

Statement Concerning the Atonement Gathering 2010

Background

During the past 18 months many leaders in our conference have been discussing a significant concern regarding how we as a conference think about the work of redemption. The conversation has revolved around the significance of *penal substitutionary atonement* as a model of atonement in light of the way the Bible describes the work of salvation.

The Board of Faith and Life, after listening to the conversation, and being involved in it, presents the following statement of reflection on atonement. Our intent is to provide clarity on what we now confess, along with some reflections more broadly, with the purpose of enhancing our mission to bring people to salvation and discipleship in Jesus Christ.

Reflections on the Confession of Faith, Commentary, and Pastoral Application

1. We are committed to a high view of Scripture. It is the revelation of God and “we accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice” (Article 2).
2. Articles #3, 4 and 5 must be viewed together – they provide a rounded picture of the human condition and the salvation solution.
3. Article 3 states that sin entered the world with the result that “human nature is distorted and people are alienated from God.” Part of the commentary notes, “While human beings are capable of noble accomplishments, human history and our own self-awareness force us to recognize that there is something warped in the deepest recesses of the human heart....The consequences of this disobedience have been catastrophic for the human race.” We believe people are utterly lost because of sin.
4. Article 4 speaks to the problem of sin and evil in reference to the fall of the human race and also in reference to principalities and powers. “Sin is a power that enslaves humanity” and this touches the individual as well as “political, economic, social and even religious systems.” We believe sin and evil are found at individual, social and systemic-corporate levels, and that principalities and powers are the force behind evil at these levels.
5. Article 5 confesses our understanding of salvation in 3 sections: God’s Initiative, God’s Plan and Humanity’s Response. God took initiative because “creation and all of humanity are without hope of salvation.” God’s plan was signalled through his actions among his people “until finally God reconciled the world to Himself by the atoning blood of Jesus.” Humanity’s response is founded first in Jesus’ own “obedient life, His death on the cross and His glorious resurrection.” “Convicted by the Holy Spirit, people turn away from sin, entrust their lives to God, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and join the family of God....Those whom God is saving...have been set free from sin and called to newness of life.” We believe that individuals are reconciled to God through the atoning work of Christ through his life, his death and his resurrection.

6. The commentary on Article 5 affirms penal substitutionary atonement among other “models” of atonement. “The legal substitution model, probably the most common view among Protestants, focuses on the death of Christ as a substitute for the punishment which all humanity deserved. It emphasizes the truth that we could not accomplish our own salvation.” We believe that penal (legal) substitutionary atonement is a biblical description (model) of how we are saved.
7. The commentary expands on salvation from sin and evil by naming powers and principalities as an integral, mysterious factor addressed by the work of Christ. These powers are both “heavenly” and reside within human institutions of all kinds. “Sin is an enormous problem” and thus requires an “enormous” solution. Just as we don’t know precisely the origins and the nature of evil, we don’t know the full dimensions or extent of atonement required to address evil. We believe that the Scriptures provide several images of the work of salvation through Jesus Christ as a way to describe the multi-faceted work of atonement.
8. The pastoral application on atonement says, “It is important to balance such models with the whole counsel of Scripture...Although early Anabaptists employed forms of the substitutionary atonement model, they also used other models such as Christ-as-Victor. Whatever the model, they emphasized that Christ’s life and teachings demonstrate how Christians must participate in God’s grace.” We believe that within Scripture all images make a complementary contribution to the whole grand portrait of redemption and together they form our understanding. Conversely, one cannot remove or minimize any of the images without causing the portrait to be incomplete.
9. Article 17 states, “We believe that the saving grace of God in Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God. Although salvation is available to all, only those who put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have the assurance of eternal life...The Bible teaches that those who reject the gospel are under divine judgment...Our task is to proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation to all people in all cultures.” The discussion regarding the atonement is not about *whether* Jesus saves (or is the only way of salvation) but *how* does Jesus’ life, death and resurrection accomplish salvation.
10. In summary we believe that the Confession provides a rounded portrayal of the atonement, intentionally following what is in the Bible.
11. The Confession has multiple articles which need to be considered altogether as we seek understanding on this (and other) issues.
12. The Confession is forged through a community process. Both the written Confession and the community discussions that come together to correct doctrinal drift or error.

Reflections on the Atonement

1. Attitude of Reverence: Whenever we discuss atonement we stand on holy ground. Let us remember that salvation is our most precious gift, even as we seek clarity about it.
2. The Complexity of the Issue: The problem of sin and evil is not completely understood, since its origins are only hinted at in Scripture. The fall story itself does not explain evil, sin and brokenness, but points to the complexity and wonder of human lostness – a combination of our power to choose and the power of forces opposed to God that tempt us to evil. Sin is

found at the individual, systemic and corporate levels. Thus human redemption must also contain a complexity that addresses the complexity of evil. The Scripture therefore contains many different descriptions of the redemptive work of Christ.

3. **Implicit Theology:** Mennonite Brethren have historically developed their theology inductively in the context of discipleship, which has resulted in an implicit theology. When faced with questions, we ask “what does the Word say,” rather than appeal to a systematic doctrinal statement for answers. Since the Bible uses multiple images to describe the atonement, then our response must also reflect this biblical picture. Until now, there have been almost no articles about the atonement written in MB periodicals and journals, indicating that this may be the first time we have been challenged to specifically engage on this subject as a conference. Part of the issue now is how to clarify our understanding of the atonement in a way that reflects biblical teaching, and to check if our current statements do that already.
4. **Witness:** Mennonite Brethren are very concerned that our proclamation of the gospel is clear. This concern stands behind our discussion of atonement. Insofar as the atonement is multifaceted, we see the opportunity to present the various images of atonement as they are most deeply relevant within various cultural contexts. We do not agree at this time as a Conference whether there is one image or model that is the key saving model or if they are altogether the multifaceted image of atonement equally. While this question may be debated, we do not stray from proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation.

Conclusion

BFL believes that we as a conference would do well to study the work of Christ on the cross further and is prepared to hold the next study conference on the subject in 2011. The intention would be to explore the wonder of atonement in light of our mission and discipleship. Examples of subjects would include in-depth study of the biblical text, the Confession of Faith, the major models of atonement, the wrath of God, the problem of sin and evil, cross cultural views of the atonement, and more. Opportunity for significant dialogue will be provided.