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place, as if we were his equivalent. And that means when we relate to other human beings in the trinitarian fashion of Jesus' own life, we do not do so in exactly the way he does. Because he is divine, Jesus has a superior position in relating to other people – he saves them, for example – and we do not.

Finally – because of the differentiated way in which human relations are formed in the image of the trinity – one need not fear that basing political recommendations on the trinity will produce either an unrealistic politics or an uncritically complacent one. The different fashions in which the same pattern of the trinity appears means that a trinitarian politics can be realistic. One no longer need expect or demand a simple reproduction everywhere of the relations that members of the trinity have with one another – where they are clearly inappropriate, where they simply seem inapplicable. Political recommendations based on the trinity gain realism as they follow the highly differentiated ways the trinity works within the world; trinitarian political recommendations become appropriately gauged thereby to the actual character of humans.

Yet, uncritical complacency is also overcome. The workings of the trinity in the world that seem to be of a character we can easily imitate are for the sake of, are the means to, something more: life-giving relations of perfectly mutual flourishing that the divine persons themselves enjoy. Complacency is overcome by a sense that there are heights of relationship above our own, ones that our relations with one another in themselves can only strive to approximate without ever matching – at the highest, relations among perfectly equal trinitarian persons swirling in and out of one another with such a completely realized fullness of mutual communication that any need for loss or gain is thereby excluded. Without taking on the character of such perfection in and of themselves, human relations might hope to gain that height by being united with the trinity and thereby incorporated within its own life, as the trinity itself makes that possible by its coming graciously into the world to us in Christ.

6 | Death and sacrifice

Serious attention to the incarnation enables one to revise traditional descriptions and explanations of the saving significance of the cross so as to do justice to the criticisms that feminist and womanist theologians rightfully lodge against classical atonement theories.[1] This is among the more controversial claims to be found in my *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*.[2] I expand upon the argument now, and show how it provides a nuanced and subtle reworking of classical images for the cross – the primary test case for my purposes here being images of sacrifice.

Reflecting to some extent theological differences about the nature of sin and salvation as well as the complexity of the event itself on a Christian understanding of it (for example, this event involves both God and humanity in Jesus' person, and both Jesus' sinless humanity and the acts of sinners against him), descriptions of what is happening on the cross are notoriously diverse among the followers of Jesus, beginning at least with the New Testament. The cross is the final expression of God's wrathful condemnation of sin, the place where sin, and the suffering and death it entails, are borne by Christ and put

[1] For summary statements of feminist and womanist worries, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Execution of Jesus and the Theology of the Cross," in *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 97–128; and Delores Williams, "Black Women's Surrogate Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in Paula M. Cooey, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (eds.), *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), pp. 1–13.

[2] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2001).

to death, destroyed. The cross is the ultimate expression of God's loving choice to be with sinners, in all the sufferings of a spiritual and physical sort that burden human life in its sinful condition. The cross is the final act of divine humiliation, or the intra-trinitarian act whereby the second person of the trinity is abandoned by the first, in a divine self-emptying that makes room for a world of pain, sin, and death within the very life of God. It is the cultic sacrifice to end all sacrifices. It is the agonizing birth of the new creation to be revealed in the resurrection of the dead and in the new life of those dedicated as Christ was to God's cause. On the cross we find the final form of perfect obedience to God's will, or a man laying down his life for his friends. We see our own sin: the culminating rejection of Christ's mission of love as that takes shape in the execution of a religious and political subversive at the hands of imperial power.

These various descriptions of what is going on when Jesus is crucified have distilled over the centuries into distinct models of the atonement, each developing more thoroughly particular aspects of them and usually offering in the process some explanation for the saving significance of the cross. Thus, the moral example or moral influence model of the cross (stemming from Abelard) stresses the way Jesus' dying for us is the perfect manifestation in human form of God's self-sacrificial, condescending love, a helpful example for our imitation or morally powerful influence, spurring us to a similar love. According to the *Christus Victor* model, God is engaged on the cross in a decisive battle with the forces of sin and death, overcoming the devil for our sake. Restoring the beauty and order of the world lost by our dishonoring of God, Jesus, on Anselm's vicarious satisfaction model, offers up to death his own sinless life in honor of God, thereby rendering the satisfaction that humans owe to God but in a divine way that their dishonoring of God demands and merely human lives cannot provide. On the penal substitution model, typical of the Reformation but found as early as Athanasius, Jesus on the cross, through his perfect obedience and/or by suffering the punishment due violators of the law, fulfills the

law's terms and exempts human sinners from penalties otherwise owed. On the happy exchange model associated with Luther, Christ takes on our sins and puts them to death on the cross while we put on Christ's righteousness through our faith and in that way find acceptance before God.

The disconcerting differences of opinion, and even outright conflict, among these models encourage efforts to construct typologies of their essential differences and establish criteria for their evaluation. The models differ, for example, on who is responsible for the crucifixion – the devil, human beings, God, or Jesus as the one consenting to his death and going willingly to it. They differ on who or what is changed via the cross: God (God's wrath changed to mercy); human beings (our hate for God changed to love, our fear before God's wrath changed to trust); or the whole situation (through the cross a new sort of relationship is set up between God and human beings). The models differ on the one effecting change: God brings it about or we do by following the way of obedience that Jesus models for us on the cross. Christ effects the change primarily through the powers of his humanity (for example, insofar as he is obedient), or through his divinity (in case God is battling the devil on the cross for rights of jurisdiction over us). The models differ on whether the cross is an interruption of God's relations with us or part of a continuous effort – for example, to win us back from the devil, or to express love for us in a way that will finally get through to us. And so on.

