

# The 'Blood of Christ' - Transaction or Transfusion?

What we traditionally call the “doctrine of atonement” has been a recent conversation topic around the theological table.

It has been a helpful dialogue in bringing some familiar images and formulas into the clarifying light of careful reflection.

Unlike “big” doctrines like that of the Trinity and Christology, the concept of atonement did not have a major council to authorize an official way of understanding it.

Like many faith systems, the roots of the Judeo-Christian tradition include a need and process for reconciliation of humanity to the agenda of a deity; the question of how this is accomplished becomes a tradition’s “doctrine of atonement.”

It is clear that Paul and his successors brought to their understanding of the cross their heritage in the sacrificial system of the covenant faith of Israel.

Sacrifices intended to appease a God rightly displeased with various expressions of unfaithfulness became the conceptual framework for interpreting Jesus’ death on the cross as the ultimate, final and most theologically significant sacrifice offered by God himself for the reconciliation / redemption of the world.

As the blood of the first paschal lamb “saved” the Hebrews from the catastrophic plague of the death of Egypt’s first-born, and as the blood of subsequent sacrifices atoned for the sins of the people, the blood of Jesus shed on the cross saves mankind from the deadly spiritual consequences of sin.

The image is clear and persuasive, especially for those with a Jewish heritage.

The lasting presence and influence of this way of understanding this part of Christian faith is seen in many a hymn and gospel song: “There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.”

Other hymns echo similar refrains: “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the

blood of Jesus!” and “There is power in the blood.”

That there were different ways of understanding atonement in the Christian community was made clear in the latter part of the 11th century when two distinct alternatives for interpreting atonement were articulated.

One was a concept of divine justice attributed to Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and developed later by the Reformers of the 16th century, requiring a sacrifice to pay the debt for human sin.

This interpretation asserted that because mankind could not pay the debt owed, God sent Jesus, whose perfect life made him a worthy sacrifice, through whom and through which we are made “right with God.”

Drawing on the imagery of the Lord’s servant in Isaiah 53:5 (“by his bruises we are healed”) and Paul in Romans 3:25 (“through the redemption that is Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood”) and 1 Corinthians 15:3 (“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures”), this concept of atonement suggests a transaction wrought by the “blood of Christ.”

Against this satisfaction / substitutionary / punishment-oriented concept, an alternative was offered by Peter Abelard (1079-1142), reflecting earlier Augustinian influence, which came to be known as the “moral influence” theory of atonement.

In this concept, Christ’s death on the cross was not a transaction that changed the nature of the divine-human relation but a disclosure of the reconciling love that is who God is - taking on the vulnerability, pain and suffering of human brokenness.

By this interpretation, such a disclosure results in humankind’s embrace of this experience of the cross and the transformation brought about by the power of love’s response to the love of power that put Jesus there.

The church in the following years tended to side with Anselm and to reject Abelard, leaving the transaction model of thinking about redemption as the dominant one for coming generations.

Yet, the long-subdued voice of Abelard seems to be finding its way into contemporary conversations that work with applications of this ancient imagery.

The brutality of a sacrificial system of atonement is an aversion to many, and the “blood washing” of hymnody and preaching doesn’t seem to be a first choice of metaphor to explain the transformation experienced in Christ by those far removed from an ancient sacrificial system.

Our first Christian theologian may offer us some encouragement to be thoughtful and open to possibilities in our “mining of metaphors.”

As we noted, Paul is responsible for the connection of the cross with the sacrificial system of the covenant faith of Israel.

But he is also responsible for a concept of the “new life in Christ” that is the experience of grace in the faith journey, which makes possible an expanded understanding of the “blood of Christ.”

As he speaks of his own transformation, he says, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Part of him saw the blood of the cross as the symbol of the redeeming work of God throughout Israel’s history, but another part of him was a vision of a new life lived with the blood of Christ flowing through the veins of those who respond to the call to take up that cross and follow him.

Discussions of whether the blood of Christ represents a transaction or a transfusion will probably continue.

A theology and an ethics seeking to interpret and apply the transformation of a faith experience will benefit from the insights emerging from them.

Let’s stay tuned to the conversation.

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