

ATONEMENT

How do you get leverage with God? This is a huge question for anybody who truly believes in God. The entire ancient world was fascinated and preoccupied with this question. Can we get God (or the gods) to fight on our side; to bring us rain for our crops; to protect us from natural disasters; to make us successful or rich, or at least not to help our enemies?

Every temple in the ancient world was built on and around the assumption that it was possible to feed and thus please God. Fire was a mystery and a miracle, and cooking things on the altar would please God. You could see some of it going up in heat waves to the realms above. And if you left anything on the altar for long enough, God would take it all. Endless details evolved from there: Was the sacrifice worthy? Was the lamb (or whatever) unblemished? Did the priests know how to do it right? Was there enough salt, enough of the right grains, appropriate drink? Were we humble enough? Did we say the proper prayers? Was there anything wrong with our attitudes, the level of our obedience, or the sincerity of our remorse if we had done something wrong?

And of course, the whole ancient world believed that if we did it right – got it right – the crops would be good; disease would be averted; we would win in battle, even against great odds. If we could please God – get God on our side – life would be good. If not, well, there are endless disasters associated with the failure to get God to play on our side.

Of course, we know today that all this kind of thinking is foolish and superstitious. (Knock on wood.) Today we know that God loves us, rewards all the good guys, and punishes all the bad guys. Therefore if we have enough faith and if we praise and honor God like we are supposed to, everything will be fine and we will be successful and prosperous. The religious reality for most people today is some kind of mixture between still believing that this is true and believing that there is no really true and actual God at all.

How do you get leverage with God? A ten-year-old boy, growing up in a Catholic home, grew more and more desperate to own a bicycle all his own. All his friends had one. He needed one to be with them and to go on the many adventures that a bicycle makes possible.

This longing became the focal point of his life. He thought about it all the time.

Finally one day he got a towel from the bathroom, made sure nobody was around, then tiptoed carefully to the mantle in the living room. He took the statue of the Virgin Mary from the mantle, wrapped it carefully in the towel, and took it to his room, where he stuffed it in the back of the bottom drawer of his dresser. Then he got on his knees and prayed: “Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again ...”

How do we get leverage with God? Is there food enough, service enough, praise enough, goodness enough, humility enough in the whole wide world to get God on our side – to get God to do what we want God to do? What does God want from us? Are the gods angry with us? The most comforting and convenient solution to all such questions and concerns is the one many people have hit upon in the twenty-first century: “Well, actually, there is no God.” That was easy; no more worries. To be sure, to believe this would save us a lot of time, a lot of money, a lot of confusion, and a lot of worry.

But all things considered, perhaps it is best not to be too blatant about it. The most peaceful and effective stance of all is to not make a big deal out of it. We can pretend to go along with religion and faith in sort of a vague, generic kind of way and then go on about our mortal lives the best we can and never take any of it really seriously. That way we do not get into a lot of foolish arguments, but neither do we have to get all involved in a lot of hocus-pocus or any inconvenient rituals or disciplines as if some Divine Being really did exist and really did care about what we were doing or how we were spending our lives.

There are two people above all others whom we never should have listened to: Moses and Jesus.

Some God wanted to free us from slavery in Egypt so we could enter into a Covenant and demonstrate a far better Life than the world had ever seen before. But Egypt was a huge and prosperous empire. We should have stayed there – worked hard, become as valuable as possible to the Egyptians – and over time, we would have been far better off than out in some bleak wilderness with a delusional Moses and his visions of some kind of Covenant with God. No stealing, no adultery, no jealousy, no dishonesty? How ridiculous! Where do people come up with such fantasies?

And Jesus is even worse. Freedom from slavery to sin and loneliness and fear itself. A Kingdom not of this world, but all around us even so. A Kingdom where people actually love God and each other and even themselves – deeply and earnestly. From the ridiculous to the ludicrous. And those who listen to Moses or Jesus cause endless mayhem, trouble, heartache, and misunderstanding in this world. Clearly the world, wherever and however it came into being, is not designed to contain or allow such high motives or purposes or beliefs.