Criteria for evaluation have become somewhat standard by this point in the history of theological argument over the atonement and I understand feminist and womanist criteria to be very much in line with them. One consideration, certainly, is the unappealing or one-sided character of God that many of the models imply. God in the moral example or influence model might seem a sentimental patsy, without righteous anger or horrified concern for the destructive and wayward effects of sin on human life. On the vicarious satisfaction model, God appears more concerned about slights to God's own

dignity than the sufferings of a death-filled world. Here and in the penal substitution model, God seems restricted in the expression of love by a rigid law or penal code of God's own construction. In many cases, one suspects God derives pleasure or satisfaction from death and suffering. Feminist worries about the cross as a model for abuse are perfectly continuous with the last concern, which hardly seems especially objectionable or outlandish in its basic form.

The outdated character of the mechanism of atonement in many of the models is a question too. Contributing factors here include, for example, the loss of the honor code among superiors and subordinates and penitential frame that gave Anselm's theory its cogency; and the modern sense (certainly since the Enlightenment) that an injustice would be done if another were punished or had to be obedient to the law in one's place. The womanist concern that classical atonement theories trade on ideas that would condone the surrogate status of black women – their having to do the dirty work for whites – and play down the now so obvious injustices of that surrogacy, seem an unproblematic example of the latter well-justified worry.

Another major question is the degree to which these various models leave other aspects of the gospel story, the other major dimensions of Jesus' life according to Christian understanding, unexplored or unimportant. The moral influence and vicarious satisfaction models, for example, slight the importance of the resurrection. The incarnation easily drops out of view on the penal substitution model: someone has to die or be obedient since those are the terms of the law but presumably the merely human quality of Jesus' acts is sufficient to meet the terms of any original contract or covenant that God sets up with us. The public ministry of Jesus is not obviously important on any of the models and this point in particular feminist and womanist theologians make forcefully.

Feminist and womanist theologians remind us that the death of Jesus must be brought into connection with his public ministry

in a way that does not slight the saving importance in its own right of that ministry. The two are connected appropriately, feminist and womanist theologians tell us, if Jesus' ministry gave rise to the opposition that brought about his death, or if the message of the cross is to stay the course in dedication to the mission of God despite the costs in suffering and death to oneself that are likely in a world marked by sin. These connections between Jesus' death and his ministry turn one's attention away from any exclusive focus on Jesus' death and toward the character of the mission – for example, to the healing nature of Jesus' interactions with others, his acceptance of sinners among his close associates, and practices of inclusive table fellowship. Obedience to the mission, as that is pointedly displayed on the cross, is all well and good but the more important point is what the mission is to which Jesus' life is dedicated. It is true that obedience unto death is a proof of supreme dedication, but death, in and of itself, is an impediment to the mission and not in any obvious way its positive culmination. If the mission of God continues, it is despite Jesus' death and not thanks to it. Rejection and death stand in the way of the mission and must be overcome in a resurrected life that moves through and beyond death. To the extent the cross is simply the culmination of the sinful world's rejection of Jesus' mission, it presumably would have been better – a sign of the kingdom's having already come – if the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus had never happened. The new covenant or community of God that Jesus struggles to bring into existence would ideally not include them.

Feminist and womanist theologians in this way prevent human sin, along with all the religious and political aspects of the sinful situation that led Jesus to his death, from being eclipsed, as they tend to be, in models of the atonement in which God brought Jesus to his death or such a death was necessary to satisfy divine requirements. Identified as the consequence of human rejection and sin, the horror of the cross stands out in an unmitigated way: the death and suffering of an innocent victim, in and of themselves, are in no respect

good; there is nothing saving about them as such. Once again, this reminder that theologians must remain cognizant of the sinful horrors of the cross, of the fact that this is a brutal, bloody death suited to a world of sin, is fully compatible with quite traditional and longstanding criteria for evaluating atonement theories (especially within Reformation circles).

Of course a feminist and womanist focus on Jesus' ministry can itself become one-sided, and therefore susceptible of critique according to some of the same general criteria. Despite the obviously climactic character of Jesus' passion in the gospel narratives of his life and the focus on it in Pauline writings especially, the cross can fall out of consideration altogether except as something simply negative. The usual recourse of feminist and womanist theologians is to dismiss the idea that there is anything saving going on in the crucifixion. Discussion of religious and political opposition to Sophia's prophets, among whom Jesus is numbered, can take the place of any further need for theological investigation into how Jesus saves us despite such opposition – how he saves in and through the extreme opposition that his mission faced and in contradiction to it.

A model of atonement based on the incarnation, I suggest, would supplement feminist and womanist theologies on this score, thereby deflecting criticism of them while resurrecting, so to speak, a nearly forgotten form of classical atonement theory. Following Thomas Torrance, one can say: "Union with God in and through Jesus Christ who is one and the same being with God belongs to the inner heart of the atonement."[3] Incarnation becomes the primary mechanism of atonement. Such a mechanism replaces altogether vicarious satisfaction and penal substitution, with their obvious problems from both feminist and non-feminist points of view; and provides a different underpinning than usual for the *Christus Victor* and happy exchange models.

[3] Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 159.

The happy exchange model is easily combined, as it is in Luther and Calvin, with a penal substitution view of the mechanism of atonement: sin needs to be put to death for justice to be done and Jesus does so on the cross by bearing our sins, putting them on. The primary mechanism of atonement on the happy exchange model would in that case be the legal one of the penal substitution model: the requirements of the law are met on the cross.

