



ATONEMENT VII:

Transformation

“THE WORD *ATONEMENT* . . . is almost the only theological term of English origin. . . . The verb ‘atone’, from the adverbial phrase ‘at one’ (M.E. *at oon*), at first meant to reconcile, or make ‘at one’ . . . ”¹ Traditionally, to make “at one” has had a substantive connotation — so that, through “at-one-ment,” “plurals” are believed to become a singular substance, essence or *ousia*. However, this misconstrues the biblical intention of bringing “others” into genuine relationality. From a biblical perspective atonement must be understood relationally rather than substantially. Thus, in his encounter with Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, God spoke from the burning bush and, as his own identity, uttered the relational Hebrew phrase “*’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh*,” which means “I will be with you; I will become with you; I will effect with you” (Exodus 3:14).^{2, 3}

From a biblical perspective atonement must be understood relationally rather than substantially.

However, “before” the “beginning” God was “with no one.” He was self-existent and thus had no relationships with “others.” Under these circumstances he necessarily had to initiate the creation of “others” by command. Later, for the protection of emerging human beings, he resorted to possession and then to dominating power structures. Also, to limit the negatives — such as natural and biological disasters that accompanied the free process and free will of Creation — God introduced death, extermination and annihilation.⁴

This left God with a divine predicament. For although initially necessary, self-existence, along with command, possession, dominating power structures, death, extermination and annihilation, are all contrary to unending human relationality. This was a predicament for which God himself was responsible.

And this was a predicament that God alone could resolve. To express his love and achieve relational “at-one-ment” with “others,” God had to move beyond self-existence, beyond command, possession, power structures and terminal death:

1. This aspiration could only be initiated when God himself became incarnate and established his human embodiment in relational “at-one-ment” with self-conscious mankind and the created order.

2. As Jesus Christ, God had to submit to command, possession and power structures, as all other human beings must do.

3. Accepting his full responsibility, God had to terminate his “old” self, his “old” covenant of command, possession and power, and his “old” Creation. Jesus Christ initiated this by taking the “old” God, the “old” covenant and the “old” creation to death in his judgment at Calvary. Then, by the judgment of his resurrection, Jesus Christ inaugurated the “new,” relationally human God, the “new” covenant of faith, hope and love, and the “new” Creation.

4. By his “atoning” (relationally human) presence, the new God has already made humanity and all Creation ultimately irrevocable. He now patiently waits for representative witnesses to testify that “the hour of his judgment is come” (Revelation 14:7), that he has indeed “paid it all,” and that he has fully “satisfied” the terms of cosmic justice.

5. Once this cosmic judgment is acknowledged, the Human God can proceed to the final step — the Parousaic (Second Coming) transformation of all Creation into true, relational, reciprocal “at-one-ment.” This constitutes both the “conciliation” of Creation with God and the “conciliation” of God with Creation for all eternity.

To express his love and achieve relational “at-one-ment” with “others,” God had to move beyond self-existence, beyond command, possession, power structures and terminal death.

Endnotes

1. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Doctrine of the Atonement,” at www.newadvent.org/cathen/02055a.htm.
2. See Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1960), pp. 38-48.
3. See “The Dawn of Self-Consciousness,” *Outlook* (October 2001); “The First Temple: United Monarchical Period,” *Outlook* (November 2001).
4. See John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), p. 84.