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The Atonement in Mark's Sacramental Theology

Peter J. Scaer

I. Atonement: The Lay of the Land

It was much simpler not that long ago. A seminarian taking an essay test on the atonement had only to remember the three A's: Anselm, Abelard, and Aulén. Abelard held to an exemplary view of the atonement, which rang hollow apart from Anselm's assertion that Christ's death actually paid for sin. Aulén's *Christus Victor* shook things up a little, trumpeting Christ's death as victory over sin, death, and the devil.¹ Now, quite frankly, it is a mess. Anselm is judged not simply inadequate, but anathema. As C. J. den Heyer, a professor of New Testament at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches, puts it, "How can the death of someone in a distant past mean salvation and redemption for me, living centuries later? This notion no longer inspires many people today, but rather provokes opposition."² While den Heyer is wrong to assume that Anselm's doctrine of the atonement no longer inspires, he is right about the opposition.

Feminist theologians have been in the vanguard of the insurgency. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker have contended that Anselmic atonement is the source of Christianity's supposed "oppressiveness" and promotes the idea of a "blood-thirsty God."³ They infamously declared that the atonement amounts to nothing short of divine child abuse. Rosemary Ruether systematized feminist thought, arguing that the traditional understanding of atonement promotes violence, not to mention the evils of patriarchy.⁴ Echoing the feminist critique, pacifist J. Denny Weaver expresses disdain for a view of atonement that depends on violence to provide satisfaction.⁵ Stephen Finlan notes that proponents of

¹ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1950).

² C. J. den Heyer, *Jesus and the Doctrine of the Atonement*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 132.

³ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30.

⁴ See, for instance, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

⁵ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

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Liberation Theology, Womanist Theology, and Black Theology have all weighed in against the traditional atonement.⁶ He proceeds to summarize the objections, noting that the Anselmic atonement is “primitive,” “superstitious,” “destructive of monotheism,” and, for good measure, a “font of anti-Semitism.”⁷ The very necessity of Christ’s death is questioned. As Finlan bluntly puts it, Jesus “did *not* think that it was God’s will that he should be murdered.”⁸

It has to be added, however, that the doctrine is attacked not only on the fringes. Consider the promisingly titled book *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, published by the hardly-radical InterVarsity Press. In it Joel Green and Mark Baker proclaim that the cross is “the defining symbol of the Christian faith.”⁹ In an ecclesiastical culture of prosperity theology, with both Mormonism and Islam on the rise, such attention to the cross is refreshing. Green and Baker helpfully speak of the manifold ways in which the death of Christ may be articulated. Abelard is credited for championing the exemplary atonement and Aulén for *Christus Victor*. The authors go further and show how developing Christianity in Japan has emphasized the way in which Jesus’ death provides salvation from shame. Other more obscure models of atonement likewise receive positive attention. One view, however, is singled out for extensive criticism: namely, that sin incurs a debt or penalty that must be paid and that Christ pays this debt, on behalf of humanity, to the Father.

What is wrong with the Anselmic view? First, we should know that it is medieval, which is code in modern scholarship for backwards. Second, we should be aware that it is a Western idea, which in scholarship is a synonym for shallow, hierarchical, and possibly imperialistic. Third, substitutionary atonement is based on a judicial model that is supposedly specific to our culture. Christian missionaries, we are told, have discovered “huge populations of our world for whom guilt is a nonissue.”¹⁰ Fourth, Anselmic atonement promotes patriarchy, which, of course, is cruel by nature and a stepping stone to the “legitimation of unjust human suffering or the idealization of the victim.”¹¹ Finally, as we know, sin is not our fault.

⁶ Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).

⁷ Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 106, 108, 116.

⁸ Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 109 (emphasis original).

⁹ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 29. The idea of making guilt an issue by preaching the law does not seem to have occurred to the authors.

¹¹ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 30.

Under-represented groups cannot be accused of sin, for they are oppressed. The rest of us can blame our families, genetics, and society at large.¹² Moreover, as if we have not heard this before, we are told that by placing our guilt on Jesus there will be no basis for moral behavior.¹³ So, Green and Baker paradoxically tell us that we are not to blame for our sin, while simultaneously encouraging us to take responsibility for our actions.