In any case, there is always a shadow side to every truth. If you listen and get suckered in by Moses or Jesus, then you start to need the God they speak for and represent. Then you try to live by and live into the Covenant that they proclaim. It is too high to begin with, so you are bound to make mistakes and certain to fall short, at least from time to time – or even most of the time if you get really serious about it. What then? What do you do when you fail to live up to the Covenant?

If there is no Covenant and God is just some imaginary hope or dream, then no problem. But if God is real and you offend against God's plans and purposes, what then? Well, then you get really interested in the kinds of things we have started to talk about: salvation and atonement; grace and forgiveness; propitiation and expiation and reconciliation – all the things we seldom name in our world today, but the things we have to find and know about, whether we name them or not, if we want to stay married or have any friends or work for the same company for more than a few months at a time. There are things we need to comprehend even to get along with ourselves, never mind trying to stay in a true and clear relationship with God.

Are any of your demons bigger than you are? What if God is your only hope but you keep making mistakes and living against, or at least falling far short of, the Life God is asking of you – a Life you have come to want and desire for yourself more than anything else on earth? What then? Oh, it's not that hard, in certain moods, to intellectually deny the existence of God. But what do you do about the soul within you? What do you do with the spiritual experiences you have had, whether you wanted them or honored them or not?

Paul is not the only one who walked a Damascus Road. And suddenly it gets more difficult to imagine that Moses and Jesus were just delusional, or were making things up for some inexplicable reason that nobody has ever been able to explain or imagine.

So into the maze we go. The old crib-sheet version said that “atonement” meant “at-one-ment” with God. That is demonstrably a false definition – meaning, linguistically it is not accurate. But it cuts through a lot of details and ends up closer to the truth than definitions far closer to what we call accurate.

In Hebrew, *kaphar* is the word for “atone.” But then the technicians take over and often leave us further away from God than before. Does *kaphar* denote an action directed toward God (propitiation), or an act designed to cover the offense itself (expiation)? Are we trying to correct our mistakes, or are we trying to turn away the wrath of God that is coming toward us *because* of our mistakes?

Most of you will recognize that we are into the theology of the Cross. But what many do not realize is that the theology of the Cross is surrounded by and imbedded in constructs of atonement – animal sacrifice: beliefs and assumptions that we have inherited from the Old Testament Covenant. It is a Covenant apart from which and without which our New Covenant in Christ Jesus is not really comprehensible. Only, the New Covenant is so NEW – such a dimensional leap – that even if we understand the Old Covenant, the New Covenant is close to incomprehensible. For all our lip service, the Gospel still beckons to us from the very fringe of our conscious awareness. Intellect will only take us so far. Beyond that, we live, walk, and comprehend by FAITH.

For instance: After last Sunday’s sermon, one of my very good friends said to me, “You know, sometimes I feel like I am not really *worthy* of the Kingdom – not worthy of salvation.” How can I reply? This is not a neophyte; this is one of our most sincere and stalwart members. Such a comment just creeps out of our mouths when we are not paying attention, not thinking. I finally replied, I hope very gently: “If you could get worthy or ever imagine yourself becoming worthy, what would you do with GRACE?” We are not worthy and we never will be worthy of God’s love. That is the first step into the Life of the New Covenant. “By myself I am powerless to be good or to do good.” *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

We are constantly being thrown off track by the assumption that some right or true doctrine has always been the truth, when actually the doctrines were invented long after the events of Jesus’ life among us. And the doctrines do not reveal the truth; they obscure it. Jesus IS the Truth. Not ideas about Him. Not theories we make up about Him long after His life among us is over. JESUS is the Truth: His life, His

coming, His presence with us IS the Truth. And Jesus uncovers the love and purposes of God toward us.

But the doctrines that humans invent to explain His coming keep obscuring it. For instance: Jesus is the Savior. In watching Him, encountering Him, following Him, we come into the experience of salvation. Our lives begin to change, get refocused, take on a joy and peace and purpose we never knew before. But then we start to wonder: How does Jesus save us?