Christus Victor is not a model at all in that it fails, per se, to address the question of the mechanism of the atonement. Christ is battling the forces of evil and sin on the cross but how is the battle won? Gustaf Aulén, who is primarily responsible for the modern currency of this classical idea, associates the *Christus Victor* model with a ransom theory: God buys back or redeems humans from imprisonment or enslavement to sin and death by way of the cross. He also associates it with the bait-and-hook account of what happens on the cross that one finds, for example, in Gregory of Nyssa.[4] If one excises the fishing analogy, which has important non-legal connotations, the latter idea is that the devil takes Jesus to his death, as if he were a sinner whom death can rightfully claim; the devil thereby oversteps his bounds and loses rights to us. But the historical currency of these accounts of the atonement is just as restricted as the penitential and feudal conceptions that underlie Anselm's.

Aulén is aware that the *Christus Victor* model has some connection with the incarnation. But he understands the incarnation as merely a necessary prerequisite for the fight to be engaged: God has to enter into the sphere of sin and death, by becoming human, in order to fight sin and death. If the fight culminates on the cross, there is a continuity to the struggle across Jesus' life and death. The struggle begins with the incarnation where the fight is engaged, reaches a climax of intensity on the cross, and then moves through it to the victory of resurrection.

[4] Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1965), especially pp. 63–71.

Aulén does not see, however, that the incarnation is the very means by which the fight is waged and won. This claim is fundamental nonetheless to the early church theologians to whom he appeals. All of them view the incarnation, understood as the Word's assumption of humanity – the Word's uniting of humanity to itself in such a way as to make humanity its own – as the key to the salvation of humanity. It is in virtue of the incarnation that humanity is saved – first the humanity of Christ himself and then through him that of every other human being, one with him. Humanity is purified, healed, and elevated – saved from sin and its effects (anxiety, fear, conflict, and death) – as a consequence of the very incarnation through which the life-giving powers of God's own nature are brought to bear on humanity in the predicament of sin. Humanity is taken to the Word in the incarnation in order to receive from the Word what saves it.

The connection of incarnation with the happy exchange model becomes in this way easy to see so that the happy exchange model's association with penal substitution is broken. The happy exchange of the atonement is just a case of the saving communication of idioms that the incarnation brings about. As a result of the incarnation, the characteristics of human life become the (alien) properties of the Word, and thereby the properties of the Word (its holiness, its life-enhancing powers) become the (alien) properties of humanity in a way that saves humanity from sin and death.

The saving effects of the incarnation on this classical model are felt throughout Christ's life but no more so than on the cross, where those life-giving powers of the divine nature of Christ are so much needed – remedying the loss of the humanity of Christ's own powers of life as they ebb away in full physical and spiritual torment. The application of these ideas about the saving efficacy of incarnation to what is happening on the cross as to every other aspect of Jesus' life is quite clear in these same early church figures. Thus, Gregory Nazianzen maintains that the Word, in becoming incarnate, "bear[s] all me and mine in himself, that in himself he

may exhaust the bad, as fire does wax, or as the sun does the mists of the earth; and that I may partake of his nature by the blending."[5] He avers again: "So he is called man ... that by himself he may sanctify humanity and be as it were a leaven to the whole lump; and by uniting to himself that which was condemned may release it from condemnation, becoming for all men all things that we are except sin – body, soul, mind, and all through which death reaches."[6] Gregory of Nyssa makes much the same point: "Although Christ took our filth upon himself, nevertheless he is not himself defiled by the pollution, but in his own self he cleanses the filth, for it says, the light shone in the darkness, but the darkness did not overpower it."[7] And he makes the point again in a way that quite explicitly applies to the cross: "Although he was made sin and a curse because of us, and took our weaknesses upon himself, yet he did not leave the sin and the curse and the weakness enveloping him unhealed ... Whatever is weak in our nature and subject to death was united with his deity and became what the deity is."[8] The incarnation indeed is the underlying mechanism of the bait-and-hook fishing analogy found in Gregory of Nyssa:

> In order to secure that the ransom in our behalf might easily be accepted by him who required it, the deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with the ravenous fish, the hook of the deity might be gulped down along with the bait of the flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and the light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might

[5] "Orations," trans. Charles Gordon Brown and James Edward Swallow, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VII, Second Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983), Oration 30 (Fourth Theological Oration), section 6, p. 311.

[6] *Ibid.*, section 21, p. 317.

[7] Gregory of Nyssa, *Adv Apol.* 26, in Werner Jaeger (ed.) *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (Leiden, 1960–), vol. III, Part 1, p. 171, cited by Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, p. 162.

[8] Gregory of Nyssa, *Ep. adv. Apol.*, cited by Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, p. 162, fn. 56.

> vanish; for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active.[9]

Perhaps most explicitly Cyril of Alexandria says:

> There was no other way for the flesh to become life-giving, even though by its own nature it is subject to the necessity of corruption, except that it became the very flesh of the Word who gives life to all things ... There is nothing astonishing here, for if it is true that fire has converse with materials that in their nature are not hot, and yet renders them hot since it so abundantly introduces to them the inherent energy of its own power, then surely in an even greater degree the Word who is God can introduce the life-giving power and energy of his own nature into his very own flesh.[10]

Understood with reference to the incarnation, atonement returns to its English lexical roots: at-one-ment – a sense of the atonement that now can no longer be limited to the cross. Humanity is at one with the divine in Jesus. This is true on the cross as much as everywhere else in Jesus' life and that is what is saving about it.

Keeping this in mind, it becomes readily apparent how an incarnational account of the cross severely undercuts legal or contractual interpretations of the saving mechanism of the cross, typical of the vicarious satisfaction and penal substitution models. If God saves by assuming the very life of suffering and death to which Jesus is subjected, God's saving response to the events of the cross is not sufficiently external to them to make sense of a forensic analogy. God's saving act does not follow Jesus' obedience the way a reward follows the doing of good works. Nor does God's saving act follow Jesus' self-sacrificial death in the way release from debtors' prison follows the payment of a debt. In sum, God's saving action

[9] "The Great Catechism", trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. v, Second Series (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), chapter 24, p. 494.