Now, all of these attacks on the Anselmic view may be lumped together, however inelegantly, as attacks by the left in its desire to mitigate the place of human culpability. I am reminded of a now three-decade old Monty Python skit, in which the arrested thief defends himself, saying, "I'm not to blame. It's society's fault." At which the police respond, "OK then. Arrest society."

Light from the East?

It seems to me that another related challenge to the notion of substitutionary atonement comes not from the liberal West but from the ecclesiastical East. In his work *Light from the Christian East*, James Payton informs us that the Eastern church has not focused on such Western notions as "the justice of God, the question of humankind's guilt, the necessity of satisfaction, payment of debts, being justified, standing before God in his court and the like."¹⁴ As Payton notes, many in the Eastern tradition are wont to say that the real problem facing humanity is not sin, but death, and that the real goal of the Christian life is not forgiveness, but life in God, or some form of divinization. This divinization occurs primarily through the sacraments, where the Christian is healed and brought closer to God. The Eastern Orthodox John 3:16 might very well be 2 Peter 1:4, which speaks of us becoming "participants of the divine nature." This passage has signal appeal for those longing for a fuller sacramental understanding of the Christian life. There is something to learn here. On the other hand, topics such as the justice of God, humankind's guilt, the necessity of satisfaction, payment of debts, being justified, and standing before God in his court are also thoroughly biblical. Some of us might also want to add that while life with God is the ultimate goal, death is not the ultimate problem, but more precisely the fruit of a tree, which has sin as its root. Without the justice of the cross, the devil's accusation stands, as does the unpaid sin which prevents full communion with God.

¹² Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 29.

¹³ Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 31.

¹⁴ James R. Payton, *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 121.

Uneasy Allies

To their credit, many of the strongest proponents of the Anselmic model of atonement are often traditional Evangelicals and Calvinists. In recent years, works by David Peterson,¹⁵ Robert Letham,¹⁶ Thomas Schreiner,¹⁷ Roger Nicole,¹⁸ J. I. Packer,¹⁹ and others have provided welcome ammunition in the battle to defend the traditional doctrine of the atonement.

Yet, for Lutherans a sense of unease remains. Robert Letham, for instance, has written the largely excellent book *The Work of Christ*. In it, he provides a sturdy biblical defense of penal substitution: namely the doctrine that Christ has paid for the penalty of sin on the cross. What follows though is an appendix on "The Intent of the Atonement"²⁰ in which he frets that the idea that Christ died for all will lead to universalism. Some idea of limited atonement is necessary, lest we think that God's work is not efficacious. Likewise, J. Ramsey Michaels argues for the idea of a limited, or as he puts it, "definite atonement."²¹ Thus, the idea that "Jesus died for everyone indiscriminately" is avoided.²² Such authors aim to make salvation and atonement co-terminous. The Reformed view that Christ died efficaciously for the elect alone is meant to safeguard monergism and the atonement's efficacy. As Sinclair Ferguson asks, "For if Christ's atonement was made for someone who was never saved by it,

¹⁵ David Petersen, ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today, Papers from the Fourth Oak Hill College Annual School of Theology* (Carlisle, UK, and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 67-116.

¹⁸ Roger R. Nicole, Charles E. Hill, and Frank A. James, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives, Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

¹⁹ J. I. Packer, *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998).

²⁰ Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 225-247.

²¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, "Atonement in John's Gospel and Epistles: 'The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World,'" in Nicole, Hill, and James, *The Glory of the Atonement*, 106; see also Raymond A. Blacketer, "Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective," in Nicole, Hill, and James, *The Glory of the Atonement*, 304-323.

²² Michaels, "Atonement in John's Gospel and Epistles," 117.

how can I look to it with confidence that I will be saved by his precious blood?"²³

This puts Lutherans in a bit of a quandary. We want, in the strongest way, to proclaim the guilt of sin and necessity of payment. With our Evangelical and Reformed friends, we want to say that Christ's death actually accomplished something. What we do not want is to lose the doctrines of universal atonement and objective justification: the belief that by the death of Christ, God is reconciled to the whole world. The God of limited or "definite" atonement is not a God at peace with humanity, or at least not with all of humanity. In fact, one might argue, he looks not unlike the caricature of the God portrayed by those who rail against the Anselmic atonement. Yes, such a God may be glorious, but is he all-loving? Thus, Lutherans may well lean on Reformed scholarship but are understandably wary of where they may fall.

