same time unthinkable for man as he does not have such freedom.

In trying to understand this salvation, Christian theology, starting with the witness of the Scriptures believes that in Jesus Christ, God took initiative to become man to enable the rescue of lost humanity. Salvation, however, can be understood in a variety of ways. It can refer to making whole again that which was broken or it may mean some sort of restoration of relationship with God, or reaching an authentic life and hope beyond death. In the English language the word atonement (at-one-ment) indicates that it brings together man and God in a restored relationship.

The predicament in which man finds himself lacking is the result of sin which has itself a number of meanings such as: disobedience to-

wards God, rejecting the relationship with the Creator, missing the purpose of man's existence, lack of faith or uncleanness. Since atonement is related to how Christ's work affects the relationship between man and God it has generally seen as having a subjective element (when it relates to what happens in human life) and an objective element (when it relates to what happens in relation to God). In fact no understanding of atonement is purely subjective or objective but it attempts to strike a balance between the two elements.

Throughout the history of the church the attempts Christians have made to understand atonement have often been influenced by the kind of society in which they lived and by the context of ideas they encountered. Paul Fiddes, reflecting on the work of Christ³, points out to the many images of atonement developed in Christian theology. This richness is due partly to the difficulty in relating one event that took place in the past with the experience of salvation that happens in the present. The two sides, the past event (that took place in relation to God) and the present salvation (that takes place in the believers life), reflect this subjective/objective sides of Christ's work expressed in the question: how does the death (and resurrection) of one person affect the lives of all men. "*The sheer variety of images and concepts for atonement is also evidence that Christian faith has found that the event of the cross touches life at many points*"⁴.

³. Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event Present Salvation – The Christian Idea of Atonement*, Darton, Longman & Tod Ltd, London, 1989.

⁴. *Ibid.*, p.5.

Among the images that have been used to explain and bring meaning to salvation, atonement was understood as sacrifice according to the Old Testament requirements and the blood of Christ as the agent that cleanses man's defilement of sin. Also Jesus Christ was seen as the one who fought the devil and his angels and therefore his victory was celebrated. In a different understanding of atonement Christ was seen as restoring the image of God in man leading to the Eastern Church understanding of salvation as *theosis*. In the Middle Ages atonement was seen as an attempt to satisfy the divine honor by providing satisfaction for man's debt incurred from sin. Other images of atonement include: the moral influence which God's love instigates in those who are then able to understand the price he paid or the need to meet the requirements of God's Law who was infringed by man's sin and needed to be satisfied by the substitution of Jesus Christ who took the punishment for man. Other, more modern images include the need for healing or for overcoming alienation and anxiety or the breaking down of social relationships.

Theological reflection on the work of the Holy Spirit has lacked behind the interest in the work of the Father and the Son. Therefore the Spirit's role in atonement has not been generally explored as much. Karl Barth recognizes this in a lecture he delivers in 1929⁵ in which he argues that the role of the Holy Spirit is in creating, saving and delivering people for God (creator, reconciler and redeemer). As creator the Holy Spirit is the reason man is in the image of God and Christian life and this is by grace. At the same time human life is opened to God through the work

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, translation and annotation by Michael Raburn, Michel Raburn, Cleveland, 2002.

of the Holy Spirit. Barth says that the Holy Spirit represents the subjective side in the event of revelation. As atoner (or reconciler) Barth thinks that the Holy Spirit fights against the human hostility against grace when man tries to justify himself by works. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit in human life that “*justification through faith comes as repentance and trust*”⁶. As deliverer the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Promise as “*Christian life is born out of the Holy Spirit as a new life in hope*”⁷. Man is a new creation, a child of God who prays and is always heard.

Developing an understanding prosperity in connection to atonement

Linking atonement with healing and prosperity has become especially popular in the preaching and teaching of the so-called “prosperity Gospel”. Although the roots of such a theological understanding can be found in some of the teachings of Pentecostalism and of the charismatic movement, the ideas are by no means limited only to those Christian movements. In an article describing the theology of the prosperity Gospel, Ken Sarles points out to the fact that this represents a relatively recent development in some part of American evangelicalism where the focus has shifted towards the human potential for successful living, “*a change from theocentric providence to anthropocentric prosperity*”⁸.

⁶. Ibid. p. 2.

⁷. Ibid. p. 3.

⁸. Ken Sarles, *Prosperity and healing: Is it Promised to the Believer?* In <http://>

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The prosperity gospel suggests that when Christ dealt with sin through atonement, he also dealt with the consequences of sin like poverty, illness and death. Peter Cotterel has a useful study of the relationship between atonement and the prosperity theology⁹.

Atonement and healing

Dr. Graham Hill in a paper presented at the BICTE conference in Ocho Rios¹⁰ introduces us to the main elements of the arguments for linking atonement with healing. He starts with an exegesis of several important texts from this perspective (Isaiah 53:4–6, Matthew 8:16–17, and 1 Peter 2:24).

One of the New Testament stories used in relation to an understanding of the relationship between atonement and healing is Matthew 8:16-17 where Jesus heals Peter's mother in law. *That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."* The quote from the Old Testament comes from Isaiah 53:4-6 and it refers to the suffering servant.