[10] *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John McGuckin (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), pp. 132–3.

can no longer be viewed, in the temporally subsequent sense required by a forensic analogy, as any kind of legally mandated response – to what Jesus does on the cross, to his obedience, self-sacrifice, or suffering unto death. Saying any of that makes God's action to save come too late, too far after the fact. Instead, God is taking saving action from the very first in that here these human acts and passions are the Word's own.

To discuss God's saving action in legal or contractual terms is also to misunderstand the causal connection between what happens on the cross and God's action to save. What happens on the cross does not evoke what God does to save, in any strong sense. Those saving acts flow to the humanity of Christ in virtue of an already present community with that humanity – the strongest possible community in which what is the Word's becomes humanity's own – a community that holds prior to the meeting of any conditions and which in its intimacy obviates the need to meet them.

It is true that what happens on the cross is a precondition for salvation in some sense – just not in the way forensic models presume. If the powers of the Word are to reach humanity suffering under the forces of sin and death, the Word must assume, become one with, a life of that sort, as Jesus goes in suffering and abjection to the cross. The idea that Jesus must be obedient unto death, humiliated on the cross, in order to be exalted, means only that – not that Jesus is exalted, resurrected, as a reward. It simply means (as Athanasius makes clear in his interpretation of Philippians 2) that the Word must take on humanity as we know it in all its horrors if the powers of the Word are to be translated to that humanity in a saving way.[11] If anything more about Jesus' humiliation as a precondition of God's saving action is suggested, it is that Jesus had to be

[11] Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," trans. John Henry Newman and Archibald Robertson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. iv, Second Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1957), Discourse 1, chapter 11, section 44, p. 332.

humiliated on the cross for the sake of salvation the way one has to be sick to go to the doctor, not the way one has to swallow one's pride and make amends in order to be forgiven, let back into another's good graces.

More subtly perhaps, the incarnational model of the atonement undercuts the sense of vicariousness in the satisfaction and penal models. In the claim that Jesus dies for us, the primary meaning of "for us" is benefit rather than legal substitution; Jesus dies to benefit us so that we will no longer have to live as we do in a sin-afflicted, death-ridden world. Jesus, as the Word incarnate, does act on our behalf: he steps into our place to act as our advocate and thereby does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. But in Jesus the Word makes our cause its own and does for us what we cannot do in virtue of the kinship established between the Word and humanity via the incarnation, because of the bond of the Word with humanity that the incarnation brings about. It is this incarnational identification of the Word with humanity rather than Jesus' simple standing in our place before the law that makes Jesus our substitute in the prosecution of our cause. Jesus does not represent us, stand in for us, primarily by taking on the position of guilty, death-deserving persons before the law. That, once again, is not what "died for us" has to mean here.

If the incarnation is often so evidently in the early church the basic model of salvation that extends to the cross, why does the incarnation drop out of modern accounts of the atonement, even among theologians such as Aulén with a special interest in the early church? One possibility is that Greek philosophical assumptions lie behind the account of how the incarnation saves and contemporary people no longer find those assumptions plausible. (For example, the incarnation trades on a Platonic reification of universal terms such as "humanity.") The incarnation would fall victim, then to the Hellenization thesis which Protestant liberalism, following Adolf Harnack, popularized. Even if true, however, the implausibility of its philosophical assumptions hardly explains why the incarnation

is not at least included among the many models of atonement that contemporary mores and cultural assumptions render problematic. Such a charge, moreover, is unlikely to be true. As the earlier quotations clearly indicate, the saving efficacy of incarnation is not commonly explained by any technical philosophical means, but through the use of examples that are rather "homey" and commonsensical even to modern ears. We are told to think of the way darkness is overcome by light, or the way wood catches fire when set next to a flame. There is nothing particularly objectionable here, compared to modern worries, for example, about the injustice of putting innocent people to death, or especially time bound in its incomprehensibility to contemporary people, in the way the feudal code of honor underlying the vicarious satisfaction model now seems to be.

A much more plausible explanation for absence of attention to it is that incarnation is being understood – misunderstood – in ways that make it hard to see its connection with the cross. One such misunderstanding is to see the incarnation in a narrow temporally indexed way – that is, as simply referring to Jesus' birth – and therefore separated from the cross by the whole intervening span of Jesus' life. The incarnation, however, refers primarily to the fact that the Word has assumed or united the humanity of Jesus to itself. That assumption of humanity by the Word is of course responsible for the fact that the man Jesus exists at all; it is therefore a way of talking about Jesus' birth. But it also underlies and makes sense of what happens over the whole course of Jesus' existence, from his birth to his death and beyond: his whole human life and death are that of the Word incarnate. On an understanding of incarnation as the underlying precondition for the whole of Jesus' life and death, it makes perfect sense, as one finds in some quotations I cited, to associate the verses of the Gospel of John that introduce the birth of Jesus – the light shines in the darkness (John 1), and so on – with the death of Christ. There too, indeed especially on the cross, one finds the light coming into the darkness.