The Sacraments and Atonement?

The next question is whether there can be any real intersection between sacramental and atonement theology. Does a strong sacramental theology militate against a strong doctrine of the atonement? Or, do the sacraments necessarily lead us to a more therapeutic understanding of salvation at odds with substitutionary atonement? Many of those who promote sacramental theology downplay or disavow Anselm. On the other hand, the most prominent defenders of the doctrine often have little to say about sacramental theology. Or worse, some pit sacramental theology against a true understanding of the gospel.²⁴

What I think needs to be established, or at least explored, is the relationship between the atonement and sacramental theology. One place to begin may be the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospels within the Debate over the Atonement

The debate over the doctrine of the atonement is wide-ranging, covering most of the canon of Scripture, from the meaning of the Exodus, the Levitical sacrifices, and the Suffering Servant, to the translation of

²³ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Preaching the Atonement," in Nicole Hill, and James, *The Glory of the Atonement*, 439.

²⁴ Such is the case, perhaps, with *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, in which Alan Stibbs adds a two-page epilogue on the sacraments, mentioning in passing "the unworthy practice of infant baptism." See "Appendix: Justification by Faith: The Reinstatement of the Doctrine Today," in Petersen, *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 173.

ἱλαστήριον in Romans 3:25 and the role of Christ's priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews.

Given their centrality to the Christian story, less attention has been paid to the Gospels than one might expect. Most New Testament atonement discussions center first on Paul and then proceed to the Gospels. Martin Hengel, in his marvelous little work *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, notes that the kind of atonement formulae found in the Pauline epistles "retreat into the background in the synoptic tradition."²⁵ In this view, Paul writes the definitive theology which is then given biographical background by the evangelists. There is, however, another way to think about it. That is, the Gospels represent the very heart of the atonement and are Scripture's purest expression of a God who is truly at one with humanity in Christ.

II. The Meaning of Christ's Death in Mark

Some argue that Mark is not the best Gospel for seeing the fullness of the atonement. The second evangelist lacks much of our Lord's teaching ministry. He omits the Lord's Prayer and, therefore, the petition "Forgive us our debts" (Matt 6:12). Likewise, he does not include the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35). These and other texts would be useful in explaining sin as a debt that must be paid. When it comes to the atonement, one is tempted to agree with C. J. den Heyer who comments that the evangelist Mark "offers relatively few new perspectives on the suffering and death of Jesus."²⁶

On the other hand, Christ's death is the pivot of Mark's entire Gospel. Strikingly, Mark, excluding the later additions by transmitters of the text, omits resurrection appearances and leaves us only with an empty tomb. Furthermore, no human being declares Jesus to be God's Son until the crucifixion. As Ernest Best aptly puts it, "The death of Jesus broods over the entire Gospel."²⁷ As such, Jesus' atoning death takes center stage in the Markan drama.

Christ's Death is Necessary

Some strangely argue that Christ's death was not necessary. As Stephen Finlan writes, "Jesus did not come to earth in order to be murdered. He tried to lead his people into a new age of spiritual

²⁵ Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 34.

²⁶ Den Heyer, *Jesus and the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 80.

²⁷ Ernest Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 66.

illumination, which would have followed upon acceptance of his revelation."²⁸ Against such a blatant misreading are numerous Markan passages based on our Lord's own teaching. As Mark writes, "And with boldness he [Jesus] began preaching the word" (Mark 8:32). What word? The word of the cross. Mark writes, "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). This theme of necessity is repeated in Jesus' passion predictions in Mark 9:31 and 10:33-34, where Jesus again speaks of the inevitability of his death. What is more, the basis for the necessity of Christ's death is found in God's will, as expressed in the Scriptures. In Mark 9:12, Jesus interprets his death in this way: "It is written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt." Again, at the Supper, Jesus says that "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him" (Mark 14:21). Yet again, as he is being arrested, he says, "Let the Scriptures be fulfilled" (Mark 14:49). Thus, Jesus describes his own death as necessitated by the Scriptures and, therefore, by God himself. Though Jesus prays that the cup may pass from him, he nevertheless proceeds to drink the cup of suffering, in accordance with the will of his Father (Mark 14:32-42). Of course, to say that Jesus' death was necessary does not then define the exact nature of that necessity.

