

**“DIVINE NECESSITY OR HUMAN INEVITABILITY?
Progressive Theology Beyond Atonement”**

Workshop Presentation:

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INTRODUCTION

If you were to ask any Australian or New Zealand Christian “Why did Jesus die on the cross?” most would say something like, “To save us from our sins”. There would be some notion that it was necessary that Jesus die in order that we might be “saved”, which for most people means going to heaven when we die. There would be some notion that Jesus had died in our place as the payment for human sin.

The title of this paper “divine necessity or human inevitability” comes from the book *The Last Week* by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg and summed up for us (John and David) the dilemma we share with other progressive Christians that the belief that Jesus died for our sins is no longer sustainable in the light of recent scholarship. We agree from a sentence in another book by Crossan and Borg, *The First Paul*, that this belief which has dominated Western Christian thought for the past thousand years is “*bad history, bad anthropology, and bad theology*” [p 129].

We contend that the belief that Jesus died for our sins does not originate from the established authentic writings of Paul, and that a different interpretation of the Cross from the popular doctrine of atonement can be strongly argued based upon Paul's authentic writings. We believe that there is no biblical evidence to support the concept that Jesus saw himself as a substitutionary sacrifice.

We recognise that the doctrine of the atonement is 'bedrock' Christianity for a majority of Christians and that sensitivity is required in challenging it. However, we anticipate that those who have chosen to attend this conference, and this seminar, have already begun the journey we ourselves are on in addressing the meaning of the Cross for twenty-first century Christianity.

WHAT IS THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT?

The atonement doctrine primarily describes how God allows for reconciliation (at-one-ment) between God and humans through the death of Jesus on the Cross. There are a number of different understandings of the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion, but in Western Christianity one particular understanding has dominated for the past thousand years. It is this that we address in this paper.

Most Western Christians believe that Jesus' death was ordained by God to buy back the sinfulness of humanity initiated by Adam when he disobeyed God in Eden. The doctrine holds that God has been deeply offended and dishonored by human sin, and no amount of finite human punishment could atone for this infinite divine offence. The only way that human beings could again enter into a

right relationship with God is for God's own divine son to be killed as a punishment for our sins in the form of a substitutionary sacrifice. Once this had been accomplished, forgiveness is available to all truly repentant sinners. According to the doctrine, Jesus did not so much offer himself for our sakes as God required it.

The doctrine took some time to develop and it wasn't in its present form until St Anslem, Archbishop of Canterbury, spelt it out in 1097 CE. Our disobedience is seen as a crime against God and requires a price to be paid, and that price is Jesus' life. This is primarily what a Christian means if asking, "Are you saved?" It means, "Do you believe that Jesus died instead of you for your sins?"

The later work of Calvin and Luther took this doctrine to a more extreme form, bringing Augustine's original sin doctrine fully into the equation. Calvin even believes that babies are in sin from birth because they were conceived through the sinfulness of sexual union. He claims they are guilty for they are the seed of further sin.

This classical doctrine of the atonement has dominated Western Christian thinking, spirituality and worship for the past thousand years. It is all-pervasive and subtle in the way it appears as the underlying assumption of the majority of hymns sung and prayers offered and as the heart of the sacrament of holy communion.

We note, in passing, that the doctrine of the atonement along with the doctrine of original sin which is the atonement's underlying presumption, are Western Christian concepts – both are unknown in the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition, and original sin is foreign to Judaism.

IS THERE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT?

Those who framed the doctrine of the atonement depended largely on Paul's letters for the basis of their argument, in particular Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians. However, contemporary scholars challenge the idea that the idea of substitutionary atonement originates in Paul's authentic letters. We outline three such challenges.

Stephen Finlan

According to Finlan, Paul took up and transmitted a primitive current in religious thinking, but spiritualised it with an emphasis on the heroic martyrdom of Jesus and the generosity of God. For Paul, writes Finlan, "*Christ is the sacrificial gateway through which one must go in order to pass from alienation to reconciliation.*" (2005. p9.)