To see the connection with the cross one must also not think of the humanity that the Word assumes as anything other than humanity adversely affected by the consequences of sin and in that sense fallen. One must not identify that humanity, for example, with the pure, pre-lapsarian humanity favored in medieval accounts of the incarnation. If the humanity assumed by the Word were itself in such great shape, it would have no need of becoming any different by being one with the Word. Since the humanity of the man, Jesus, who is without sin, nevertheless represents humanity in need of salvation, such an account of incarnation has every reason to stress the awful human conditions that the Word assumes in becoming incarnate. The humanity of the Word is humanity suffering from fear and distress, persecution by others, anxiety before death, betrayal and isolation, separation from God – all the qualities of death-infused, sin-corrupted life that require remedy. The cross then exemplifies in paradigmatic fashion the very character of human life that the Word becomes incarnate to reverse by making its own. Far from turning attention away from the cross, this account of incarnation understands all the struggles of Jesus' life as the Word made flesh in light of it.

Finally, one must not understand the saving effects of the incarnation to be immediate. If that were so, humanity would be saved right at the start of Jesus' life, and the cross would have no significance. For example, Jesus' own humanity would enjoy resurrected life from his birth, without having to move through death to gain it. If the incarnation saved humanity immediately, incarnation would become an alternative to atonement on the cross and not an explanation for what is saving about it: humanity would be saved by the incarnation rather than by anything happening on the cross. One must say, instead, that humanity suffering under the weight of sin is reworked in a process of salvation over time, from Jesus' birth up to and through his death. The incarnation remains a constant but its effects are not. Salvation, what the incarnation brings about, takes time, in short; salvation is a form of temporal, historical process,

involving struggle with the forces of sin and death, and the sort of changes that typify any human life, sinful or not.

To understand this, one must see the humanity that the Word assumes as an historical humanity, one that alters and grows. "The child grew and became strong ... Jesus increased in wisdom and in years" (Luke 2:40, 52). And one must see it as a humanity needing to be changed because of the forces of sin and death afflicting it. There is consequently in Jesus' life a passover, a genuine way or passage, from corruption to incorruption, from a life suffering from sin to one free from its effects.[12] Each moment of Jesus' life as it happens is being brought into connection with the life-giving powers of the Word, and the reworking of each of them takes time. Jesus is not saved from death, therefore, until he dies and not saved from the terrible consequences of his rejection in a sinful world until he suffers them, at which time those aspects of Jesus' human life are taken up by the Word and subject to a process of reworking through the powers of the Word.

The way this incarnational model of the atonement addresses feminist and womanist worries is I hope evident by now. Here is a God who works unswervingly for our good, who puts no value on death and suffering, and no ultimate value on self-sacrifice for the good, a God of gift-giving abundance struggling against the forces of sin and death in the greatest possible solidarity with us – that of incarnation. Contrary to a great deal of feminist and womanist theology, there is something saving about the cross here, but there is nothing saving about suffering, death, or victimhood, in and of itself. All those cruel and bloody features of the cross that feminists and womanists worry atonement theories positively evaluate are here identified in no uncertain terms with the world from which one needs to be saved. The mechanism of atonement does not mitigate the horrors of the cross, but highlights them: they are what gives

[12] John Meyendorff, "Christ's Humanity: The Paschal Mystery," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 31 (1987), pp. 15–31.

salvation by way of incarnation its urgency. Nothing stands in the way, moreover, of a quite realistic appraisal of the religious and political reasons for Jesus' execution, since they make all the more evident the sinful, conflictual, and death-dealing world that the incarnation of the Word works to heal.

Nor need feminists and womanists worry unduly in this case about the tendency of atonement models to foster one-sided and narrow prescriptions for human action by elevating certain features of the cross to salvific status. Nothing of the human character of Christ's going to the cross – for example, Jesus' steadfast dedication to the cause of God at such great cost to himself – is a condition in any strong sense of its being saving. Or, one might say everything about Jesus' life that involves intimacy with the human condition for the sake of saving it is a condition of salvation in a weak sense. Jesus is obedient to the mission of God and that is a good thing but this obedience is itself the *result* of the same fact of incarnation that accounts for the saving character of the cross: Jesus perfectly follows the mission from the Father upon which the Word has been sent because he *is* the Word. Obedience cannot, moreover, be a matter for isolated preoccupation, in the effort to live as Christ does. An incarnational model of atonement insists upon the relationship between the cross and the rest of Jesus' life, since the mechanism of salvation on the cross is at work throughout the whole of Jesus' life. And the effects of this salvific mechanism – its point – are, indeed, much clearer away from the cross than on it – for example, in Jesus' healing ministry to the sick and the outcast, the advent of the new community of God, and Jesus' resurrected life.

Along the way, we have been discussing several cases where images commonly used of the atonement are seriously reinterpreted and critically revised on the basis of an incarnational model – for example, language of obedience, contractual images, and the idea of Jesus as a "stand in" for us. But I turn now in a more concerted way to images of sacrifice, since that imagery is often what feminists and womanists are most worried about – because of its possible lauding

of self-sacrifice. The model of incarnation throws a whole new light on such imagery especially when the historical complexity of that imagery's associations is better recognized.