Then, instead of the encounter – instead of trusting the relationship itself – we come up with *doctrines* about our salvation. It was the blood – the sacrifice. It was our sin – our distance, our mistrust, our disobedience – that was causing all the trouble. And that is true; it was, and it is. And what did Jesus do about it? Well, He paid the price for our sin. Is that really as obvious as we try to pretend? Our “salvation” requires some kind of transaction? Something must be paid? How much? And to whom?

Our oldest doctrine of atonement (called the Classic View) is that Jesus was the “ransom” payment for our sins. Because of Jesus’ unspeakably high merit and virtue, He was worth more than all the rest of us put together. So in payment for our release (from Satan’s realm – from Satan’s bondage and control), Jesus is given to Satan so that we will be set free. God pays off Satan with the death of his Son. It is a ransom price, and it is a very good deal for Satan indeed. Except God tricks Satan. Jesus has more power than Satan can comprehend. Death cannot hold Him. So after we are released from Satan’s bondage, Satan suddenly discovers that he is not strong enough to keep Jesus under his control. So Satan loses both us and Jesus, and everybody else wins.

The Classic View of atonement is by far the most joyful, satisfying, and fun explanation of what Jesus does for us. But there are a few flaws. Who gives Satan the right to keep us all in bondage because we are not perfect? Who decides that a trade-off with Satan is what happened, or even that such a thing is possible? What happens if you get into Satan’s clutches after the Crucifixion has already happened? Or even worse, what happens if Jesus pays the ransom with His death and you get set free but then sin again? And if God is God, why does God have to trick Satan by a clever deceit? And worst of all, from my perspective: How does this ransom payment change any of us from being sinners into becoming more and more the children of light? That is, what happened to the *real* salvation?

Because of all its flaws, the Classic View was soon replaced by what is called the Latin View. Most of Christendom still holds to some version of the Latin View, teaching it to children in catechism classes and reciting pieces of it in weekly worship services. And of course, many of our hymns reflect its views. What few people realize is that when we read and study the New Testament, we often interpret the New Testament writings through the eyes of the Latin View of atonement – even though this view did not come into the church’s consciousness until during and after the fourth century A.D. In other words, many of the New Testament stories and teachings themselves are coming to us through filters and screens that were invented four hundred years *after* the events themselves.

In the Latin View of atonement (how we are saved; how our relationship with God is restored and made right again), God is back in charge. We are not paying a ransom to Satan; we owe a debt *to God* for the rebellion, disobedience, and evil by which we keep ruining God’s creation. So far, that’s a big improvement over the Classic View. But then it gets far worse.

Our sin offends against the laws of righteousness and justice by which God has created all things. Sin destroys life and leads to death, and we are all in debt way deeper than any price we will ever be able to pay. And this debt is owed to God – not Satan. So God, in mercy and love, sends his Son into the world to become the priceless sacrifice that will free us from the enormous debt that we owe. Then suddenly it all blurs terribly. *God sends Jesus and sacrifices Him on the Cross* to pay the debt we all owe.

There is no way to redeem this horribly flawed imagery. To turn away his own wrath and to satisfy his sense of justice, God kills his own Son in order to keep from killing us. Jesus dies to pay off God; to bribe God; to appease the anger and wrath of God. And that is what gives us forgiveness and mercy and a chance to go on into salvation. Eighty percent of Christendom still claims this and teaches this – insists that this is what we must believe if we want to be saved.

But there is still a problem. This may take care of God’s anger, but what about mine? I know; I’m too insignificant to matter. But I am not the only one in Christendom who is enraged by such attempts to explain our salvation or to proclaim the love and grace and mercy of God. I came to know Jesus before I was old enough to be taught the doctrines of the church. Jesus cared about me, and He started trying

to help me (started the process of salvation) long before I knew anything about the Apostles' Creed or Athanasius or the doctrines of the Catholic church. And I was more and more amazed at the presence of Jesus, and I was already enthralled with the stories of His encounters with the people He met, what He taught, what He liked, and what made Him angry. So I was pretty young, but Jesus was already my Lord and Savior – not in the formulas, but in my reality – and I already realized that Jesus loved me more than any other being ever had. So I can promise you that I will never love a God who would kill Jesus, never mind in such a brutal and totally unjust way. How could anybody trust a God like that?