Paul emphasised the outgoing love of God but uses metaphors that have been interpreted to imply that Jesus' death was a payment or offering to God, that God is somehow bought off, manipulated or appeased by the death of Jesus. Paul

uses both the 'scapegoat' and 'sacrifice' metaphors and Finlan explains the value of both metaphors.

"Sacrifice" is the offering up of a pure gift – an unblemished animal – to God in a careful and controlled way at the community's central sanctuary. Crossan and Borg, in their book *'The Last Week'*, suggest that sacrifice is something akin to a gift offered to God - invoking God to participate in the meal at which the sacrificed meat is eaten. They liken it to going to a friend's place for dinner and taking a gift to share, such as a bottle of wine, as a way of being united – "atoned".

The 'scapegoat' on the other hand is impure, it is not an offering or gift, it is not given to God but is ritually abused and mistreated and is driven out of the sacred precincts into the "realm of the wilderness demon." The scapegoat is really a sin-carrier. Sacrifice and scapegoat use completely different forms of logic.

There is no single category of atoning substitution into which the Old Testament rituals of 'sacrifice' and 'scapegoat' fit. In Leviticus neither of these terms involves punishment. The sacrificed animal is not 'punished' in place of the worshipper and the scapegoat's task is simply to transport – it also is not being punished. Yet Paul uses both rituals as metaphors for the significance of the death of Jesus.

In Romans 3:24 -25 Paul mixes metaphors of ransoming, acquittal before God, and purification at the mercy seat to convey a powerful message about Jesus'

death as a liberating, releasing and purifying fulfilment of various rituals and events in Israel's history. In Galatians 3:10-13 he writes that Christ takes away our curse by becoming a scapegoat, purchases the freedom of the captives of sin, and secures a favourable judicial result for human plaintiffs in the divine court – a mix of metaphors in the space of three verses. Paul, by mixing metaphors, is suggesting that no one metaphor is complete or sufficient.

Paul's multiple models and metaphors to illustrate the meaning of the death of Jesus, all known to his original audience, have been taken literally by later interpreters of Paul. Paul's metaphors, especially sacrifice, were hardened into doctrine giving us the theology that most Christians today take for granted, that Jesus died for our sins and in our place. According to Finlan, all of Paul's subtleties, as well as the implication that no one metaphor is sufficient, were forgotten by the lesser minds of later Christianity.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan

In their book *"The First Paul"* Crossan and Borg recognise that Paul sees the cross as a means of salvation, but not as most today understand 'salvation'. In today's context "being saved" is primarily about the afterlife – we are saved in order to be in heaven. For Paul, according to Borg and Crossan, being saved was primarily about life before death. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus go together – each gives meaning to the other. Without the resurrection the

death of Jesus would have just been another execution – another life ended by imperial authority.

Crossan and Borg point out that the word atonement – or ‘at-one-ment’ – has a much broader meaning than substitutionary sacrifice, it refers “*to a means of reconciliation*” (p130). How does the death of Jesus bring about this reconciliation, this at-one-ment with God? Crossan and Borg identify in Paul’s theology of the Cross three important factors – revelation of the character of the Empire, perhaps of all empires; second, revelation of the path of personal transformation; and third, revelation of the character of God.

Paul’s term “Christ crucified” has an anti-imperial meaning. The emphasis is on crucifixion – Jesus just didn’t die, he executed in an act of state terrorism by imperial authority. Rome reserved crucifixion for two categories of people – those who non-violently or violently defied Rome, and chronically defiant slaves. Crucifixion was public and prolonged and carried with it a clear message – “*Don’t defy imperial authority, because if you do, this will happen to you*” (*The First Paul* p131)

When Paul proclaims Christ crucified he is clearly saying that Jesus is anti-imperial, and therefore Paul’s message is anti-imperial. The Empire killed Jesus, but the Jesus executed by Rome was vindicated by God in resurrection, and therefore Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. Borg and Crossan write, “*The cross reveals the character of the Empire, disclosing the moral bankruptcy of the domination*

system, and the wisdom of this world that legitimises it.” (p136). The Cross points to a this-worldly life of non-coercion, of mutuality and respect, love and compassion, equity and equality – in short, everything that Rome wasn’t!