Christ's Death as Example, Victory, and Ransom

Abelard could have very well drawn upon Mark in asserting Jesus' death as exemplary. When speaking of his death, Jesus offers himself as a model for the Christian life: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44). True disciples are called upon to follow the example of our Lord who "came not to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

Still, the exemplary nature of Christ's death hardly exhausts its meaning. As others have remarked, for his death to be exemplary it must also have purpose. Roger Nicole puts it well when he writes:

Yet for any action to be truly exemplary, it is necessary that it have an appropriate motivation. If I should die in attempting to save a drowning child, my action may be judged heroic and exemplary. But if I thrust

²⁸ Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 110.

myself in the water to give an example to those present, my act will be seen as insane and far from a paragon of virtue.²⁹

Accordingly, after describing his death as exemplary, our Lord then offers the *locus classicus* for the atonement: "The Son of Man has come . . . to give his life as a ransom for the many" (Mark 10:45; cf. Matt 20:28). First, as a matter of housekeeping, we should not think of "many" in such a way that we say that Christ's ransom is for many but not for others. As James Edwards notes, "In Semitic grammar, 'the many' normally stands for totality, all."³⁰ This Markan and Matthean passage has a close parallel in 1 Timothy 2:6, where Paul writes that Christ "gave himself as a ransom for all." In Romans 5, just as Adam's sin results in the judgment and death for the masses (i.e., all humankind), so also Christ's act of obedience has a positive effect for the masses (i.e., all humankind). Thus, in Mark 10:45, we do well to say that Christ died for the masses, among whom we are all numbered.

In what way is our Lord's death salvific? In Mark 10:45, Jesus describes his death as a λύτρον, which may be translated as "ransom" or "redemption." As many have noted, the term λύτρον is an echo of the Exodus story, where the Lord redeems his people Israel out of the bondage of slavery. For instance, in Exodus 6:6 the Lord says to Moses, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment." This is the same way the term is used in Luke's Benedictus, where Zechariah sings, "Praise be the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and made a redemption [λύτρωσιν] for his people" (Luke 1:68).

Yet, a number of scholars have cautioned that this supposed metaphor should not be pressed beyond its limits.³¹ In Exodus, the Lord redeems with his arm and by his mighty acts. Thus, God redeems not with payment but power. When Christ speaks of his death as a redemption, he evokes memories of deliverance from pharaoh and proclaims his own victory over sin, death, and the devil. Thus, our Lord proclaims himself *Christus Victor*. Score one for Aulén.

Yet, while the *Christus Victor* theme is present, it does not tell the whole story. Even as the death of Jesus broods over the Gospels, so also death broods over the Exodus. The children of Israel were not only

²⁹ Roger Nicole, "Postscript on Penal Substitution," in Nicole, Hill, and James, *The Glory of the Atonement*, 447.

³⁰ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 327.

³¹ See, for instance, J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 317.

redeemed out of Egypt, but they were also saved from the destruction of the firstborn. This came at a price: namely, the blood of the Passover lamb. Those whose doors were not marked by the lamb's blood lost their firstborn to death. It is significant, therefore, that each of the Gospels, Mark included, frames Christ's death within the Passover tradition (Mark 14:1). Mark pictures Jesus' death in terms of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb (Mark 14:12). Christ is the first-born, the spotless lamb whose blood is shed so that we may escape death.

Further, we would do well to consider the work of Simon Gathercole who has shown that the term λύτρον is also found within the legal framework of Exodus (LXX).³² Particularly, he points to passages such as Exodus 21:29–30 where Moses lays down this law: "But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death." The owner may avoid the death penalty, notes the Lawgiver. "However, if payment is demanded, the owner shall give a ransom [λύτρα] for his life, whatever is demanded." Thus, within the immediate context of Exodus, the term "ransom" cannot be used simply as a metaphor for salvation or liberation because it implies that a definite price must be paid for that freedom. Thus, the term "ransom" carries with it the idea of exchange or bartering.

