

DID JESUS DIE FOR OUR SINS? ... A UNITARIAN VIEW

by

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Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians are fond of saying that Jesus died “for” us all, and, more particularly, “for” our sins, but what exactly does that mean? Further, what can it mean for progressive Christians and for those Unitarians who identify as Christians ... as well as for those who follow some other spiritual path?

The doctrine of vicarious atonement is one that has troubled many people, and not just Unitarians. Well, let’s start with the word “vicarious”. As the late British Anglican minister, the Rev. Frederick W. Robertson, pointed out: “A vicarious act is an act done for another. When the Pope calls himself the vicar of Christ, he implies that he acts for Christ. The vicar or viceroy of a kingdom is one who acts for the king – a vicar’s act therefore is virtually the act of the principal whom he represents”

Robertson goes on to state that the expression “for all” (in the sense of Jesus

dying “for all”) means that he was, and is, the representative of humanity or “properly speaking, the representative of human nature” ... hence the expression “Son of Man”, which was the title most used by Jesus (indeed over 60 times) to describe himself – a title which does not imply that Jesus was claiming to be God. That title was used solely by Jesus himself, and it appears to be linked with what he saw as his special mission in life, namely that he saw himself as a *representative* human being through whom God was acting in an important way.

So, more specifically, how did Jesus see his mission? To die for our sins, in our place, as a human sacrifice and ransom for many, as part of some sort of legal transaction between God and humanity or between God and the Devil? No, that was *not* the message of Jesus as I see it. True, Mark 10:45 says, “The Son of Man came ... to give his life a ransom for many”, but we can be very certain from Biblical scholarship that those words come from Mark or the editor of Mark’s Gospel. Indeed, the words occur in a portion of Mark 10:41-45 which is known as a duplicate of another portion (viz Mk 9:33-35) in which the “ransom” idea is wholly absent. In fact, there is no reference to Jesus’ martyrdom at all. The obvious interpolation represents not a teaching of Jesus but the faith of the church.

As for the verse Matthew 26:28 (“For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”), the last mentioned words (“for the remission of sins”) are, as critical commentators such as Dr Vincent Taylor have pointed out, a comment added by the evangelist and are not authentic. Both of these supposed utterances of Jesus are hyper-Paulinistic editorial additions to support a later theological interpretation of Jesus’ death. Critical investigation of the Biblical manuscripts confirms all of the above.

In any event, in the Jewish scriptures and Jewish religion, blood atonement was only one method prescribed for the forgiveness of sins, and even then only for a

small category of transgressions (cf Heb 9:22). The main way was pure repentance unto God, through words of prayer: see Ezek 33:11, 33:19; Jer 36:3, Hos 14:3, etc. The Christian ideas of blood sacrifice owe more to pagan mystery religions (especially Mithraism) than to Judaism.

Returning to the notion of a vicarious act, Robertson writes that “a truly vicarious act does not supersede the principal’s duty of performance, but rather implies and acknowledges it”. What this means is that Jesus died “for” us, and “for” our sins, in the sense that he gave his life - just as he had lived it - that we might awaken to our own innate God-potential (that is, the full awareness of God’s indwelling Spirit within us) and, in repentance and loving obedience to the Father, “pass over” from death to life (that is, from a life of sin rooted in selfishness, self-centredness and self-absorption to a life devoted to serving the needs of others) and take up our *own* respective crosses on a daily basis, living lives of spiritual maturity, self-sacrifice and selflessness.

There is another sense in which it is rightly said that Jesus suffered “for us”, and this is pointed out by Dr Annie Besant in Chapter 17 of her book *Esoteric Christianity*. Besant writes that Jesus’ strength replaces our weakness, his purity our sin, his wisdom our ignorance, for Christ becomes so “one” with humanity that they share with him and he with them. Besant goes on to write, “There is no substitution of him for [humanity], but the taking of their lives into his, and the pouring of his life into theirs. For, having risen to the plane of unity, he is able to share all he has gained, to give all he has won. Standing above the plane of separateness and looking down at the souls immersed in separateness, he can reach each while they cannot reach each other.” Thus, to the extent to which we open ourselves, especially our minds and hearts, in faith and obedience, and in daily imitation of the one who suffered “for us”, we are, in Besant’s words, “lifted a step higher, and by his wisdom the ignorance of the whole world is lessened.”

For Unitarian Christians and religious liberals, as well as others including Buddhists, this is an interpretation of the Atonement which makes sense and doesn't offend against our sensibilities or reason.

There have been many Holy Ones and Way-Showers throughout history - not just Jesus - who, having achieved oneness, have poured out their love and wisdom over all humanity, "bringing the divine more and more into the human" (to quote from Dr Besant again) "for" the benefit of all who, in varying degrees according to their capacity so to do, are responsive to those outpourings of perfected spiritual life, leading to a state of "at-one-ment" in which we become reconciled to the Divine ... for the latter certainly does not need to be reconciled to us. By means and as a result of this experience of at-one-ment, we are able to realize our own spiritual Selfhood - something that can be greatly assisted and accelerated by means of our appropriating the spiritual life and potency of Holy Ones and Way-Showers such as Jesus and Buddha, whose expanded and purified consciousness is forever part of the spiritual life of the human race. They will always remain archetypal prototypes of what we are intended to be ... what we may be like.

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