And *does* anybody trust a God like that? It seems clear to me that despite all the good intentions and wonderful inconsistencies of faithful people down through the ages, the truth is that most people do not trust God. We still betray our faith with fear and guilt and endless ways to shortchange, reduce, and deny a true love-bond between ourselves and God. Is that partly because we keep telling the major story of our faith so poorly, so wrongly, and in ways both twisted and evil?

Of course, in actual fact, I do not believe that the Father ever would treat Jesus this way. The creeds and the explanations we have tried to come up with are flawed beyond words to describe it. But the errors and false explanations are now locked-in to our structures, our traditions, our vast complex of religious institutions and proclamations. I know there have been many voices that have tried to correct such things and to turn us toward the many ways we can still see the light of Jesus shining behind all the layers that have been piled onto His coming and His Message. But their impact, like mine, is soon plowed under by the monolithic weight of usage, tradition, and the busyness of a world that has too little time to ponder such things.

I try to stay faithful to what I have seen and known and learned in my life and time in the church. And I try to call you to be faithful too. But it's hard to imagine that anything of what I see or know will last beyond a day or two when I am gone. Of course, there is another realm we are heading toward, and in time many things will be corrected there. So if you think I am discouraged, that would be a misunderstanding. Yet I do wonder why the church is in decay and disarray in our time. Is this a tragedy, or is this the Holy Spirit deciding to take a hand at last? We humans have no power great enough to transform or renew the church of Jesus, but the Holy Spirit

has endless power and influence. So I am not counting the church out, even yet. “There is yet more light and truth to break forth from his Holy Word.” (John Robinson)

I am, by the way, very grateful indeed for this church. A faith family – a true fellowship of believers – is a wonderful place to live in and to work out of. But we do have to keep working to get the poison out: the guilt and the fear and the many false beliefs. They keep undermining everything.

In any case, atonement does not come from animal sacrifice in a temple, or from constructs of a terrible Day of Judgment designed to scare people into being good. Nor does it come from pretending that we are all okay, and that we can save ourselves and our world by pooling our own pretenses at being good and wonderful by our own power.

Most of us know that Jesus’ life was greater than our own. That is the whole point of His being able to save us. Only, you cannot save us with formulas as flawed as the Classic and Latin Views of atonement. God does not kill Jesus – we do. If God is killing Jesus in our place – in order to save us – that does not take away our guilt and shame. It increases it!

Why did we not notice, clear back in the fourth century and even before, that our concepts of atonement were very human and familiar constructs? We were turning spiritual truth into a deal – a payoff – that could not reflect a love-bond between God and us. It could not reflect a relationship. It could not reflect the dimension of GRACE. It could not carry the meaning of the Gospel. So what Jesus came to reveal, and what Paul had finally come to understand and teach and preach, was more and more lost in the creeds and the doctrines of atonement.

The love of God still shines beyond the clouds and through the screens and filters of our doubt and disbelief. But it is always muted and warped and twisted by our determination to understand it, teach it, and explain it *our way*.

Following Jesus into a true baptism – into a true relationship with God – does transform everything. So we turn away from the doctrines but never away from Jesus. Does Jesus try to teach us the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed? Does He try to teach us formulas

about expiation or propitiation? It is such a relief when we turn back to Him – when we try to hear and see and trust and follow Him more earnestly and clearly than ever. What kinds of things does Jesus say?

“Until now I have been using figures of speech; a time is coming when I shall no longer use figures, but tell you of the Father in plain words. When that day comes you will make your request in my name, and I do not say that I shall pray to the Father for you, for the Father loves you himself, because you have loved me and believed that I came from God.” (John 16:25-27)

“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32)

“I have come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

“I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another.” (John 13:34)

On second thought, no wonder we would rather engage in erudite discussions of the meaning of atonement and recite ancient creeds. That is certainly a lot easier than trying to love each other. On the other hand, how quiet does the night have to get before we realize that in these and endless other sayings, Jesus is trying to tell us about a whole new dimension and a whole new possibility of “at-one-ment” with God?