Secondly Crossan and Borg claim that for Paul, Christ crucified and risen functions as a powerful metaphor for the path of personal transformation which requires an internal dying to an old identity and rising to a new life or identity. Reconciliation or ‘at-one-ment’ is achieved when we die and rise with Christ, metaphorical language for the radical process of internal change. The path of transformation lies in our ability to centre our lives in the God made known to us in Jesus.

Paul recounts his own personal experience in stating *“I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who lives, but it is Christ who lives in me”* (Galatians 2:19-20). Paul is speaking metaphorically about his own internal death and resurrection. It is, if you like, identity transplant.

Lastly for Paul, Christ crucified reveals the character of God. Paul sees Jesus as the decisive revelation of God. He declares that Jesus reveals God’s character as love and passion for the world – and for a world that is different from the world of domination, injustice and violence. It is a love that is prepared to give all for sake of the beloved.

Crossan and Borg point out that dying “for” someone, and “sacrifice”, do not have to mean substitution. A parent who loses her life saving a child in a

burning house or a soldier leaping on a grenade to save the lives of his comrades can be said to die instead of or for the other, but not as a substitute.

Similarly, we can speak of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, three twentieth century Christian martyrs, as dying “for” others, but not in their place; dying, “sacrificing” their lives, because of their passion for different world and freer people. Their death reveals the depth of their love and passion. And so Jesus, the decisive revelation of God, in being prepared to die on the cross reveals the extent of God’s love and passion. Our realisation and acceptance of the enormity of that love and passion enables “at-one-ment” with God.

John Cobb’s Insight

In his essay “Did Paul Teach the Doctrine of the Atonement?” John Cobb examines Paul’s letter to the Romans, in particular chapter 3:21-26, a text often cited by those who claim that Paul taught the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.

Only in Romans 3:21-26 does Paul seem to infer that Jesus’ death is sacrificial in the substitutionary sense, particularly in verse 25, “...*whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.*” While there are variations on the word ‘atonement’ in other English translations, all translations basically agree that God sacrificed

Jesus so that people could be reconciled to God through faith. Cobb highlights an alternative translation, one more consistent with Paul's thinking.

The Greek word 'pistis' is usually translated into English as "faith", and all translations of verse 25 have 'pistis' or faith belonging to those who are sinners, for whom Jesus died. But the Greek reads as easily, if not more easily, if the reference is to the 'pistis' of Jesus rather than the 'pistis' of others directed towards Jesus. There is a footnote in the NRSV, which supports this alternative translation. Cobb also suggests that the word 'pistis' refers more to 'faithfulness' than faith, because faith is an inner subjective state, whereas 'pistis', faithfulness, is a way of being in the world – it is the action of faith.

Cobb concludes that 'pistis' refers to the "faithfulness of Jesus", and if we translate 'pistis' as faithfulness, then it reflects the righteousness of God, which has been revealed in the faithfulness of Jesus. Therefore what liberates us is Jesus revealing God's loving justice and being faithful, even to death. For Paul, Jesus' death shows the radical character of the faithfulness of Jesus. Cobb suggests that the translation should be: "God is just and God justifies those who participate in the faithfulness of Jesus."

Cobb concludes that Paul does not suppose or teach that God sacrificed Jesus as the price for justifying us. Rather, Jesus saves and transforms us by being radically faithful, and this faithfulness shows us the true character of God's justice.

If Cobb is correct in his examination of the text then we are being encouraged by Paul to believe not that the sacrificial death of Jesus is a saving act, but that his faithfulness to the point of death is the final redeeming feature of his life and this is for us the saving/liberating and life-transforming meaning of Jesus' death.