Many have also noted that Mark 10:45 strongly echoes Isaiah 53.³³ By offering to give his life, Christ identifies himself as the Suffering Servant, the one who will bear the iniquities of others and carry "the sin" of many with the result that "many" will be accounted righteous (Isa 53:11–12). R. T. France aptly concludes, "This accumulation of verbal echoes of Is. 53:10–12 is compelling in itself, and it is the more so when it is recognised that the whole thrust of Is. 53 is to present the servant as one who suffers and dies for the redemption of the people, whose life is offered as substitute for guilt."³⁴ France astutely observes that it would be hard to offer a better summary of Isaiah 53 than Jesus' own words, "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).³⁵

³² Simon J. Gathercole, "The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21 (2003): 152–165.

³³ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 419–421.

³⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 420.

³⁵ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 420–421.

In sum, Abelard, Aulén, and Anselm can all be supported by Mark 10:45, not as competing themes of atonement but complementary ones. Without including an Anselmic understanding of Jesus' death in the mix of interpreting Mark, the exemplary nature of the atonement is lost, as is the victory over death.

III. Jesus Describes the Atonement Sacramentally

What has not been such a prominent part of the atonement discussion is the relationship between the atonement and the sacraments. This, I think, is crucial. Atonement, after all, has to do with reconciliation. What can atonement mean if God does not come in touch and stay in touch with his creation? Without incarnation, atonement is a theory. Without the sacraments, atonement remains history. In the incarnation, and then in the sacraments, atonement is actualized. For in the sacraments, not only do we receive a pledge of forgiveness, we also come into contact with the God who is with us in Christ. God's forgiveness and presence are two sides of the same coin. In this regard, it is interesting to see how closely the Gospel of Mark ties together the death of Jesus to his sacramental ministry. The first instance of this is the relationship between the atonement and the Lord's Supper.

The Atonement and the Lord's Supper

The setting of the Lord's Supper is the Passover meal, a point Mark repeatedly underlines (Mark 14:1, 12, 14, 16). The reader is thereby reminded that redemption is accomplished and actualized by the sacrifice and eating of the Passover lamb. In what may be the apex of atonement theology, our Lord echoes his previous ransom statement, saying, "This is my blood of the covenant shed on behalf of many" (Mark 14:24). Thus, as he did earlier, our Lord speaks of his death as a sacrificial self-giving for the masses. Yet, now he links that sacrificial giving particularly to the shedding of his blood—to the Supper. Here our Lord's words echo not only Isaiah 53 but also Exodus 24:8 (LXX), in which Moses offered and sprinkled the blood of the covenant (τὸ αἷμα τῆς διαθήκης). As in Exodus 24, the shedding of Jesus' blood provides necessary atonement and enables the Lord to eat and be one with his people. The Lord's Supper and atonement are linked further in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus willingly drinks the cup of judgment. Thus, Christ drinks in judgment so that his disciples may drink in forgiveness. The shed blood speaks of sacrifice and the very basis of redemption for "the many." The death of Jesus becomes the basis of a new relationship between God and his people, and this relationship finds its bond in the blood which Jesus sacrifices (atonement) and shares (sacrament). The historical enactment of

atonement (the shedding of blood on the cross) will be actualized as the disciples continue to drink it anew in the kingdom of God (sacrament).

The Atonement and Baptism

That the Lord's Supper should be linked to the atonement is not so surprising. What is remarkable, though, is the way that Mark links Baptism to the atonement and the atonement to Baptism.

Atonement is, at its very heart, the bridging of the gap between God and man and the breaking down of barriers. Perhaps there is no more telling symbol of this than the temple curtain which is the final barrier that separates God's people from his immediate presence. Only the high priest walked beyond this curtain once a year, on the Day of Atonement. In order to enter past this curtain, the high priest was required to offer a sin offering and a burnt offering. In a type of Old Testament Baptism, he would then bathe his body in water and put on holy garments (Leviticus 16). Then he would sprinkle blood upon the mercy seat, thereby making atonement for the uncleanness of the people.