Sacrificial imagery in the New Testament is quite complex, reflecting in great part the varied character of both Old Testament descriptions of sacrifice in ancient Israel and contemporary Temple practice (along with the fact that the governing political context for New Testament writings is a Greco-Roman one, in which sacrifice also plays an important role). If Christians assume there is something saving about Jesus' death, this association with cultic sacrifice is perhaps quite natural: the blood (of animals) is key to establishing and maintaining cultic relations with God, God's presence in the Temple. Christ's death therefore comes to be discussed in terms of communion sacrifice: "This is my blood of the new covenant" (Mark 14:24; see also 1 Cor 10:16; 11:25), a reference perhaps to the sacrifices that Moses performed to seal the covenant (Ex 24). Christ is the lamb of God, the paschal lamb, slain as a sign of the favor of God that would bring Israel's redemption from Egypt and its establishment as a new people under divine direction and protection (see 1 Cor 5:7; Eph 5:2; 1 Peter 2:9; 3:18). Problems in or interruptions to a close relationship with God (moral fault or cultic impurity) are rectified through the blood of cultic sacrifice (see Heb 9:22). Christ's death on the cross is therefore discussed perhaps most frequently in terms of expiatory sacrificial rites (for example, in Rom 3:24–5; Heb 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10, and Rv 1:5) – those rites that wipe away sins or cultic impurities for the individual or whole community. Since none of these sacrifices involves the sacrifice of a human being, it perhaps makes sense that there are other New Testament references to the Abraham and Isaac story – Abraham's bringing his own son to be sacrificed; Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed (Rom 8:32). There are also suggestions of non-cultic sacrifice of a moral sort. Jesus is like those martyrs for the people under persecution (see 4 Macc) who lay their own lives of self-sacrificial service before God as a pointed reminder of and appeal to God's steadfast love of God's people.

References to the Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah 53 in descriptions of the Last Supper seem to have the same import.

With this understanding of the historical complexities of New Testament references to sacrifice in mind, one can see how many of the standard atonement models distort the understanding of sacrifice that originally grounds its use for describing the cross. Legal or contractual interpretations are cases in point. While the animal sacrificed in an expiatory rite may be standing in for the one for whom the sacrifice is offered (the man offering it lays his hands on its head in some act of identification perhaps), there is no legal connotation of the sacrificial act as a satisfaction or payment of a penalty.[13] The rite is not propitiatory: its point is not to change God's wrath to mercy, but to wipe away fault or impurity in ways that a God already desirous of communion with us institutes.[14] Benefits do not come back to the offerer because the conditions of something like a contract have been fulfilled but because the rite trades on God's unbroken faithfulness to a decision to be with those engaged in Temple service. Propitiation is not the reason why the rite wipes away sin; no real explanation is offered. God simply wants to reinstate God's people to full communion with God and this is what God tells God's people to do in such cases.

It is sometimes maintained that ideas of propitiation or placation according to a kind of legal contract are a Greco-Roman influence: Greek content is being introduced into New Testament references to Israelite practices.[15] But even in so-called propitiatory ritual acts in a Greek or Roman context – sacrificial rites designed to gain the favor of the gods for the city – the relationship is not specifically contractual. The idea is to maintain good relations, social communion, via

[13] Robert J. Daley, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 34–5.

[14] See Frances M. Young, *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom* (Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1979).

[15] See Young, *Use of Sacrificial Ideas*; and Stanislas Lyonnet, *Sin, Redemption and Sacrifice* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970).

gifts; social relations generally, whether among human beings or between human beings and gods, are simply constituted by gifts, back and forth. Votive rites – pledges of future offerings upon receipt of a blessing ("I will do this for you, oh gods, if you do this for me") – only obligate the offerers and not the gods. An offering is obligated in case the gods act for one's benefit but the gods remain free to give or not as they see fit.

A fuller sense of the historical complexities of sacrifice disrupts too any atonement theory that focuses on the death of Christ to the exclusion of attention to the social and political circumstances that surround it. Sacrifice is all about the establishment of communion and exclusion in social terms, and about how community is to be organized.[16] Sacrifice is a kind of social mimicking and reconstitution of biological bonds. The way a sacrificial animal is taken apart and those parts redistributed – who gets what part – mirror social arrangements; social connections are indeed symbolically constituted through such rites. There is undoubtedly then political import to the way Jesus' death is a sacrifice. The character of that sacrifice might very well be tied to the practices of community formation advocated by Christians, according to Jesus' own model in his ministry. The political import of Christian refusal to participate in the sacrifices of the Roman state is commonly recognized, but the socio-political ramifications of sacrifice need to be brought more centrally into the discussion of what it might mean to say that Jesus' death is itself sacrificial. What forms of exclusion, community, and social organization are implied by it?

Modern atonement theories have the tendency, moreover, to read modern ideas of sacrifice into the New Testament references to

[16] See Marcel Detienne, "Culinary Practices and the Spirit of Sacrifice," in Marcel Detienne and J.-P. Vernant (eds.), *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 1–20; Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever* (University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Stanley Stowers, "Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not," in L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (eds.), *The Social World of the First Christians* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 293–333.

sacrifice (or to make sense of all of the references in light of the last, moral sort mentioned above).[17] Sacrifice for us is a primarily non-cultic act involving self-renunciation for others. It is a sorrowful act in which what is sacrificed is not offered to anyone but is considered simply a necessary cost to oneself of doing what is right. Self-sacrifice in this way becomes a sign of degree of dedication, a mark of disinterested effort for another's good. The cultic sacrifices of Israel (and Greece) are arguably quite the opposite: they are all rites that either celebrate or end in joyous communion – between human beings and God and among the human beings so blessed. The important point of the sacrifice is not the fact that one has given up something, since the people offering the sacrifice are often the ones who go on to eat it. Sacrifices that take the form of a holocaust – in which the animal or grain is completely lost to the worshipper by being burned – seem to suggest, not so much the renunciation of what is one's own as a return to God of what is already God's, the return to God of prior gifts on God's part to us (of at least the first fruits of those gifts) as an appropriate act of thanksgiving. Expiatory holocausts – in which the burning of the entire animal seems a way of wiping out sin or ritual impurity that interrupts communion with God – should therefore be understood to reinstate meal fellowship. The joy of God's presence is their presupposition and end.

