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## The Death of Jesus as Atonement for Sin

The teaching of Jesus' death as atonement for sin has received renewed attention recently in biblical and theological studies. Some of this attention has been in reaction to the omnipresent mantra of critical scholarship that such teaching was a later creation of the church in order to provide a more suitable interpretation of the death of Jesus. Both the Symposium on Exegetical Theology and the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at Fort Wayne, held in January 2008, took up the challenge of engaging this debate. The four articles in this issue were first delivered as papers during these symposia.

David Scaer addresses the tendency of Lutherans to see atonement as a doctrine easily separated from—and less important than—justification. He demonstrates the intimate interrelationship and interdependence of these doctrines as well as the current challenges being issued against a proclamation of the atonement that is faithful to the teaching of the Scriptures, especially of Jesus in the Gospels. The remaining three articles each focus on the atonement as proclaimed in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John respectively. Jeffrey Gibbs, author of the recently published Concordia Commentary on Matthew 1–10, explores the variety of texts in which Matthew proclaims the atonement. In addition to his emphasis on Jesus' substitutionary role as the New Israel, Gibbs gives significant attention to showing how Matthew proclaims the death of Jesus as the eschatological visitation of the Father's divine wrath over all sin. The article by Peter Scaer introduces us to some of the modern debate and then focuses on the teaching of atonement in Mark. Not only does he review the traditional texts proclaiming atonement (especially Mark 10:45), but he also probes how Jesus (and subsequently Mark) use the Lord's Supper and Baptism in order to proclaim Jesus' death as atonement. My article addresses the challenge that the fourth evangelist does not understand Jesus' death as atonement for sin by demonstrating ways in which this Gospel proclaims atonement that are in concert with the more explicit atonement teaching in 1 John.

Debate about the atonement in our circles used to center around the legitimacy of proclaiming the atonement also according to the *Christus Victor* model rather than strictly using the more familiar Anselmic model. Much more is at stake in the current debate. We hope these articles will help readers to ground their teaching of the death of Jesus as atonement for sin in the very Gospels that narrate our Lord's exemplary life lived and laid down in our stead to pay for the world's sin and conquer our foes, death and Satan.

Charles A. Gieschen  
Associate Editor

then a foundation has been laid for a system to provide the greatest theological potential. Theology defined narrowly (as “doctrine of God”) has, in this respect, direct bearings on theology more widely defined.

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### Heaven Is Not Our Home?

Those who still remember the 1950s and 1960s LCMS controversy over the existence of the soul after death may have been taken back by an article by Church of England Bishop N. T. Wright of Durham in *Christianity Today* 52, no. 4 (April 2008): 36–39. Tom Wright, as he is known among his Evangelical friends, is upsetting the historical-critical appletart in his defense of the bodily resurrection of Jesus as an event in real history—not a mean task, especially since he meets his opponents on their own turf. Seeing him in action at the November 2007 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature was a pure delight, but he does not deny the existence of the soul after death as the title “Heaven Is Not Our Home” may have been misunderstood by some. Since many of our readers subscribe to *Christianity Today*, they hardly need an additional commentary on the bishop’s clear and succinct article. Divided into four parts, the first assembles Pauline passages which describe our resurrected bodies like that of Jesus, a fit topic of discussion for Christians in an Easter issue. The second section is entitled “Life After Life After Death.” (Unclear is whether the first ‘After’ is in italics.) The “many places in the Father’s house” are dwelling places (μοναί), temporary halts in a journey leading to another place. (Sounds good to me.) Jesus’ promise of being with him in Paradise refers to “the blissful garden, the parkland of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of a new day.” (This sounds better.) No wonder Paul had a desire “to depart and be with Christ,” another reference cited by the bishop. All this taken from Wright’s latest book, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). In common thought the intermediate state following death is often confused with resurrected life under the general heading of “heaven.” That is why we have preachers to unscramble all this, and Bishop Wright is there to help us. Our only regret is that he is a thorough Calvinist, but we can live with that. We Lutherans do not have a theologian to match his scholarship, proclivity, and wit.