We cannot underestimate, therefore, the significance of the fact that at the death of Jesus the temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom (Mark 15:38; see also Matt 27:51 and Luke 23:45).³⁶ The Holy of Holies, the very presence of God, is made accessible by the death of Jesus on the cross. Adele Yarbro Collins is right to note that it symbolizes "the rending of the barrier between humanity and God," and it may further signify "that the death of Jesus has made possible access to God for all humanity."³⁷ Mark takes the tearing of the curtain, however, in a surprising new direction. Mark alone among the evangelists explicitly links the tearing of the temple curtain to Baptism. At Jesus' death in Mark 15:38, the temple curtain was torn open (ἔσχισθη). So also, Mark 1:10 tells us that at Jesus' Baptism the heavens are not simply opened (as in Matthew and Luke), but they are "torn open" (σχίζομένουσ). Not so long ago scholars attributed such a strange word choice to Mark's primitive, oral character. As R. T. France notes, "Mark's use of σχίζω is vivid and unexpected. He may have chosen it simply for its dramatic impact, which is considerable."³⁸ Working on the

³⁶ There is some debate as to whether the evangelists are referring to the outer or inner curtain. For the writer to the Hebrews, the inner curtain is clearly the significant one (Heb 6:19, 9:3, and 10:19-20). Given that the outer curtain lacks theological significance, Adela Yarbro Collins's judgment that Mark refers here to the inner curtain seems most probable; see *Mark: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 760.

³⁷ Collins, *Mark*, 760.

³⁸ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 77.

assumption that Mark was the first Gospel, scholars note how Matthew and Luke smoothed out Mark's rougher narrative. Mark, however, moves beyond Matthew and Luke, and has a distinctly theological point to make. In our Lord's Baptism, the Spirit is able to descend, the Father's voice can be heard, and Jesus is revealed as God's Son (Mark 1:10). In Jesus' Baptism, the wall of separation is violently ripped open. Jesus is baptized unto the death. The tearing open of the heavens is an expression of God's desire to be at one with humanity, as well as a vivid picture of the price that would have to be paid. Mark would have us know our Lord's entire ministry is a passion story, whereby he tears open the curtain of separation between God and man, and ensuring an everlasting *Yom Kippur*, that is, a Day of Atonement.

Two Times Three

Perhaps the most remarkable Markan text linking death and Baptism is Mark 10:38–39. James and John request places of honor at the table of Christ's glory. Jesus asks rhetorically in Mark 10:38, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" Thus, Mark again underlines the connection between the suffering of Christ on the cross and the Lord's Supper where he offers a cup of blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Then, in what seems a non-sequitur, Jesus switches from the Supper to Baptism, adding, "or [sc. Are you able] to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38). Mark may not include the trinitarian baptismal formula, but here we have a three-fold reference to his death as Baptism. This is not incidental or accidental, for our Lord repeats the three-fold baptismal reference, saying, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" (Mark 10:39). Adele Yarbro Collins, for example, does not see this: "Here 'baptism' is used metaphorically and refers neither to the baptism of John nor to Christian baptism."³⁹ Why then, one wonders, did Jesus speak with this particular metaphor, especially given the prominence that Baptism held in the early church and within the Gospel of Mark itself? Concerning the double three-fold baptismal references, R. T. France comments that Jesus has "coined a remarkable metaphor, drawing on his disciples' familiarity with the dramatic physical act of John's baptism, but using it (somewhat along the lines of the secular usage mentioned above) to depict the suffering and death into which he was soon to be 'plunged.'"⁴⁰ Yet, Baptism is much more than a metaphor in Mark's Gospel. Jesus himself links the cup with Baptism, and both the cup and Baptism with death.

³⁹ Collins, *Mark*, 497.

⁴⁰ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 416.

Moreover, Mark links Jesus' Baptism with his death by connecting the ripping of the heavens with the ripping of the baptismal curtain.

The Ministry of Jesus is Baptismal

Something seems to be missing. For R. T. France, Jesus metaphorically recalls John's baptismal ministry. What France, and many others, miss is that Jesus' own ministry is thoroughly baptismal. Yes, John is introduced as one who baptizes (Mark 1:4). Within the Gospel, he is also the one who introduces the hearer and reader to Jesus. What does he say of him? "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:9). Strangely, within the Gospel of Mark, these are the only words that John the Baptist uses to describe the Lord's ministry. He does not say that Jesus has come to save us from our sins, nor does he call him the Lamb of God (John 1:29). He says only that Jesus has come to baptize. In one small phrase, we are given a summary of Jesus' entire ministry: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8).

What can John the Baptist mean by this? This, I would propose, is a thematic verse, that clues the reader in on how to understand the entire Gospel. If we take John the Baptist's, and the evangelist's, word for it, Jesus' entire ministry is baptismal. What does Baptism accomplish? From elsewhere in the Scriptures we know that in Baptism we receive the Spirit, the devil is driven out, we are able to call upon God as "Abba, Father," we are cleansed from our sin, we are raised up to walk in the newness of life, and we are given the garment of Christ's righteousness that covers us.