Atonement theories that make the death of Christ saving have the tendency to overemphasize the importance of death to sacrificial rites.[18] Certainly, the cross is associated with sacrifice because Jesus dies there for our sins, but that does not mean death is the center of the rites with which the cross is being associated. Calling Jesus' death a sacrifice might indeed be a way of drawing attention to something taking place on the cross other than death. Particularly when

[17] See Daley, *Origins*, pp. 2–4.

[18] See J.-P. Vernant, "A General Theory of Sacrifice and the Slaying of the Victim in the Greek Thusia," in *Mortals and Immortals* (Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 290–301; and Sarah Pierce, "Death, Revelry and Thysia," *Classical Antiquity* 12/2 (1993), pp. 219–61.

sacrifices are viewed as establishing and maintaining community between God and human beings by their eating together, killing the animal has the same sort of significance it would have in any meal: the animal needs to be killed in order to be eaten. Even when the animal is not eaten (but burned), this seems a way of indicating that the food is reserved for God – no one else can eat it. "The holocaust and the vegetable offering ... which are wholly burned by fire [are like] a feast set for a superior in which the host does not share."[19] Expiatory rites – which seem to focus on the animal's death as a way of erasing fault or impurity – are an exception only when one fails to see them in light of the communion and thanksgiving meals that they reinstate and sustain. Understanding expiatory rites in this broader communion-rite frame, one might see the expiatory character of Jesus' "sacrifice" on the cross in a similar way – with reference to the images of communion sacrifice that occur before his death (again in Mark 14:24) and after – when Jesus eats with his disciples before his ascension and at a prophesied eschatological banquet (Mark 14:25). The point of Jesus' death being its provision of a meal is indeed a primary feature of Reformation interpretations of the Eucharist; it is central, for example, to John Calvin's argument that the Eucharist is a meal and not a sacrifice, a meal subsequent to the sacrifice on the cross that makes it possible. Even without the connection to communion sacrifice, it is possible to argue that what expiates in these rites is not the death of the animal per se, but the blood poured out at death. Blood purifies and reconnects across separation because of its life-giving powers – "the life is in the blood" (Lev 17:11).

While being mindful of the historical complexities of sacrificial imagery is important in these ways to the assessment of Christian atonement models, it is not sufficient. One must be mindful too of the way the cross is not a sacrifice. The political execution of a

[19] John Dunhill, "Communicative Bodies and Economies of Grace: The Role of Sacrifice in the Christian Understanding of the Body," *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003), p. 86.

previously beaten subversive on a polluted site outside the city gates is not anything close to the sacrifice of an animal without blemish in the Temple at the hands of a priest. Sacrificial language is obviously being applied to something that is not a cultic sacrifice in order to throw some novel interpretive light on the cross. But this means that the differences from ordinary sacrifice should also be salient – much more salient than they are to modern people for whom cultic sacrifice is not a daily occurrence, for whom the cross is the only reference to cultic sacrifice they know. When such differences are clear, something novel is being said about the understanding of sacrifice appropriate here. Viewing the cross as a sacrificial act from the perspective of the incarnation is one (admittedly somewhat anachronistic) way of developing such differences and thereby seeing what is odd about the meaning of sacrifice when applied to the cross.

Understood as an act of redemption that follows from God's decision to be incarnate – understood indeed as a continuation of God's decision to make humanity its own in Christ – God's action on the cross to save takes center stage. The sacrifice of the cross is then viewed accordingly – as a rite performed by God and not human beings. God is sacrificing there for us and our salvation. If the work is done by God, the object of that work is human existence in its plight of sin and death. The sacrifice is not directed here to God but from God to human beings. Humans are not offering anything to God; God is giving to us.

If the man who dies on the cross is not just a man but God as well, then in a sense God is both the one sacrificing and the one sacrificed. The whole act is God's. An expiatory rite where human beings kill something that they might otherwise use for their own sustenance is turned into a situation where God gives everything necessary, where God contributes all the elements, where God gives completely to us. God's being the substitute for human property in an expiatory rite in this way undercuts any element of human self-renunciation in a rite of that sort: since God is the victim, we do not have to sacrifice

anything ourselves, anything whose use might otherwise have contributed to our well-being.

But none of this takes away from the fact that the one sacrificed – killed – is the human being, Jesus. The suffering, dying human being, Jesus, is the one sacrificed. The rite is directed as we have said to the human, performed for the human in its circumstances of suffering and death. Any expiatory rite is focused on the human predicament – on the problem of sin or cultic impurity – and this feature is only accentuated by saying that God, rather than human beings, performs this rite of expiation for our sake.

The humanity of Jesus suffering under the burdens of sin and death is the sacrifice but one must also remember that to sacrifice, literally, is to make sacred or holy – that is the sort of transformation that occurs through the rite, that is the point of the rite now directed to humans in all the ugliness and brutality of their sinful situation. To sacrifice is, in other words, to sanctify. Looking ahead to his arrest, Jesus says in his farewell discourses, "for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they may be sanctified" (John 17:19). Despite the fact that it takes place on the cross, this sanctification is not being identified with death but with life. Life is being brought to Jesus on the cross, as his resurrection makes clear. To be sacrificed, so as to be sanctified, is now not to die but to live, in a perfected and purified form.

Death is significant here because death is what is being sanctified or transformed in the passage from death to life, and not because death is what does the sanctifying. God does not work sanctification by bringing Jesus to the cross, by killing him – human beings do that. In keeping with the focus on the life in the blood of the sacrificial animal, the "how" of this sacrifice is the life-giving power of the Word rather than the power of death. The life-giving properties of the Word are what sanctify Jesus' humanity – healing his wounds, raising him from the dead, bringing him back to community with his disciples.