David P. Scaer

## Book Reviews

***Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross.* By David A. Brondos. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. 234 pages. Paperback. \$20.00.**

A history of doctrine can show how it has been interpreted over the years. What Christ's death meant for Irenaeus is not what it meant for Luther or Ritschl. Students new to theology must struggle with the reality that theological terms do not have the same meaning for everyone. Brondos's procedure resembles Gustaf Aulén's in *Christus Victor*, but he is more thorough in engaging his subjects and does not interpret them to fit his own views. To further his view that Christ's death was a victory over sin, Aulén eliminated Luther's understanding that Christ's death was a payment of sin. Brondos does not do this, but where he disagrees with his subjects he takes them to task. Aulén advanced his thesis by beginning with Irenaeus and then taking a U-turn to go back into John and then advancing up to the nineteenth century. Brondos begins with Isaiah, Luke, and Paul before moving on to Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Ritschl, Barth, Bultmann, and culminating with liberation and feminist theologians. For Brondos the purpose of Christ's death is transforming humanity, so he combines Ritschl's exemplar theory, Aulén's *Christus Victor*, and liberation theology. With the fall of the Soviet Union, liberation theology, which sprang from Moltmann, Pannenberg, and Sobrino, has gone comatose (other than in the preaching of some, e.g., Jeremiah Wright), so it is hard to see why Brondos gives it credence. Feminist theology is the new orthodoxy. See chapter 13: "Salvation as Liberation from Patriarchy in the Thought of Rosemary Radford Ruether." As a historian Brondos wants to stay above the fray, but he has a dislike for understanding Christ's death as a sacrifice for sin in the face of divine wrath. He understands Christ's death as transforming creation. He cannot be faulted for choosing biblical books that he believes support his views. Had he included Genesis and Leviticus, he would have had to deal with sacrifice. If Luke and Paul allowed him to soft peddle Christ's death as sacrifice for sin, Matthew, Mark, and Hebrews would not have. Surely Christ's death includes reconciliation with others and peace for ourselves, which for Brondos is the major focus of Christ's death. But "is that all that there is"? Hopefully the thoroughness with which he handles his subjects and his engaging literary style will not prove persuasive enough to win converts.

David P. Scaer

***Jonah.* By R. Reed Lessing. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007. 496 pages. Hardcover. \$42.99.**

The editor's preface in the Concordia Commentary series notes the debt that the authors and editors have to Martin Luther, including his recognition that

exegesis is to follow “the contours of the grammar of the original languages” (xi). Of the many valuable elements within R. Reed Lessing’s commentary on Jonah, his attention to these contours is most noteworthy. His extensive textual notes not only immerse the reader in the subtleties and riches of biblical Hebrew, but his thorough analysis of the Hebrew also sets the stage for the ensuing commentary and exposition of the text. This stands as a ready reminder that sound exegesis flows from the biblical languages. Likewise, this commentary demonstrates that study of the languages finds its fruition in the theological truths mined from the languages. It is also helpful that Lessing discusses the textual notes in a manner that makes the riches accessible to the parish pastor who may have forgotten Hebrew or the student of Scripture who has yet to wade into the language’s bountiful waters.

Lessing’s commentary also has three other valuable aspects. First, he ably grapples with the classic issues of the book (for example, historicity, date, genre, and literary mold), balancing the leading arguments with helpful insights for where a faithful Lutheran exegete can stand on such issues. Second, more cutting-edge issues within the book (for example, his discussions of Jonah and Noah, Jonah and Elijah, and Jonah’s place in the Book of the Twelve) introduce the reader to the latest matters in the scholarship of Jonah. Lessing’s treatment of Jonah’s place in the Book of the Twelve is to be especially commended as he does not fall prey to the current scholarship which loses Jonah within the Book of the Twelve rather than allowing it to stand alone. Third, the excurses of the commentary offer great riches. While they grow out of Jonah, Lessing’s discussion of these topics extends beyond Jonah into the whole corpus of Scripture. Thus, the excurses reveal Jonah’s continuity with the rest of Scripture, while also harvesting the great theological riches of Jonah (the various excurses are trinitarian, christological, sacramental, missional, and theological).

It is the nature of a commentary to leave some stones unturned lest the work would become overwhelming. Among the topics left for the reader to explore are the inter-textual relationships between Jonah (especially the psalm from the belly of the fish in Jonah 2) and the Psalms, as well as the use of Jonah’s confession that YHWH is “gracious and compassionate” at various points in the Old Testament. While these items are addressed, a more thorough study will be of benefit to the student of Jonah. So also, readers may find the work of Ehud ben Zvi to be worth their further study.

The study of a biblical text, however, is never a finished endeavor. There are always more riches to be mined. For those desiring a thorough entrée into those riches, Lessing’s commentary on Jonah stands as a treasure because it offers to the reader this short prophetic book as a bold proclamation of Christ.

