

Week 4: The doctrine of atonement

- Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (London: SPCK, 1931)
- D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (2nd edn; London: Faber and Faber, 1955)
- F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (Welwyn: Nisbet, 1968)

Readings II

- Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989)
- Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974)
- Simeon Zahl, 'Atonement' in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 533–654.

1. Soteriology as part of Systematic Theology

- Friedrich Schleiermacher said that Christology and Soteriology dealt with the same content in different ways.
- What he means is that in the Christian tradition, the idea of salvation through Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the person of Jesus are closely correlated.
- We have seen how central Christology is to Christian theology.
- Its centrality is due to the significance of the person of Jesus.
- Yet this significance is due to the belief that he is the saviour.

Soteriology in ST II

- The need to explain *who* he is conditioned by the need to explain what he *does* and how he does it.
- For example: Athanasius argued against the Arians that Christ had to be fully God because otherwise he could not save us.
- Gregory Nazianzen argued against Apollinarius of Laodicea that Christ had to be fully human (including body, soul, and mind) with the celebrated words that What is not assumed *is not healed*.
- Christ is divine because only God has the power to save humanity.
- Christ has to be human because only this guarantees that *we* are going to be saved.

Soteriology in ST III

- These two examples already show, however, that soteriology is not only related to Christology.
- Athanasius argued soteriologically in the trinitarian controversy.
- As we have seen last term, the doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in the belief that Jesus pre-existed his early life.
- These statements were soteriologically motivated, i.e. seek to explain how he can save humanity.

Soteriology in ST IV

- There obviously is also a connection with the doctrine of sin.
- Salvation is salvation *from* the effects of the fall.
- Already in the New Testament, salvation is often expressed in the words, 'Your sins are forgiven you'.
- Doctrines of sin and salvation are, so to speak, mirror images of each other.

Soteriology in ST V

- Yet this means that salvation is also related to creation.
- If the fall is conceived as a distortion of original creation, salvation is *restoration*.
- In the New Testament, creation language is often employed in the context of salvation:
- 2 Cor. 5, 17: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”

2. What is salvation?

- All this begs the question of what salvation is?
- Interestingly, while belief in the Trinity and the person of Christ has elicited major doctrinal controversies, the same never happened to soteriology.
- Different accounts with different emphases have existed throughout Christian history.
- Controversies *have* occurred, however, on the problem of divine-human contribution to salvation.
- Problems of grace and free will have been at the centre of Western debates since the fifth century.
- This will be the topic of next week's lecture.

2. What is salvation? II

- For now, I will consider salvation as atonement.
- By this word, one of the few genuinely *English* terms we use in doctrine, is meant to process of salvation as initiated by Jesus.
- It is already a first *interpretation* of salvation.
- Salvation means the reconciliation of God and human beings.
- Their separation and alienation on account of the Fall is overcome.

2. What is salvation? III

- What does this mean in reality?
- Last term, I discussed the different ways sin has been understood in the Bible and the subsequent tradition.
 1. There is sin in the plural: sins as transgressions.
 2. There is sin in the singular (Johannine usage).
 3. This is often understood as 'universal' sin although quite what this means has been variously interpreted.
 4. Finally sin is discussed in the context of Paul's Adam-Christ typology.

2. What is salvation? IV

- This already indicates that salvation cannot be a simple concept either.
- At one level, its aim is the transformation of human existence opening up the possibility of a new life in the present world.
- At another level, it addresses the balance sheet, so to speak, in humanity's relationship with God. Here, the language of criminal justice is often invoked.
- Finally, salvation is concerned with human mortality and its transformation in the resurrection.

2. What is salvation? V

- At different times in Christian history, some of these aspects have taken precedent over others.
- The early Church focused its Christology strongly on the concept of Incarnation.
- Consequently, salvation in Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa and others was understood as overcoming human mortality.
- This developed into the idea of 'deification' (Greek: *theosis*).
- Athanasius: Christ became human so that we could become gods.

2. What is salvation? VI

- By contrast, Reformation thought was largely although not exclusively concerned with salvation through the death of Jesus on the cross.
- This was in response to an understanding of sin as transgression of the law.
- Atonement strictly speaking *will* happen at the final judgment when we escape the punishment for our sins due to the merit of Christ's unique sacrifice.

2. What is salvation? VII

- Luther, Smalcald Articles (1537):
- The first and chief article is this,
- That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification, Rom. 4, 25.
- And He alone is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, John 1, 29; and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all, Is. 53, 6.