Here death does not bring about the transfer of the sacrificial object to God, the transfer of this human being into God's

possession, into the realm of the divine. Death itself (along with sin, rejection, and conflict) is instead what is being transferred to God by way of the already given fact of God's assumption of mortal flesh. Dying, suffering humanity is God's own because this humanity is that of the Word incarnate. Here God purchases us, in the sense of acquiring us as his own people, through the life-giving blood of Christ in the way God always acquires a people – through a covenantal communion with them (1 Peter 2:9; Titus 2:14; Acts 20:28). Now this covenant of shared life amounts to incarnation, the assumption of the humanity of Christ, however dire its straits, as God's own.

Sacrifices in general are performed in order that humans may cleave to God, form a union with God.[20] This sacrifice of incarnation is no different: it gives us access to God (as the Epistle to the Hebrews says). But here, in virtue of the incarnation, God cleaves to us before the expiatory sacrifice associated with the cross; on the cross, expiatory sacrifice thereby loses its appearance of being a condition for communion with God. For example, God's forgiveness of us on the cross is offered before any confession on our part of sin or impurity, which is crucial to expiatory rites. From the cross, without waiting for their repentance, Jesus asks the Father to forgive his tormentors and executioners – just as Stephen does while being stoned (Acts 7:60). The expiatory rite associated with the cross is not then preparatory to communion sacrifice; a communion sacrifice has already taken place in Jesus' person, in and through the incarnation.

Here is a sacrifice indeed without any sort of preparatory rite of purification. The humanity of Christ on the cross enters into the holy of holies just as it is: defiled by sin's effects, and blemished and impure through contact with death and the curse of the cross. No purification of the human is required in order for it to be in contact

[20] See Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), Book 10, chapters 3–6, pp. 375–80.

with the holy. Nor, for that matter, need the holy itself be purified of our sin and impurity, as in expiation rites on the Day of Atonement. The cross makes clear that the holy simply cannot be contaminated by contact with sin or impurity. There is, accordingly, every reason to bring the sinful, the death-ridden, and the impure, as they are, into direct contact with the holy: such contact is the very means of their sanctification, as the incarnation makes clear.

It is through direct contact of the human with the divine by way of the incarnation that sacrifice is overturned: Jesus is the sacrifice that ends sacrifice (Heb 10). Sacrifice ordinarily brings about communion with the divine in a way that respects and enforces distance. Sacrificial systems differ, indeed, in the degree to which they stress that distance. But Israelite sacrifice (like Greek and unlike Vedic sacrifice) perhaps "consecrates the unattainable distance that henceforth separates them" even as it "seeks to join the mortal with the immortal."[21] For example, the more expiatory rites come to the fore, as they arguably do after the Exile, the more fault and alienation are foregrounded in rituals that nonetheless bind humans to God. Like the Pythagorean critics of Greek sacrifice, Christian descriptions of the cross as a sacrifice would therefore be proposing a kind of closeness of contact or proximity with God that undercuts the very presuppositions of sacrifice for both Greeks and Jews – distance.

This has its social consequences. Through an alimentary code – a code that concerns eating – sacrifice is concerned with the careful delimitation and allocation of the place of human beings: human beings are neither the animals they sacrifice, nor the gods they worship.[22] Talking of the crucifixion as the sacrifice of a God/man, blurs the difference between sacrifice (to which the animal victim is thought to consent) and murder, between animal victims and human sacrificers, between human sacrificers and God – the very

[21] Vernant, "General Theory," p. 297.

[22] I am paraphrasing Vernant, "General Theory," p. 297.

divisions that found human civilization according to the presuppositions of sacrificial rites. The human divisions that sacrifice enacts by way of entrance and exit to the holy, by way of restrictions and inclusions to meal fellowship, by way of the parceling out of animal parts, are threatened with effacement as well. Since Jesus shares our sufferings, weakness, and trials and yet is the very blood spattered upon the inner sanctuary of God's presence, every Christian, like the high priest on the Day of Atonement, now has access to the holy of holies through him (Heb 4:15–16; 10:19–20).

Let me try to bring all this together in conclusion. Humans are not to offer sacrifices to God. God to the contrary makes gifts to us for use on our behalf (for which we are admittedly to be grateful in "sacrifices" of praise and thanksgiving). The whole of Jesus' life – before, as after his death – is such a life-giving sacrifice given by God for us to feed on, for our nourishment.

Putting those gifts to use for the good of themselves and others, human beings become living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). Not sacrifices sanctified in death, but in the lives they live, for life. Humans no longer offer gifts to God to be consumed in fiery holocausts – since God needs nothing but wants to give all, since God does not destroy what God uses for God's own purposes. Instead humans make a proper sacrifice in life-enhancing use, for the good of human life, of what God gives them in sacrifice – the life-enhancing powers of the Word. The direction of these living human sacrifices becomes in this way the same as God's: toward the satisfaction of human needs, the reversal of the effects of sin on human life. Service to the neighbor becomes the reality designated by "sacrifices to God." Here we see a connection with the sacrifices of martyrs, but a connection that now downplays their deaths in that it calls attention to lives dedicated wholly and unswervingly to God's mission of life, as Jesus' was. As one martyred for refusing to sacrifice said:

> We have been taught that [God] has no need of streams of blood and libations and incense. We praise him to the utmost of our power by the exercise of prayer and thanksgiving for all things wherewith we have been supplied. We have been taught that the only honor that is worthy of him is not to consume by fire what he has brought into being for our sustenance but to use it for ourselves and those who need, and with gratitude to him to offer thanks by solemn hymns for our creation.[23]

[23] Justin Martyr, "The First Apology," trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), chapter 13, p. 166; translation slightly altered following Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Sacrifice," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 23/2 (1980), p. 1172.