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CONTEMPORARY IMAGES FOR COMMUNICATING THE ATONEMENT AND REDEMPTION: LIBERATOR AND LOVER

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Not all biblical and historical images of the atonement and redemption will communicate effectively in contemporary society. "Redemption," for example, generally connotes presenting a coupon for something; that is, one gives something that was received for free and gets a free benefit for it—a discount or a free item. This conflicts with the biblical idea of redemption as "a process involving release by payment of a ransom price."[1] Similarly, the terms "propitiation" or "expiation" (from the Greek *hilasmos*), found in older English Bible translations, today would be foreign words to most people, whether Christians or not. Other images would be more effective to communicate the meaning of the atonement today.

This paper will present two images of the atonement and redemption—God as Liberator and Lover.[2] Both images will be described by considering what "the problem" (i.e., sin) is according to the images as proposed here, the action God takes, and the results of this action. These descriptions are not meant to exhaust the meaning and significance of the atonement, but are given to describe how each *particular* image can and does communicate the significance of the atonement. Two images of the atonement are presented primarily to reinforce the fact that every image (biblical or not) does not communicate all that is significant with respect to the atonement, but also to communicate more of the

1. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 10.

2. Rick Warren also speaks of God as both Liberator and Lover, though he does not explicate his understanding of these images. See his influential book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 79.

essential aspects of the atonement than if only one image was presented. By doing this I hope to avoid the "great loss" that occurs when "atonement theology . . . is collapsed into one model or metaphor."[3] Furthermore, it will become clear that in presenting these images I do not dismiss key historical expressions of the atonement (e.g. Christus Victor, the satisfaction theory, or the moral influence theory), but rather draw on their strengths and seek to improve upon their weaknesses.

1. *Liberator*

The first image of the atonement to be explored presents God as the Liberator of humankind and the world. This will bear resemblance to the Christus Victor model of the atonement, in which Christ is presented triumphant over the evil powers of the world, and may conjure ideas of liberation theology, but it will be seen that this presentation of God as Liberator is distinct from both. The image of Liberator is one that should have some impression upon a culture that is certainly familiar with the idea of liberation. Freedom is something we value and strive for. For example, we see commercials for retirement planning aiming at financial freedom, which exemplifies our desire for freedom from those things that restrain us. Similarly, the need for liberation is manifested in the self-help groups that abound.

The concept of God as Liberator is consistent with the biblical theme that God is the one who freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It is also consistent with Paul's assertion that we are "set free from sin" (Rom 6:18, 22; cf. 8:2). God is the Liberator who sets us free from sin that we might live in freedom. As expressed here, the metaphor of God as Liberator serves as an expression of atonement and redemption by presenting humanity as enslaved to sin and its effects, and God as the one who sets us free from this enslavement. I begin by discussing how humanity (and even creation at large) is enslaved to sin, and

3. Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 108.

then continue by discussing how the liberating work of God in the atonement remedies this situation.

A. *Enslavement*

According to this image, the problem with humanity and the world at large is that it is enslaved to sin and the results of sin. We are, in fact, even slaves to ourselves. As Cynthia Crysdale describes it, we are involved in self-destruction. Sin is more than "disobedience to a divine command but an innate conflict between who we are and who we can become."[4] With our very own choices we destroy ourselves. People are often unaware or uncertain of what is right. And even when we do know what is right, there is an inner conflict that rages on inside of us between us and us. As Paul wrote: "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Rom 7:18–19). This is because sin is not only an external thing, or actions that we do, but sin affects us deeply. It can even be described as "sin living in me" (Rom 7:20). As this sin lives in us, we are slaves to ourselves.

Our separation from God comes from this sin, which is self-serving and self-focused rather than God-serving. We become consumed with gaining things for ourselves and making a great name for ourselves rather than with worshipping God. Emil Brunner described sin like this: "Sin is the desire for the autonomy of man; therefore, in the last resort, it is the denial of God and self-deification: it is getting rid of the Lord God, and the proclamation of self-sovereignty."[5]

This obsession with ourselves not only causes us to destroy ourselves, but it may also destroy others. In an effort to save money by making things cheaply or in an effort to hoard money for ourselves, we rob others, oppress others, and treat others (both at home and globally) in ways that we would not allow

4. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today*, 9.
5. Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 92–93.

ourselves to be treated. Our own enslavement to sin causes us to enslave others with our political and economic acts.

