

Atonement Here and Now!

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Wrong conclusions are often drawn from right doctrines. Some of these are rather trivial; others are quite consequential. A notable example is the conclusion that is drawn from the teaching on the finished work of Jesus. It is based on the triumphant cry of Jesus at his death: "It is finished" (John 19:30). In that cry Jesus spoke about the completion of his work of atonement by his sacrificial death on the cross.

From this correct teaching some Protestants hold that since his work of atonement was finished there and then, he has nothing further to do as God's incarnate Son. They regard his ascension as his retirement from active service. So since he has done that great work for all of people on earth, he hands over his mission to his disciples. He commissions them to take over the work of evangelism from him by acknowledging what he has accomplished, serving him in gratitude for what he has done, and bearing witness to it in word and deed.

Yet that is only half true. The work of Jesus is not yet completely done. Even though he has completed his work of atonement, the main work that his Father sent him to do on earth, he now offers himself as the atonement for our sin in order to deliver the benefits of his sacrifice for us. That is what St John teaches about the atonement in his first letter. On the one hand, in 4:10 he declares that God has sent his Son into the world to make atonement for our sins. That was accomplished by his death on our behalf. On the other hand, in 2:1-2 he also declares that as our advocate before the Father he is now the atonement for our sins and the sins of the whole world. He provides atonement for us by cleansing us from all sin and all unrighteousness by his blood (1:7, 9).

Paul draws a similar conclusion from Christ's death on the cross and elaborates further on it in Rom 5:9-11 and 2 Cor 5:18-21. In both these passages he connects what Christ accomplished by his death with what we now receive from him as a result of it. In both passages he uses the closely related imagery of reconciliation rather than the language of sacrifice.

In Rom 5:9-11 he argues that since we have been reconciled by Christ's death we **now** receive reconciliation with God through him (5:10-11). In 2 Cor 5:18-21 he explains that Christ himself offers this through "the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18) and "the word of reconciliation" that he has committed to his ministers as the means to accomplish it (5:19). They are Christ's ambassadors who represent him and his heavenly Father. Through them as his spokesmen God himself addresses the congregation. His appeal employs a divine, passive imperative. Like the word of Jesus to the deaf man in Mark 7:34, it is a performative decree that does not just tell its hearers to seek reconciliation but actually reconciles them to God (5:20). By means of his effectual word Christ actually offers and conveys what he gained for them by his death as a sin offering (5:21). Through his ministers, Paul and Timothy (2 Cor 1:1), Christ himself forgives them by taking on their sin and sharing his righteousness with them (5:21). Thus since Christ has gained reconciliation for sinners by death for their atonement, he now delivers it to them through his word and the ministers that he has appointed for its delivery and reception.

Like Paul, Luther also explains how the atonement that Christ made for human sin on the cross is delivered to Christians in and through the church. He does this most vividly and eloquently in the second part of his treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* which he wrote in late 1524 and early 1525 to oppose the influence of Karlstadt in Strassburg. In it he corrected Karlstadt's misapplication of the finished work of Jesus in this way - which I quote at some length due to its ongoing relevance (LW 40. 212-13:

We treat the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed or given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or the sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning of the world to the end ... If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karstadt trifles, in knowledge and remembrance, for I will not find him there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me the forgiveness that he has won on the cross.

Luther therefore distinguishes between how Christ gains forgiveness by his sacrifice of atonement and how he distributes it in the divine service through his word as it is preached in a sermon and enacted in the holy supper.

Later in 1529 he explains this further in the *Large Catechism* in his teaching of the Creed (LC 2.38-39), Baptism (LC 4.37), and the Lord's Supper (LC 5.31-32). Even though the work of redemption is finished at his death, it is like a hidden treasure that has been gained for us but is not yet available to us. As long as it remains hidden it cannot be enjoyed. It cannot be received unless it is published, proclaimed, and given to us in his word. Through his word the Holy Spirit unwraps the treasure for us; the Spirit offers and applies it to us (LC 2.38-39). Christ himself places it at our door by the oral proclamation of the gospel and sets it on the table before us through the words that accompany the sacrament and (LC 5. 28-35). What's more, the treasure that is offered to us through God's word is received by faith (LC 5.26-27), for "without it nothing can be received or enjoyed" (LC 4:37).

So Christ's atonement for us is not far from us in time and space, hidden away in a past historical event and set in a place that is remote from us. It not only touches us here and now; it changes everything for us in our journey through life so fully that it creates a new life for us (2 Cor 5:17). We receive the full benefit of it in faith by our faithful participation in the divine service.

Thus it is true that Christ's work of atonement is finished. All that remains is for us to enjoy spiritual bounty that he has gained for us by his death on the cross. Best of all, Christ himself delivers its abundant benefits to us through the ministry of reconciliation and the word of reconciliation that is spoken to us by his ambassadors, the pastors that he commissioned to be ministers of reconciliation. Through their ministry in the divine service Christ reconciles us with God and each other. Through faith in his word we receive the full riches of atonement.