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**Ezekiel 1-20.** By Horace D. Hummel. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005. 752 pages. Hardcover. \$42.99.

The Concordia Commentary series has as its goal to provide a commentary with four major convictions: first, the content of the scriptural testimony is Jesus Christ; second, law and gospel are the overarching doctrines of the Bible; third, the Scriptures are God's vehicle for communicating the gospel; and fourth, the Scriptures are incarnational and sacramental (ix-x). While one may find New Testament examples of this approach, Old Testament commentaries with these convictions are rare, and such commentaries on the Book of Ezekiel are almost nonexistent. Horace Hummel does an admirable job not only of providing a strong law and gospel approach focusing on the incarnational and sacramental aspects of the Book of Ezekiel but also with a theological flair not often found in this genre.

Hummel sees Ezekiel playing a prominent role in the *praeparatio evangelica*, the "preparation for the Gospel," and so provides broad messianic applications throughout (14). He states:

The obverse reason for the neglect of the book by the church is its relatively brief overtly messianic material. If we define "messianic" too narrowly and then unconsciously try to reduce the entire OT to the narrow theme of prophecy explicitly predictive of the person and work of Christ, (which I think we have been guilty of doing), then we will have special difficulties with Ezekiel. . . . But if one defines "messianic" broadly of all prophecies of Israel's restoration, the book is full of them, even in the earlier sections. (13)

An example one finds of Hummel doing this is his christological interpretation of *כבוד* (*kabod*), "glory," using New Testament language and thought to interpret "Christ as the divine speaker" (1) throughout Ezekiel and as the one in whose name and by whose authority the prophet gives his messages. This allows him to draw connections to other prophetic literature and to the New Testament, especially the apocalyptic literature (for example, Revelation). Again, Hummel successfully accomplishes his task.

This commentary of Ezekiel 1-20 is quite helpful and will be a useful tool in any pastor's library. The author's preface and introduction alone make the volume worthwhile. Hummel is brilliant in stating his method of interpretation to the exclusion of others, and he lays out the text, style, and historical context in a well thought-out manner.

Criticisms and concerns of Hummel's commentary are few, but one does note that his bibliography is somewhat dated with most of the current resources coming from "in house" writings. With all of the new interest in Old Testament studies, I expected a larger collection of recent works. Also, although Hummel does spend some time with the Septuagint, I would have appreciated more depth, especially in light of Ezekiel's textual variances

between the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text. That stated, it is small criticism for an extensive work.

Jeffrey H. Pulse

***Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church.* By David P. Scaer. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004. 416 pages. Hardcover. \$24.98.**

This book develops the approach to the Gospel of Matthew begun by David Scaer in his previous book, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Church's First Statement of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000). In his new book, Scaer develops the idea that Matthew's Gospel was written as a catechesis of what believers were taught before being admitted by Baptism to Holy Communion.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew uses *didache*, the Greek word for catechesis, or teaching, to describe the words of Jesus (Matt 7:28). Scaer demonstrates how the first Gospel has a liturgical use. It has maintained a prominent position in the church's worship as the Gospel that is read most often. In the early church, Matthew was the most highly honored and respected book of the New Testament. In it the evangelist sets out to compose authoritative Scripture. He anticipates a worldwide audience (Matt 26:13) and a ready acceptance of the contents of his Gospel by believers everywhere. Matthew presents us with a universal Gospel.

Scaer pays special attention to Matthew's five discourses and shows how each new discourse builds on the foundation of previous ones to culminate in the account of Jesus' death and resurrection, and his commission to take his teaching to all nations. He shows how the Eucharist functions as a hermeneutical principle that facilitates a deeper understanding of the whole Gospel (157-164). He argues that a first draft of this Gospel was written before most of Paul's Letters. It was written in catechetical form in order to prepare believers for a deeper reception of Holy Communion. The better communicants know Christ's words and deeds, the richer and more blessed would be their reception of the Sacrament.

Holy Communion gives us access to the meaning of our Lord's life and death. It unites the church by making its members participants in the atonement. The different pericopes all flow into Holy Communion, where the most profound and ultimate interpretation of Jesus' death is found. Scaer argues that participation in Holy Communion is participation in the atonement: "As Christians participate in the Eucharist, differences of time and space between Christ's crucifixion and the sacramental act disappear" (162 n. 5). Here we enter the holy of holies beyond space and time. All that our Lord did and said becomes clearer in the light of the Eucharist. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus goes beyond eating with sinners to relieving them of their sins. The atonement and the Sacrament of the Altar stand in reciprocal relationship with

each other. Christ instituted Holy Communion before his death to demonstrate its significance as atonement. The mystery of the atonement can be best understood eucharistically.