These things are happening in Christ's own ministry in the Gospel of Mark. Read against the baptismal template, Christ's ministry is not simply a laundry list of signs and wonders, but it has a distinctly baptismal shape. Note that this is not a matter of eisegesis (reading into the text), but it is a matter of taking John the Baptist's (and Mark's) word seriously. Jesus came to baptize with the Holy Spirit. And so he did. Even as the baptismal service is a trinitarian invocation, so also are the Father and the Spirit present in the Baptism of the Son. Baptism begins with the rite of exorcism; so also in Mark, Jesus' first recorded miracle is the casting out of unclean spirits (Mark 1:26). Baptism washes away sin; so also, Jesus cleanses a leprous man with the words "Be clean" (Mark 1:41). Baptism enables us to walk in the newness of life; so also does Jesus say to the paralytic man, "Rise, take up your bed and walk" (Mark 2:11). In Baptism we share in Christ's resurrection; so also Jesus says to the little girl, "Little girl, I say to you, arise [ἐγείρε]" (Mark 5:41). In Baptism our mouths are opened to call God "Father"; so also does Jesus say to the deaf and mute man, "Ephphatha. Be opened," and the man's ears were opened and his tongue

was released (Mark 7:34–35). Indeed, in Baptism, we receive the garment of Christ's righteousness; strikingly, in Mark, a woman touches Jesus' garment and is saved (Mark 5:29). Jesus' garment is the sole focus of the Markan transfiguration, where Mark comments that Christ's garments were "intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them" (Mark 9:3–4). In short, the whole kaleidoscope of New Testament imagery describing Baptism can be found in Christ's own baptismal ministry. Moreover, this ministry is not simply one of healing, but it is salvific. The woman touches our Lord's garment not simply to be healed but to be "saved" (Mark 5:28). Indeed, as many as touched him were "saved" (Mark 6:56).

Jesus' Baptismal Ministry and the Price of Atonement

Matthew understood that Christ's healing ministry was intimately related to the atonement. Even as he heals, he takes our diseases upon himself. Thus he quotes Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:17, "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases." For Mark also, Jesus' own baptismal ministry of healing and salvation comes at a price. Though his grace is freely given, it is not free. He redeems with his mighty arm, but a heavy toll is exacted along the way.

Consider the way the Mark makes the transition from the Baptism to the temptation. Matthew tells us that after his Baptism, Jesus was "led up into the desert" (Matt 4:1). Luke sweetens the story and tells us that after his Baptism, Jesus was "full of the Spirit" and was "led by the Spirit into the desert" (Luke 4:1). Mark, however, boldly underlines the price of Jesus' baptismal ministry. Even as he makes it possible for us to enter into the presence of God, the Spirit violently casts him out (ἐκβάλλει) into the desert (Mark 1:12). The Markan word choice of ἐκβάλλω is not simply for dramatic effect, or to add, as R. T. France puts it, "the immediacy of the impact."⁴¹ Mark again has theology on his mind. Though sinless and well-pleasing to God, Jesus receives the same treatment as did the first Adam, whom God drove out (ἐξέβαλεν) of paradise (Gen 3:24). Again, even as he drives out (ἐξέβαλεν) unclean spirits, so also is he driven out by the Spirit and left to Satan's devices. Thus, his baptismal ministry begins with the price of atonement.

So also does it continue. He cleanses the leper but with the result that our Lord "could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the desolate places" (Mark 1:45). Thus, as the leper reenters society, Jesus is pushed to the fringe. The woman who touches Jesus' garment is healed, but our Lord

⁴¹ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 84.

feels the power that has left him (Mark 5:30). Again, Jesus' ministry is popular, yet popularity comes at a price. As the crowds gather around Jesus, the disciples make ready the boat lest the crowds "crush" Jesus (Mark 3:9). The Greek word *θλίβω* refers to "tribulation," the type that comes to a culmination in the passion narrative. The crowd that crushes upon Jesus in his ministry will crush him on the cross. This is the pattern throughout the entire Gospel. There is a price to be paid for everything. He frees others but is himself arrested. He brings others to life but himself must be put to death.