We are also slaves to sin in that we are deceived. We have believed the lie that God does not love us. This shows that we do not know God. Ironically, at other times, we are deceived in that we "pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality" (Jude 1:4). By doing this, we have often even deceived ourselves by convincing ourselves that sin is "not that bad." Overall, our own sin has caused us to enslave our minds. As a result, we are among those who have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Rom 1:25). This is cognitive slavery to sin.

From a wider perspective, the creation at large is enslaved as a result of sin. It is "subjected to frustration" and itself needs to be "liberated from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:20, 21). It would be fair to say that our manner of polluting the environment and destroying God's creation could be described as us making creation our slave.

From God's perspective, sin causes a problem in our relationship because he is holy. That is, he is without sin and he hates sin. God condemns us for our sin (cf. Rom 5:18) (we often do so ourselves). We, on the other hand, are enslaved to sin and can do nothing about it. This fact in and of itself is enslaving, for we recognize that, of ourselves, we are hopeless.

B. *Liberation*

In response to a world being enslaved by sin, God provides liberation. God, in his love, came as Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to set us free. This was done in spite of our enslavement—"while we were still sinners" (Rom 5:8). Christ came "that he might take away our sins" (1 John 3:5). As a result of this act of Christ, "he forgave us all our sins" (Col 2:13). Immediately we are set free from the torture of the recognition that we could not save ourselves—God has forgiven us; our hopelessness is removed.

In the forgiveness that results from the cross we are immediately free from much deception. We now recognize that God loves us. He was willing to do whatever it took in order to

deal with our sin. We are also now free from the fear of God. As Peter Abelard wrote, "Christ's suffering . . . wins for us the true liberty of sons of God, so that we do all things out of love rather than fear."[6] Furthermore, we are free from the deception that sin is "not that bad." From the steps God took to free us from sin, we realize that this sin that enslaves us is in fact something serious and significant. Lastly, we are freed from the fear of death. We know that Christ was resurrected and, as the Spirit is now creating Christians into the image of Christ, we believe that we too will experience a resurrection similar to Christ's—there is life after death.

Even though we are forgiven from sin, in order for us to be free from condemnation for sin, we must be "in Christ." We have been offered the way to freedom, but we must accept it. That is, we must accept this forgiveness and be bound to Christ. It is only for those who are "in Christ" that "there is now no condemnation" (Rom 8:1). And yet, even though forgiven, being enslaved to sin, we are not able to accept this forgiveness. We must, in our present day, be freed from enslavement to sin before we can even turn to God in reception of this forgiveness. This is provided by the work of the Holy Spirit. He exposes the sin of the world (John 16:8) and draws us to Christ. He frees us from the deception that we are all that matters. He frees us from our self-worship and self-centered goals, allowing us to confess that "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3).

Beyond the act of turning to God, the Holy Spirit works to guide us in our inner conflict with our sinful desires. Though we fail, he sets us free as he helps us grow in holiness. He produces fruit in us (Gal 5:22), leading us to the freedom of being able to live the righteous life that God desires. Paul expresses this idea throughout Romans chapter eight when he speaks of "the Spirit who gives life [and] has set you free from the law of sin and death" (8:2). In this chapter, Paul describes how "those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit

6. Abelard, "Peter Abailard: Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans," 284.

have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind controlled by the sinful nature is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (8:5–6). It is the Holy Spirit who frees people from the desires of sin so that they can experience this "life and peace."

As individuals are liberated from their enslavement to sin, God is likewise freeing others from enslavement to sin, and creation as a whole is being set free from its enslavement. Each person's sin affects others, and by setting us free from our individual ways of sin, the Holy Spirit is likewise liberating those whom we have enslaved by our sin—in our change to holy living we are no longer oppressing the world around us. Let us now turn to evaluate the image of God as Liberator.

C. *Evaluation*

The image of God as Liberator conveys a number of important aspects of the atonement. First, as with the Christus Victor model, there is here a clear emphasis on the positive aspect of what has occurred. Where the penal substitution image of the atonement focuses on the removal and fulfillment of (negative) punishment, the image of God as Liberator focuses on the positive reception of freedom.

Second, there is a balance between the individual and communal (even cosmic) aspects of salvation. By contrast, in the satisfaction image, as presented by Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo*, each individual owes God a debt that is paid for in Christ's death. Likewise, in the moral influence concept of atonement, it is incumbent upon the individual to respond to God's revelation of love. Here, each person is pictured as enslaved to sin, but there is a realization that we are all enslaved together and that each person's enslavement affects the community around them. This extends beyond humanity to the cosmic community as well. That is, as humanity is redeemed from their slavery to sin, the effects of human sin upon creation at large are mitigated. This is an aspect of the atonement that is not generally included in the classical metaphors for the atonement.