Scaer shows how each of Matthew's discourses builds on earlier ones, just as each pericope informs other pericopes. He shows how righteousness in this Gospel is best understood as God's gift of righteousness in Christ. The righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees is God's gift, and it has everything to do with reconciliation. "On my account" in the last beatitude is synonymous with "for righteousness sake" in the previous beatitude, thus supporting a christological understanding of righteousness. In the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:24-27), "house" and "build" are ecclesiastical terms: the wise build their church on Jesus' words. Scaer argues that Matthew is the New Testament's most satisfying book on the sacraments because it contains the institution of both sacraments and the charge to celebrate both.

Scaer points out that no other Gospel has as many Old Testament citations as Matthew. Jesus is the content of Matthew's catechesis, but this content is expressed in Old Testament terms. "Jesus is himself the catechesis and the catechist" (17). The evangelist's five discourses outline the steps through which catechumens were led, culminating in Holy Communion and Baptism, which are revealed at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Like the other three Gospels, Matthew's writing elicits the devotion of its hearers in a way no other writing can accomplish.

David Scaer's book offers numerous fresh insights into preaching Matthew's Gospel during Year A of the three-year lectionary, especially at eucharistic services. His ability to flesh out allusions to the sacraments that are scattered throughout the Gospel will be welcomed by those who treasure the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. This is a well written and stimulating book that deserves a wide audience.

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***Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines.* Edited by David Fleer and Dave Bland. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2007. 177 pages. Paperback. \$19.99.**

"The abundance of interpretations reveals that no one approach to the Sermon on the Mount can exhaust its meaning or prove satisfactory to all parties. Its majestic expression of Jesus' teaching attracted the attention of the



early church fathers and has continued to challenge the church's theologians throughout the centuries" (David Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church*, 213).

Those who strive to deliver or digest sermons on the basis of historic Lutheran distinctions (for example, law-gospel, justification-sanctification, or the two realms) will find this to be a "challenging" book. Challenges, of course, can be helpful. Few of us have not succumbed to (or suffered through) simplistic homiletical approaches to "strong words" like those found in the Sermon on the Mount that make "distinguishing" scriptural truths-in-tension look and sound more like separating or divorcing. What a coup if we could take a corrective cue from those who tend to err in the opposite direction!

There is, after all, a healthy dose of truth in the fact that far too often "the Sermon on the Mount comes to us preachers handicapped by a convoluted eschatology or shut down by common sense ('that can't mean what it appears to say') or reduced to an interior world" (2). For Lutherans, that "interior world" is typically the "realm of justification," too often separated (rather than distinguished) from sanctification, too often individualized in a way that diminishes the doctrine of the church, too often constricted by a view of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as "pure Law" (either as second-use "impossible ideal" or third-use "give it your best shot") rather than as "a lofty expression of Gospel from the mouth of Jesus himself" (Scaer, 213).

The (six) essays and (fourteen) sermons in this book (from a variety of contemporary Christian scholars and traditions) approach the Sermon "as an act of imagination": what would a church that read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested these "foolish" teachings of Jesus actually look like? Proper preaching on it, the authors suggest, necessarily includes "challenging us to follow Christ, calling followers to embrace his alternative lifestyle, encouraging the church to become salt and light in messy relationships even with those who are our enemies, and exhorting disciples to resist the powers that run counter to the ethics of God's kingdom" (5).

To be sure, there is plenty here to critique from a Lutheran perspective. Biblical distinctions do get muddled at times. Differing presuppositions lead to applications and exhortations that will cause even the most charitable Lutheran reader to squirm or wince. But the discerning Lutheran preacher and reader (one primed, perhaps by Scaer's plea for a more holistic christological and ecclesial reading of the Sermon) will also find much to affirm, much to ponder in the way of self-critique, and some excellent resources, insights, and illustrations for enriching one's own preaching and/or hearing of God's word.