JESUS' VIEW OF SALVATION AND HIS DEATH

In the gospels, the way to God is already open. Six times Jesus tells people "*Your faith has saved you*". He uses the past tense, indicating that the action of being saved has happened and that its results continue into the present. Their faith, or in the case of the paralysed man lowered through the roof, the faith of friends, has already saved them.

Jesus does not see salvation as being contingent on his soon-to-come execution and death. In Jesus we find no mention of a sacrificial death; rather faith – that is, trust – saved people because it allowed God to reach into their lives and make them whole. Stephen Finlan (2005 p111)says "*people who related to Jesus knew that God's saving power was already available, they did not have to wait for Jesus' death*", and he cites Luke12:32 "*For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*"

To understand the message of Jesus, we need to discard sacrificial thinking. Jesus' practice supports the 'Hosea principle', when Hosea claims that God says "*I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice.*" We see Jesus supporting this principle in his opposition to the purity laws, particularly when they are used to oppress

people. Jesus sees that the laws have become more important than the welfare of people (Matthew 12:7 *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice"*). In Matthew 5:24 we even read that ritual cannot proceed if personal relationships are not restored, indicating that relationships are more important than ritual.

Finlan claims Jesus believes *"salvation and wholeness are freely available without any mediating transaction, that faith means trusting in God's straightforward generosity, and forgiveness is conditioned only by one's willingness to forgive others"* (2005 Page 114).

In their book *The Last Week*, Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg use the first Gospel, Mark, to follow Jesus from Palm Sunday to Easter Day.

They interpret Jesus' Palm Sunday 'procession' into Jerusalem as street theatre parodying another procession on the opposite side of the city at the same time as Pontius Pilate leads in troops to strengthen the Jerusalem garrison for Passover. This parody, in addition to the events of the last week, sets Jesus against the imperial rule of Rome. The street theatre parade, Jesus overturning the tables in the temple, his verbal attacks on the temple system, and his declaration that one should render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's which is actually saying that all things belong to God and none to Caesar, provoke the Roman rulers and the religious authorities.

Jesus' execution was the direct result of what he said and did. He was a real threat to Rome and the Jewish aristocratic and religious authorities, and that is

why he was executed. Borg and Crossan challenge the popular “divine necessity” understanding of the doctrine of atonement. The evidence they present clearly points to Jesus’ death as an inevitable human consequence of his words and actions.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CRITIQUE OF THE ATONEMENT

There are many reasons to find the doctrine of the atonement as it is popularly understood not merely unsatisfying but a hindrance to twenty-first century faith. In the introduction we quoted Crossan and Borg (2009 p129) saying this doctrine is “*bad history, bad anthropology, and bad theology*”. We would add that it is bad psychology.

We have outlined our conviction is that the notion of substitutionary atonement neither originates with Jesus, nor Paul. **The doctrine is *bad history*** because it tries to put onto Paul a belief he did not hold, and it takes one metaphor out of a number he applies to the Cross and makes it dominant. It is also bad history because it takes the biblical Jewish ritual of sacrifice and imposes on it a meaning it never had, that of a substitute victim. In temple sacrificial practice, the sacrificed animal was not being punished on behalf of anyone, nor was it intended to suffer – the temple priests were expert butchers.

It is *bad anthropology* because it presupposes the doctrine of original sin which in turn presupposes an original man and woman who originally sinned and passed that sin on to all their human descendants. We know that in fact human

beings have evolved over tens of thousands of years, and along with our biological evolution we have evolved socially, morally and religiously. We have a far different understanding of human relationships, ethics and God now than when, for instance, Anslem developed the doctrine of substitutionary atonement a thousand years ago, or Augustine the doctrine of original sin fifteen hundred years ago. Many of us would want to stand with Matthew Fox and celebrate humanity's original blessings rather than bewail humanity's original sin, but without ignoring humanity's extraordinary capacity for evil such as that perpetrated in the twentieth century,

It is *bad theology* because of the image of God that is portrayed – a temperamental, judgmental God, with an ego that continually needs to be stroked. It is an image of a violent God who requires the death of an innocent person, who happens to be God's own only child, in order that God might be able to forgive people their sins. Feminists have described the doctrine as child abuse on a cosmic scale, and people have questioned the doctrine's inference that God was incapable of thinking of non-violent approach to at-one-ment. It is an image of God that just does not square with the passionate, loving, healing God of Jesus who himself does not preach a sacrificial theology. The sacrificial theology comes from those who later wished to explain the purpose of Jesus' death. Jesus himself predicted that his death would come as the inevitable outcome of his own actions, rather than a sacrificial death.