2. What is salvation? VIII

- Christ's role as an example was first emphasised by Faustus Socinus in the 16th century:
- "The Way of salvation is to recognise our life as according to the example of Christ."
- Immanuel Kant similarly rejected as deeply immoral the notion that someone else could annul a penalty that was justly meted out against a person.
- This was incompatible with God's justice and the principles of a moral order.

2. What is salvation? IX

- Suspicion that traditional 'substitutionary' atonement is predicated on absolutist rule (God as a tyrant).
- More importantly, traditional atonement couldn't explain the transformation of the individual:
- Why would it change the way I feel about my shortcomings if my debt was paid by someone else?

2. What is salvation? X

- These different dimensions of the atonement are not necessarily contradictory.
- In fact, all major treatments of the atonement seek to combine them.
- They can be more easily combined in a less 'systematic' approach.
- Such an approach would emphasise the pedagogical dimension of salvation.
- Through Jesus, God offers humanity various 'medicines' to cure the various ways in which it has fallen from its original state.
- In fact, such an approach might even include pre-New Testament concepts such as the law (Thora) as parts of a comprehensive divine pedagogy.

2. What is salvation? XI

- Problem again is 'myth' versus theology.
- We can easily tell a story in which God institutes all these different things to assist human beings to return to the right path.
- It is more difficult to express this in a theory that avoids as far as possible anthropomorphisms.
- A more rational approach will inevitably seek for a single answer to the question of 'why God became human' (Anselm of Canterbury)
- The difficulty then is how an answer to this question can integrate all these different requirements.

3. Divine agency, human receptivity

- Kant's critique of a substitutionary atonement points to yet another dimension of our problem.
- This is sometimes described as 'objective' and 'subjective' atonement.
- What exactly is the divine and what the human part in salvation?
- The overweening view of Bible and tradition is that God is the agent in the atonement:
- 2 Cor 5, 19: In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.

3. Divine agency ... II

- This has led to the concern about human collaboration in salvation.
- Problem of synergy (Pelagian controversy) - will be discussed next week.
- If salvific activity is ascribed to God alone, this still leaves the human side to be explained.
- It is not enough to say how God could accomplish salvation.
- There must also be a corresponding account of how it affects human beings.

3. Divine agency ... III

- This problem is almost entirely absent from Anselm's account of the atonement.
- The problem to be solved there is how human violation of God's justice can be compensated.
- There has to be satisfaction, Anselm argues, but no human being can give it.
- God on his own cannot simply ignore the slight to his honour constituted by human sinfulness.
- Therefore, the death of the God-man is the only possible solution to the dilemma.

3. Divine agency IV

- This is perhaps the classical case of an objective account of the atonement.
- Perspective is cosmic: order was disturbed and has to be restored.
- Humanity is here seen as a unit and *as such* the object of God's atoning act.
- How this would affect individual human beings is not addressed.

3. Divine agency ... V

- Anselm's great nemesis in medieval theology was Abelard.
- He objected to various premises in Anselm's theory.
- Notably, he was unconvinced by a theory whose central tenet seemed to involve a change in God from wrathful to merciful.
- Was it not more appropriate to think that the atonement changed human beings and their perception of God?

3. Divine agency VI

- Abaelard thought that God was loving throughout.
- It was this love that became evident for all in Jesus and, specifically, in his death.
- This display of utterly selfless love, Abelard argued, could explain a change of heart in human beings.
- This change of heart truly is the effect of salvation.

3. Divine agency ... VII

- Abelard's opponents, notably Bernard of Clairvaux, read this doctrine as a denial of the atonement.
- It allegedly reduced salvation to human empathy with the suffering Christ.
- It amounted to human auto-salvation as the chief agency lay with humans themselves.

3. Divine agency ... VIII

- Whatever its weaknesses, Abelard's theory indicates the need to link human transformation with the atonement.
- As much as Christology had to be connected with the doctrine of revelation, atonement too is partly about revelation.
- Christ saves by showing God in an unexpected manner.
- In this sense, the Incarnation as a whole is salvific, and the cross is its climax.
- Coming to know God anew is tantamount to being saved.

4. Summary

- Salvation is central to the biblical message (both Old and New Testament).
- For the NT Jesus is the saviour.
- Soteriology and Christology are therefore closely related.
- At the same time, soteriology is the 'mirror-image' of the doctrine of sin.
- Salvation is described in different ways in the Bible.
- Forgiveness of sins, eternal life, transformation of human existence.

4. Summary II

- Soteriologies therefore focus on different aspects of Christ's work:
- His life as exemplary.
- His death as atoning.
- His Incarnate identity.
- Any satisfactory soteriology has to do justice to all these dimensions.
- While salvation is God's work, it has to be appropriated by human beings.
- Objective and subjective atonement therefore belong together.