Third, this image recognizes that the atonement is not limited to the cross, but includes all of salvation. As Gustaf Aulén recognized, the "Spirit ever triumphantly continues to break down sin's power."[7] Even though, by the cross, we are freed from some aspects of sin, there is a process of being freed from sin, of being made holy. We are still being freed from the effects of our enslavement even when we become Christians—the wounds of sin must be healed. Though this image has included discussion of the after-affects of Christ's death, it has remained an image of the atonement in that even though God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, we must still turn to God and be freed from sin before the relationship is finally reconciled completely. Only then are humans and God finally "at one."

Fourth, this image is helpful in that it does not present a violent image that might not be appreciated today. There is no presentation of God punishing Jesus, of which the penal substitution model is often accused, nor of a violent victory, as often presented in the Christus Victor motif.[8]

Fifth, this image of God as Liberator emphasizes that the work of atonement is the work of God. It is only he who could set us free as we were utterly enslaved to our own sin. This is in contrast to the moral influence theory, which seems to suggest that the cross of Christ did not objectively accomplish anything, but that it only motivates us to respond. In the image of God as Liberator, there is recognition that (due to our sin) we need more than motivation to get out of our slavery to sin; we need someone to set us free.

Lastly, this image of God as Liberator is focused on God's relationship with humanity. It is about setting us free. This is in contrast to the Christus Victor model which focuses on Christ's encounter with evil powers, rather than Christ's encounter with us. That is, the emphasis here is upon Christ *for us*, rather than *against them*.

7. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 60.

8. E.g. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 119, notes that "Luther loves violent expressions, strong colours, realistic images, and in innumerable passages, he describes Christ's conflict with the tyrants in this way."

We have noted numerous positive aspects of the above image of God as Liberator, but we must also consider a possible drawback of this image. The image of God as Liberator might seem to be lacking, in that it might appear to mislead people. That is, just as we are liberated by God, we also become slaves of Christ (as Paul often reminds us). This truth does not contradict this image, however, because being a slave for Christ sets us free to be what we were truly made to be and to live the life we were meant to live. Accordingly, John Stott notes, "God's love in Christ, which has in one sense liberated us, in another hems us in, because it leaves us no alternative but to live the rest of our lives for him, in adoring and grateful service."[9] Becoming a slave of Christ does not indicate oppression, but rather a choice of "grateful service."

2. *Lover*

The second image of the atonement to be proposed here is that of God as our faithful Lover (or Spouse). The image of "Lover" finds a basis as Paul discusses the husband–wife relationship and then concludes by adding, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). This image is also based upon the biblical concept of "reconciliation." It should have an impression upon our culture in which broken relationships are not uncommon. In particular, for those who choose to commit to marriage, the relationship often ends in divorce. In addition, employing the idea of reconciliation is attractive in that it is the opposite of alienation, which many people feel today. Stott suggests that people often "do not feel at home in the materialism, emptiness and superficiality of the western world. On the contrary, they feel unfulfilled and disoriented, unable to find themselves, their identity or their freedom."[10] This image presents God as the faithful Lover[11] who

9. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 257.
10. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 193.

seeks to restore his relationship with his adulterous beloved, his human creatures. I begin by describing how humanity has been "adulterous" in their relationship with God along with the shame that results from this. I then continue by describing how God continues loving us in spite of this, and seeks to reconcile us to him, even to the point of taking on the shame of the adulterer through the atonement.

A. *Adultery*

The emphasis in this image is that God's creation (here speaking only of humanity), which he loves, has been unfaithful in its relationship with God. God created us out of love and he wanted to have a loving relationship with us. We, however, have been adulterous, not loving God by not obeying him (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3). We have turned from him and committed adultery by "sleeping" with another. Jeremiah speaks of Israel's sins as having "committed adultery with stone and wood" (Jer 3:9; cf. Ezek 23:37). Rather than loving God and staying faithful we turn to the ways of the world. We have loved the world and ourselves and have forsaken God. In this manner, we read "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?" (Jas 4:4).

From our adultery, we experience shame. As a result of shame we feel worthless, and (correctly) unworthy to return to our Lover, God. C. Norman Kraus describes shame: "uncleanliness, weakness, or blemish and its consequences devaluate the worth and self-esteem of the sinner."[12] In our shame we feel we do not deserve to be accepted. Our shame and our fear that God may reject us inhibit us from returning to God. Instead, rather than trying to return to our Lover, we remain in our adultery, hoping to find acceptance elsewhere and fulfillment in this sin.