The power and cruelty of the imperial state and the envy of religious hierarchies are just two evils that are symbolised by Jesus' crucifixion on the cross. God's involvement in humanity is also symbolised, as is God's participation in human suffering. We would be in error to suggest that this is God's will. The persecution of the innocent and the killing of those who bear the truth is never the will of God.

The doctrine is *bad psychology* because it presents an image of a God who can cause us to feel guilty and to wallow in self-blame, and lead us to play psychological games of bargaining, appeasement, rationalisation and projection. The doctrine, backed by the doctrine of original sin, led to the intense Reformation focus on guilt and undeserved grace, and to be saved by God from damnation produces childish feelings of gratitude and even more indebtedness. In Catholicism it led to excessive forms of self-mortification. It encourages manufactured guilt and obsession with confession and repentance along with a general self-loathing and unworthiness.

There is a need to re-state the concept of the atonement in emotionally healthy ways, and we need to replace the substitutionary atonement doctrine with a psychologically sound alternative, because even if we reject original sin, we human beings nevertheless experience estrangement and alienation from God and from one another, and not infrequently this is because of our own wrong decisions and choices, and things need to be put right.

THE IMPACT OF THE ATONEMENT IN CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

How do we combat the power of substitutionary atonement with all its psychological overtones? Not only must we give up the psychological dependencies that are cultivated under this doctrine, we must also change the way we respond to the sacred. If we throw out doctrines about a God that is punishing, arbitrary and who seeks payment of a ransom through the sacrifice of an innocent person, what effect will this have on how we celebrate the presence of the God-spirit in our lives? A brief glance reveals how much the doctrine of the atonement is reinforced in our corporate worship.

The creeds are fixated on Jesus' birth then his death and do not mention his life, his words or his actions. The time is right to explore creeds and affirmations adjusting that balance. Dorothy McRae-McMahon has made a significant contribution in this respect.

The Revised Common Lectionary is weighted to supporting the orthodox view of the atonement by extensive use of John's Gospel especially around Holy Week. If it isn't time to produce a lectionary that truly reflects the historical Jesus in the light of the new scholarship, it certainly is time to produce resources to assist preachers to use the Lectionary passages honestly. Greg Jenks' "Faith Futures" website is one such valuable resource.

For those responsible for crafting communal worship and who are sensitive to moving beyond substitutionary atonement, choosing hymns is a nightmare.

Most traditional hymns continue to promote the substitutionary atonement. For hymns to be truly 'inclusive' today they need to be *exclusive* of all the sacrifice and blood imagery that abounds.

Traditional liturgical prayers allude to salvation being wrought by Jesus' death at God's behest, and in prayers of confession and for "absolution" we frequently pray in the name of Christ who died for our sins. We seek this regardless of whether we believe we have sinned or not. There is a challenge to develop worship services that do not require everybody to declare they are "sinners" but which still leave space for people who feel estranged or distant from God or others for whatever reason to seek "at-one-ment"

In the Eucharist the words of institution and the words of administration which speak of body broken for you, and blood shed for the forgiveness of sins, create another challenge. Is a Eucharist "valid" if the traditional words of institution are omitted, or replaced by a reference to other meals Jesus shared with people, or the meal at Emmaus? And there are alternative words of administration – "the bread of life for you; the cup of blessing for you" or "bread for the journey; wine for rejoicing", for instance – which do not imply belief in the death of Jesus for our sins.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE DOMINANCE OF SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT?