In Touch with Creation

Sacramental theology preaches a God who is in touch with his creation. Since Christ atones for the sin of the world, there is no longer a barrier between God and man. Thus, God comes in touch with his creation incarnationally and sacramentally. More than any other Gospel, Mark emphasizes the fact that the miracles of Jesus are accomplished not only by the power of his word but also his touch.

When, for instance, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, he does so by taking her hand (Mark 1:31). As Jesus cleansed, he "stretched out his hand and touched him" (Mark 1:41). Jairus, whose daughter is at the point of death, requests, "Lay your hands on her so that she might be saved and live" (Mark 5:23). Upon arriving at Jairus' house, Jesus took the girl by the hand and raised her (Mark 3:41). As Jesus healed the blind man at Bethsaida, he places his hands on the blind man's eyes, so that he sees clearly (Mark 8:25).

Even as Jesus heals by touch, others reach out to Jesus and are saved. The man with the withered hand is told, "Extend your hands" (Mark 3:5). He did so and was healed. We are told that Jesus healed many, "so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him" (Mark 3:10). The woman with the flow of blood reached out, "touched his garment," and was saved (Mark 5:27).

Also, we note that within the Gospel of Mark especially, Jesus employs earthly elements in his healing/saving ministry. Some may find such references primitive or embarrassing, but they express the sacramental nature of Christ's ministry. Thus, in the healing of the deaf and dumb man, he heals with saliva: "He spit and touched the man's tongue" (Mark 7:31). This same saliva he uses in healing the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:23). In both cases, Christ comes into a most intimate communion with his creation. The water from his body brings life and salvation to others.

IV. Conclusion

So it is that Mark preaches the atonement. Christ has offered his life as a ransom for the masses. Yet, for Mark, there is no divide between this gospel message and the sacramental ministry. The atonement finds its theological culmination in the Lord's Supper. Moreover, Jesus' entire ministry is fully one of baptismal atonement. Through his touch, he heals and brings salvation. Yet this saving touch comes at a price. It is not a case of the cross or the sacraments. It is a baptismal ministry unto death.

Unfortunately, Mark has never garnered the respect he deserves as a theologian of the church. The church fathers neglected him and ran to Matthew's primacy. The scholars' (most probably mistaken) assumption of Markan primacy has proved a mixed blessing. We know much about Mark the storyteller. Yet to this title we may have to add, Mark the preacher of the cross and theologian of Baptism. Whether or not the final ending was written by Mark, the writer captured succinctly the character of the Gospel's message: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation: (namely) 'He who believes and is baptized shall be saved'" (Mark 16:16).

This marks the dawn of a new age called the Middle Ages or the age of intellectual consolidation. By the eleventh century there was a significant social and political stability which emerged within this geographic area. Fourthly, sacramental theology also grew, as well as, fifthly, a theology of grace and the doctrine of grace returning to the teaching of Augustine, and ultimately the Bible. Sixthly, and very importantly, a return to the original sources had begun (ad fontes) in order to think and write critically on the source documents of a given text. Short Study: Understanding the Atonement. One of the theological points discussed during the Middle Ages was the "Harrowing of Hell." The New Testament demonstrates a victory of Christ over the forces of darkness. For all the danger and complexity, it isn't outside the sacramental potential given us in Christ. Archbishop Rowan Williams, A Ray Of Darkness. Whereas Baptism is, generally speaking, the ecclesiological and soteriological initiatory sacrament which introduces one's participation in the life of Christ, it is the Eucharist that perpetuates one's connection to the "body of Christ" in both the ecclesial (the Church as the "body of Christ") and soteriological (the Eucharist as the "Body and Blood" of Christ) definition. Historically speaking, the "eucharistic meal gradually became a source of dis-identity from the Jewish community, and a source of self-identity." The sacrament is also a social event: one identifies with a particular community. The Atonement in Mark's Sacramental Theology (Text). Originally published in Concordia Theological Quarterly Volume: 72 Number: 3 in 2008, p. 227-242. 8 Tips for Remembering Christ and the Sacrament. The teaching of Jesus' death as atonement for sin has received renewed attention recently in biblical and theological The Continuous Atonement by Brad Wilcox. The Continuous Atonement book.