To wit, an appetite-whetting snippet from Charles Campbell's sermon "The Folly of the Sermon on the Mount," reminding us that Jesus and Paul were preaching the same message, the "foolish" and full-bodied gospel that we are called to preach:

Although Jesus obviously does not preach “Christ crucified” in the same way as Paul, the content of his Sermon is just as foolish as Paul’s. It is just as subversive of the world’s presuppositions, rationalities and myths. Too often, many of us read the Sermon as a kind of legalistic book of rules for the Christian life. Of course, the Sermon does give directives and delineate practice for the Christian community. Nevertheless, if we read the Sermon on the Mount as a rulebook, we may miss the deep dimensions of its folly. . . . The Sermon seeks to disorient and dislocate the hearers; it shocks us out of our commonsense, take-for-granted assumptions so that we might see the world differently, and possibly glimpse the new creation that has come in Jesus himself. (62)

Joel D. Lehenbauer

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***Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospel.* By Craig A. Evans. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006. 290 pages. Hardcover. \$21.00.**

It seems that *Time* and *Newsweek* put out special issues every Christmas in which they purport to offer new evidence about “what really happened” at the birth of Jesus. So also *The History Channel* regularly offers fresh and skeptical investigations of the resurrection, trotting out “objective” scholars such as John Dominic Crossan and Bart Ehrman. The popularity of books debunking the Gospels is also on the rise. The main thrust of these magazines, TV shows, and books is something like this: “You may have learned such and such growing up in church, but now we know from our scholarly investigation that . . . .” The virgin birth? A pious legend. The resurrection? A hopeful myth. The canonical Gospels? Well, they are probably less reliable than other traditions, which have been lost through the ages or suppressed by intolerant orthodoxy. So it goes. Drip, drip, drip, the supposedly impartial scholars would dampen our Easter parade.

In the midst of all this, it is good to get out of the rain and read a book such as *Fabricating Jesus*. In it Craig Evans systematically challenges the skeptics’ assumptions. As for the supposed enlightenment brought by the *Gospel of Thomas*, Evans argues that the book is a late second-century document, far removed from the eyewitness accounts that are the canonical Gospels. Likewise, Evans sheds light on such works as the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Mary* and, in doing so, shreds them of their mystique. As for those scholars who claim that Jesus was at heart a cynic and a sage, Evans offers a helpful chapter on Jesus the miracle worker, arguing that our Lord’s miraculous deeds were the widely attested reason for his initial popularity. And—surprise, surprise—Evans claims that the canonical Gospels hold the best claim to authenticity.

While Evans' arguments are compelling, systematic, and reasonable, they are not what has created the most controversy. Instead, it is his first chapter, "Misplaced Faith and Misguided Suspicions," that has really touched a nerve. Here, Evans analyzes the scholars themselves. What of the skeptics such as Robert Funk, James Robinson, and Dominic Crossan? Are they truly neutral historians? Is Bart Ehrman really as impartial as he claims? This is the most fascinating part of the book. While skeptics may claim that Christians are biased, Evans shows how the skeptics are often animated by their own personal demons and animus against traditional Christianity. Evans traces the life and career of Ehrman, from a fundamentalist, Bible-believing, young man to a present-day agnostic. He shows how Robinson left his own childhood Calvinism. Some recent reviews of this book have cried foul, noting that we should deal with a scholar's arguments and not his personal background. Fair enough. But, where are those same scholars when Luther is dismissed as a medieval man who, perhaps because of his upbringing, had a problem with an over-active conscience? Is it not helpful to understand a scholar's theological and cultural milieu? Any decent biographer will want to investigate not only what a person thought but also what may have influenced him along the way. Thus, Evans' insights merit our attention. Robert Funk was brought up in the fundamentalist tradition, as it seems were James Robinson and Bart Ehrman. By his own admission, Ehrman began to doubt the Scriptures because of something as simple as a textual problem in Luke 22. Like a widely-swinging pendulum, a number of these scholars have gone from the far right to the far left. One might say they have gone from unthinking belief to unthinking unbelief. Or, as Evans strikingly—but insightfully—writes: "His [Ehrman's] reasoning today, even as a professing agnostic, still has a fundamentalist ring to it" (31). Now, it may be unfair to blame fundamentalism for these scholars' unbelief, as Evans seems to do. Still, it is fair, I think, to note that these scholars seem, for whatever reason, to have as much invested in Christianity being false as we have in its truth.

So, as in all things, let the buyer beware. Those who claim to be impartial judges of the Christian tradition are often animated by as many passions as their Christian counterparts. It would be nice if they would admit that. In the meantime, we can read Evans' book.

Peter J. Scaer