Finlan asks the question "*What happens if we re-state the divine incarnation of Jesus, thereby highlighting the fact of God's near approach to humanity and to*

human suffering through the incarnation of Jesus and through his whole life, but we drop the idea of any magical transaction at the cross?" (2005 p119). If we did as Finlan suggests we would return to Jesus' parental God, who wants only spiritual progress and the maturation of God's offspring.

If we were to detach the incarnation from the notion that Jesus was born in order to die on the cross (a notion perversely conveyed in some Christmas carols), would it enable us to more clearly discern the ethical and spiritual context of Jesus' life and teachings and to find these to be ways to experience "at-one-ment" with God?

The **incarnation** is an essential Christian concept. Substitutionary atonement is not. We can carry the message that God was in Christ without needing to also say that God required him to suffer and die. We do not need violent metaphors to convey the message of the gospel – there are other ways.

Theosis is a theological concept predating the doctrines of original sin and substitutionary atonement, but became swamped by them in the West. Theosis continues to play a major role in the Eastern churches which missed out on the Western ideas original sin and substitutionary atonement. Theosis is based on the belief that in Jesus, God became human as we are, in order that we might become what God's own self is. St Athanasius of Alexandria (4th Century) wrote "*God became human so that humans may become god*". Theosis is a positive way

of understanding human and divine at-one-ment. The concept is included in what became known as the Methodist Doctrine of Christian Perfection.

Theosis connects with the notion of step by step development, that life is a journey of learning in all areas of human endeavour, but especially in responding to the love of God. If truth will make you free, as the Gospel of John claims, then freedom is also a part of God's plan for the human race, and so also is spiritual unity. Finlan claims that truth honestly received is liberating, and that freedom responsibly borne leads to maturity. Maturity with freedom allows us to overcome narrow selfish loyalties. Further, ethical progress can only be made when we balance freedom with unity with each other and with God.

Freedom may mean outgrowing doctrines about an arbitrary and punishing God, and accepting a more mature concept of a divine parent who is only interested in our growth and our becoming adult children and friends of God.

The concept of theosis and its relationship to the incarnation invites further study as a positive way of expressing divine and human at-one-ment.

CONCLUSION

We have relied heavily on the work of Stephen Finlan, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, John Cobb, Patricia Williams, John Spong and Stephen Patterson for this paper. There are many other writers that we haven't had a chance to explore such as Robert Jewett, Joel Greenberg and Mark Baker, Simon Barrow

and Jonathan Bartley, Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin to name a few. Ours is very much a work in progress.

At the beginning of our paper we raised a number of the concerns that have prompted our research and it is to these that we wish to return.

The first concern was the long held belief that Jesus had died for our sins. We believe that this can no longer be supported in the light of recent scholarship. Our conclusion is that Jesus died because he was seen to be a threat to the imperial rule of Rome and the religious hierarchy of the day.

Secondly, an examination of Paul's writings shows that he does not support the concept of substitutionary sacrifice, which according to Christian orthodoxy has become the basis of the doctrine of atonement. Further we could find no evidence to suggest that Jesus saw himself as a substitutionary sacrifice, in fact there is evidence to the contrary.

Thirdly, Jesus did not portray God as a punishing vindictive deity but as a loving parent. Jesus does not see God as a blood-lusting deity who demands a ransom to sooth a wounded pride and, Jesus did not speak of his life as being a sacrifice.

Fourthly, we conclude that substitutionary atonement is bad history, bad anthropology, bad theology, and bad psychology, and it is high time to move beyond it.

Fifthly, we have briefly explored how the doctrine impinges upon our worship, and some new directions to take to develop more life-giving, liberating worship.

Finally, we have touched on an alternative to substitutionary atonement, theosis, and we believe that this may tell us more about the liberating and transforming power of a loving God than the primitive and destructive substitutionary atonement doctrine.

WHERE TO FROM HERE

(I agree – here we have discussion on the way to proceed to put into action in our worship and preaching/teaching these findings.)

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