[/www.biblestudymanuals.net/prosperity.htm](http://www.biblestudymanuals.net/prosperity.htm) (accessed on 23rd June at 12:00)

⁹ Peter Cotterel, *Prosperity Theology*, Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship, Leicester, 1993, p. 36.

¹⁰ <http://www.bwanet.org/programs/mission-evangelism-and-theological-reflection/14-programs/metr/312-bicte-papers-2013>, (accessed on 23rd June at 12:00)

Dr. Graham Hill also notes the theological implications of the various ways those texts are read. Healing is seen therefore by some as a pointer to God “breaking in” His Kingdom. The fact that the Kingdom of God was inaugurated and it is known as a present reality with a future dimension to be fulfilled or consummated means that Jesus has overthrown evil and believers are healed from sin or their alienation from God and from time to time from disease.

In an interesting study¹¹ on the Gospel of Mark, Peter Bold talks about the author’s message that Jesus had defeated death, a message with huge potential impact on the Greco-Roman world. He points out to the seriousness of illness in that context both for health but also for the social condition of the one being ill. There is also a connection between illness and demons in that type of culture which was often dealt with by the practice of magicians.

Because the first century people lived under a “shadow of death” with illness part of the everyday life for most people. Peter Bold argues that Mark’s readers, and therefore the Greco-Roman world presents a context of understanding that is specifically sensitive to the everyday suffering of illness and death. The dynamic of the Gospel is that the “Main Story about Jesus is set against the Big Story of the kingdom of God”¹² with the Counter Story of those opposing Jesus and also the Vacillating Story of those oscillating between him and his enemies like his

¹¹. Peter G. Bold, *Jesus’ Defeat of Death - Persuading Mark’s Early Readers*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹². Ibid. p. 22.

disciples were at times. To the kingdom of that world which was ruled by an Emperor who sometimes thought of himself as God, Mark presents the alternative of a different kingdom with a new ruler and therefore the Gospel is subversive in that sense.

N T Wright in one of his studies¹³ makes the point that for the Jews the healing that Jesus performed meant the restoration of those who because of their health had become untouchable and excluded from the community. Therefore the healing went beyond just alleviating the suffering or curing a disease but also to renew their membership to the people of God. Therefore the miracles as well as the exorcisms that Jesus performed become signs that point out to the physical inauguration of God's Kingdom on earth.

Atonement and material prosperity

The second question of my response today is whether atonement can be linked with material prosperity. Dr. Deji Ayegboyin presents at the same BICTE conference¹⁴ a useful description of the various positions on atonement. He also introduces us to the roots of prosperity theology and links it with an understanding of its relationship to atonement

¹³. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God – Christian Origins and the Question of God, volume II*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 191.

¹⁴. <http://www.bwanet.org/programs/mission-evangelism-and-theological-reflection/14-programs/metr/312-bicte-papers-2013>, (accessed on 23rd June at 12:00)

Ken Sarles points out that there are positive things the teachings of prosperity Gospel. For example wealth is considered a blessing from God, which is often an opinion encountered in the Bible. He also says that the main purpose of receiving such material blessing is philanthropy¹⁵.

Probably one of the most basic criticisms of linking atonement with prosperity comes from the fact that Jesus Christ himself was not rich and did not promote prosperity. The Son of God was born in a relatively poor family; during his earthly life he lived without having a stable situation including a house (Mat. 8:20); at one point he had to perform a miracle to pay the temple tax (Mat. 17:24-27); at his execution he could not make any provision for his mother and asked a disciple to look after her (John 19:26,27) and in the Sermon on the Mount he calls the poor blessed (Luke 6:20).

However at the other spectrum of material prosperity we find an example in Philoxenos a Syrian hermit who lived apparently in the sixth century, without benefit of much comfort. He addresses the issue of poverty to other dwellers in solitude affirming that there is no explanation and justification for the solitary life, since it is without a law. To be a contemplative is therefore to be an outlaw in the same way that Christ was, and later Paul. One who is not alone, says Philoxenos, has not discovered his identity. He seems to be alone, perhaps, for he experiences himself as "individual."

Philoxenos puts on the lips of Christ the following words "*I will not make you such rich men as have need of many things but I will make you*

¹⁵. Op. cit.

true rich men who have need of nothing. Since it is not he who has many possessions that is rich, but he who has no needs." One may agree with his understanding of needs but I am not sure I can accept his understanding of person as individual as being a special goal for human existence. And this is so mainly because it does not reflect an adequate understanding of person as we see in the Person of Christ who was not an individual for himself but God for us and in the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate and Mediator.

Conclusion – An evolving framework for an understanding of Atonement in the context of a doctrine of the Trinity?

Peter Cotterel, in the conclusion of his article, points out that: *Few of us are free from anxiety. Few of us are free from the allure of wealth. And most of us are persuaded, at least in some measure, that wealth can free us from anxiety. The future can be guaranteed, we feel, if only we have a surplus in the present. It is to our anxiety and our materialism that prosperity theology makes its appeal.*

This theology is, of course, the very antithesis of faith. Faith dares any future, and trusts God for whatever that future may be. Prosperity theology is a return to law, a law that promises certainty, that replaces the uncertainty which is inseparable from faith.¹⁶

¹⁶. Peter Cotterel, *Prosperity Theology*, Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship, Leicester, 1993, p. 36.