11. The inclusion of "faithful" is important because the term "Lover" alone might also be found in the context of one who is unfaithful and acting adulterously.

12. Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 212.

B. *Reconciliation*

The Lover is angry about our adultery. It grieves God. Nevertheless, the Lover does not stop loving us. If he did not love us, he would not have cared about our adultery. And so, this love that creates anguish within God is the same love that causes God, the Lover, to seek reconciliation with us.[13] God's love must be satisfied![14] God loves us despite our adultery. Accordingly, the Lord said to Hosea, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes" (Hos 3:1).[15]

Because of his love, God came to us. He came after us to tell us he loves us. He came to reconcile us to himself. He came as a human—Jesus Christ. Though we did not turn to God for forgiveness, and though we do not deserve to remain in relationship with God, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ," and rather than chastising us for our adultery, he was "not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19, TNIV).

Though we deserved shame, and were shamed, God came and took our shame upon himself. Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker note:

> Although we tend to emphasize the physical pain of death on the cross, in the Roman era crucifixion was dreaded first and foremost because of its shameful character. It was designed to be an instrument of contempt and public ridicule. The victim died naked, in bloody sweat, helpless to control body excretions. . . . By Roman law no

13. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.16.4: "Accordingly in a manner wondrous and divine, he loved even when he hated us."

14. Cf. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 129, who writes, "It is not even only that he must satisfy his law, his honour, his justice, or the moral order: it is that he must satisfy *himself* . . . [The concept of God's holy love] insists on the satisfaction of God himself in *every* aspect of his being, including both his justice and his *love*" (my emphasis [Stott's emphasis on "every"]).

15. Granted, there are times when the biblical images of marriage and adultery appear *not* to end in reconciliation between God and his people. E.g., "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries" (Jer 3:8).

> citizen could be disgraced through this dishonorable means of execution.[16]

In taking our shame, the Lover showed that he was willing to identify with us even in our shame. But rather than allowing us and others to focus on our shortcomings, causing our shame to continue, he took the shame for us. In "the substitution of total identification which accepts responsibility" for us, "he took our place including the consequences of this identification."[17] He became sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). Our shame is no longer recognized. Furthermore, where God has identified with us in our shameful state, we are invited to now identify with him outside of shame in a place of reconciliation with him. In terms of Christ's work, Kraus notes, Jesus Christ's "identification with us in our shameful situation enables us to identify with him in his realization of 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom 8:21)."[18] As a result, those who trust in him "will never be put to shame" (1 Pet 2:6), for they have been reconciled to their Lover.

Furthermore, in taking on our shame, God has shown us how much he loves us. In coming to us and taking the shame that was ours upon himself, he draws us to him. He has shown us how much he loves us and wants us back. As a result, "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). From God's act of reconciliation, we realize how much God loves us. We are also no longer afraid of him. We know that he wants us back and that he will accept us. This causes our hearts to soften. We are able to come out of our experience of shame and be reconciled to God.

As with the image of God as Liberator, God the Lover, having reconciled us through Christ, still reconciles us to himself today. Accordingly, even after the death of Christ, Paul was able to admonish the Corinthians, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). God continues wooing us back to himself by means of the Holy Spirit. He reminds us of the truth of what God, in Christ, has done for us (John 14:26; 16:13).

16. Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 163.
17. Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 219.
18. Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 218.

C. *Evaluation*

The image of God as faithful Lover who reconciles his adulterous beloved communicates a number of important aspects of the atonement. In all of the historical images of the atonement one finds that sin is a problem that somehow affects our relationship with God. Accordingly, Aulén writes, "The essential character of salvation is a reconciliation, the re-establishment of a broken fellowship between God and the world."[19] This image focuses in on this reality. This is its first advantage: it presents the atonement as something personal between God and humanity. By contrast, Hans Boersma notes that "Traditional Protestant readings of St Paul . . . work with a strict economy of exchange: the covenantal relationship between God and human beings takes on strongly contractual connotations."[20] The image of God as Lover shows, in a relational way, why God came to humanity in the incarnation—he was coming to where we were, in order to reconcile us back to him.

A second advantage of this image is that it emphasizes God's love. By contrast, note Aulén's comments regarding the Lutheran tradition:

> The idea of God which underlies it is, above all, that of a Justice which imposes its law and demands satisfaction. Only within these limits is the Divine Love allowed to operate, and there is a suggestion that the idea of the *Divine Love is regarded with some suspicion*, as though it needed to be watched lest it should infringe on the demands of justice.[21]

In contrast, the image of God as Lover emphasizes that it is not only God's justice that must be satisfied in the atonement, but God's love must also be satisfied. That is, the love of God that has been grieved by the break in the relationship by the adulterer seeks to restore this broken relationship. In this way, God's love is satisfied.

19. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 225.
20. Boersma, "Penal Substitution," 92.
21. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 146 (my emphasis).

Third, as with the image of God as Liberator, this image does not create a rift in God. God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is seen throughout the whole image as the Lover who is pursuing reconciliation with his beloved. In contrast, especially when interpreting the penal substitution theory, it can appear (wrongly) as though the (mean) Father is a bloodthirsty God who requires that someone be punished (anyone!) because of sin and that the (nice) Jesus Christ comes to "save the day," by saving us from the Father. Such a misinterpretation of the atonement is not likely to happen with the image of God as the divine Lover.

Fourth, presenting the problem of sin as creating a problem of shame has unique advantages. It implies that this image of the atonement recognizes that feelings other than guilt might accompany sin. That is, this image appeals to the feeling of shame rather than just a sense of deserved punishment. In addition, viewing sin as shame presents sin as something internal to us that must be reckoned with, rather than just something external (e.g. death and the devil) that must be defeated, as in the Christus Victor model. In other words, we are part (a large part) of the problem that calls for the need of the atonement and redemption.

A few more brief comments may be made regarding the positive aspects of the atonement that the image of God as Lover communicates. As with the image of God as Liberator, the image of God as Lover recognizes that atonement—reconciliation—is not limited to the cross, but includes all of salvation. Moreover, this image has also emphasized that God is the one who has initiated the act of reconciliation—humans are not able to save themselves. And, lastly, this image presents a non-violent notion of the atonement.

Several weaknesses and limitations of the image of God as Lover may also be noted. Nevertheless, most of these weaknesses are balanced (i.e., corrected) when the image is presented together with the image of God as Liberator. First, this image is individualistic—the Lover seeks his beloved. However, though Christ died for individuals, he died for all people—"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). Similarly, this image of atonement focuses only on the God-human relationship. By

contrast, it appears that by Christ's death on the cross "all things" have been reconciled to God (Col 1:20). In other words, this image of the atonement does not deal with the cosmic effects of the atonement as well as the image of God as Liberator does. However, this only serves to remind us that no model can by itself exhaust the meaning of the atonement.

This points to a second *possible* weakness of this image. The image of reconciliation presupposes that the relationship being reconciled is one that existed previously. In the context of this image we might ask, were we "married" before the adultery? Certainly, in the larger perspective of the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, the answer is "yes"; prior to the fall, humanity was "married" to God. However, when it comes to considering each individual person (post-fall), the answer will depend on one's doctrine of original sin. If one is born a guilty sinner who needs to be reconciled to God, then the individualistic aspect of this image does not fully communicate the idea of reconciliation. On the other hand, if an infant does not have "original guilt," then the image of Lover, which presents the idea of reconciliation on an individual level, is presenting some truth regarding an individual's relationship with God in the sense that initially they were not alienated from God.

Third, "God as Lover" does not communicate the propitiatory nature of the cross. That is, it does not adequately describe how Christ's death appeases God's wrath, nor has it recognized God's wrath (though it has recognized his anger). This might seem like a significant shortcoming to some people. However, many other accounts of the atonement miss how God's love is at the heart of why atonement is needed! This of course, is something that this image portrays quite well. Again, the various images of the atonement can complement one another in this area.

Conclusion

In light of the need for contemporary ways to describe the atonement and redemption, I have presented the images of God as Liberator and God as faithful Lover. Neither image is meant

to be exhaustive; they are meant to complement each other. They also complement, and at times supplement, traditional concepts and terms that are used to communicate the atonement. However, in contrast to these traditional ways of communicating the atonement (some in the Bible itself and others throughout Christian history), which sometimes obscure the meaning of the atonement for contemporary people, the images of God as Liberator and faithful Lover present ideas that are meaningful for contemporary hearers. Especially in our current economic climate, people are familiar with the need to be liberated from the poor choices that people might make. The image of God as Liberator presents God as liberating people from poor sinful choices in particular. Similarly, the breakdown of relationships in contemporary society allows the image of God as faithful Lover to possess unique explanatory power for our culture when communicating the atonement.

I conclude with a quote from John Stott that may be comforting when our communication of the cross and the atonement seems inadequate: "For beyond the images of the atonement lies the mystery of the atonement, the deep wonders of which, I guess, we shall be exploring throughout eternity."[22]

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22. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 168.

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